

MASTER THESIS

**HOW WOULD YOU TREAT YOUR
CUSTOMERS?**

A starting point for the Social Richness Theory

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Pre-face

As a student with a background in Business Administration and currently studying Communication Science I am interested in many domains. One of these has always been marketing. Therefore, the combination of marketing, communication, and B2B environments has been an obvious choice for this thesis.

This thesis is the final project for my Master Communication Studies at the University of Twente. Going beyond the objective of graduating, this thesis adds to the B2B research field with the introduction of a new theory. This theory could be used by managers to improve the interactions they have with their customers.

This research could not have happened without the help of my graduating company Inextenzo, the telecom company I where conducted my research (whom wishes to stay anonymous), and my supervisors at the University of Twente: Dr. Mirjam Galetzka and Dr. Sjoerd de Vries.

I would like to start off with a thank-you to my supervisors. The hours of discussing my thesis with Mirjam and Sjoerd must have been tiring, but they helped me move forward and design this study. Without their help and feedback, this study would not have been a success.

Next, I would like to thank my colleagues at Inextenzo. They were very helpful by providing me with feedback on my scenarios and the questionnaire. They helped professionalize the questionnaire and scenarios and provided a great deal of validity to this research.

Last, I would like to give my thanks to the telecom company I partnered with. The participants would not have been recruited if the telecom company had not been there. They have hospitably let me into their work space and helped my research. My thank goes out to them for their help, and of course also to their customers who filled out my questionnaire.

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Enschede

ABSTRACT

OBJECTIVE Businesses have typically been interested in ideal ways to approach and interact with customers. That is why this study proposes the “Social Richness Theory”. Prior research suggests increasing so-called social richness in B2C customer interactions can boost customers’ overall evaluation of the company and willingness to engage in word-of-mouth (WOM). It involves establishing rapport and displaying personalization in customer-company interactions to increase the perceived quality of these interactions. However, there is a lack of theories about service quality in B2B environments. It is hypothesized that increasing social richness in B2B interactions also (directly) influences the overall evaluation of the company and customers’ willingness to engage in WOM.

METHOD A 2x2 between subject experiment was set up by employing an online questionnaire presenting four different scenarios of an e-mail exchange involving a service failure. Participants were customers of a large telecom provider in the Netherlands (N = 81). 79% of respondents were male (n = 64), 21% was female (n = 17). Outcomes were measured by asking respondents about their perceived interaction quality, their overall evaluation of the company, and their willingness to engage in WOM.

RESULTS Results indicate that including rapport elements in an e-mail conversation caused people to be more inclined to engage in WOM and evaluate the company more favorably. However, personalization worked negatively. People perceived the interaction as less valuable, evaluated the company less favorably, and were less inclined to engage in WOM. One interaction effect was found. It indicated that the willingness to share a message on social media decreases when rapport and personalization are displayed together.

CONTRIBUTION This research fills a gap in literature by researching rapport and personalization in a B2B context through the introduction of the “Social Richness Theory”. This study provides a starting point for said theory. Businesses can benefit from this research as it provides insights into the effectiveness of rapport and personalization as factors to increase the social richness of their customer interactions.

CONCLUSION While rapport is a useful factor to increase the social richness of a customer interaction, personalization is ideally left out. Nevertheless, more research is needed to find other potential factors increasing social richness and to expand the theory in general.

KEYWORDS

Rapport, personalization, B2B, social richness, perceived interaction quality, willingness to engage in word-of-mouth, overall evaluation of the company

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1. Introduction

All people deal with service frequently, whether good or bad. Good service is experienced when, for example, the staff is friendly and knowledgeable, or go out of their way to satisfy a customer's needs (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985). More examples can be found in the extensive body of B2C literature on the quality of service and how to measure it (e.g. Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault (1990), Brady and Cronin Jr (2001), or Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988)).

This study adds to existing service literature by looking at a B2B environment in a service failure context. Service quality or failure in combination with a B2B context has rarely been touched upon by existing literature. However, research does suggest that service failure is an important reason for B2B customers to switch suppliers (Naumann, Haverila, Sajid Khan, & Williams, 2010). When looking at B2C contexts, service recovery strategies can have a positive impact on customer satisfaction (Ha & Jang, 2009; Lastner, Folse, Mangus, & Fennell, 2016; Patterson, Cowley, & Prasongsukarn, 2006). Whenever a service failure is recovered satisfactorily, a customer displays higher levels of trust, word-of-mouth, and loyalty than whenever a service is not recovered satisfactorily. Dissatisfied customers are more likely to engage in negative word-of mouth (Kau & Wan-Yiun Loh, 2006). Low, Lee, and Lian (2013) concluded that interpersonal relationships between customer and company are important, as strong ties increase the tolerance for service failure. All in all, there are many benefits when businesses properly correct their mistakes and make sure to maintain service quality. That is why it is important to research service quality and failure recovery in B2B environments as well.

This research specifically focusses on the interaction between customer and company and the perceived quality of this interaction, as experienced by the customers. It takes the view that value is created in this interaction. Research suggests that customer-employee relations can influence the evaluation of goods and services in service environments (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000; Menon & O'Connor, 2007). The perceived quality of the interaction is influenced by the "social richness" of the interaction. Social richness is a new concept proposed in this study. It describes how "rich" a social interaction is. Another widely-known theory that reflects upon richness is the Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Lengel & Daft, 1989). However, where the Media Richness Theory describes the richness of a medium, the "Social Richness Theory" analyzes the richness of an (electronic) customer-company interaction. Additionally, the Social Richness Theory focusses on electronic ways of interacting, which contrasts the Media Richness Theory, as it diagnoses all types of communication, on- and offline. For this study, it is important to reflect on the interaction and not the medium. That is why the Media Richness Theory is regarded insufficient. Moreover, there is no overarching theory when it comes to interaction quality in the B2B environment. That is why the Social Richness Theory is introduced.

In B2C contexts, "rapport" and "personalization" have shown effectiveness in the area of service quality by improving customer satisfaction (Biedenbach, Bengtsson, & Wincent, 2011; Gremler & Gwinner, 2000, 2008; Strauss & Hill, 2001; Surprenant & Solomon, 1987) and helping service failure recovery

(DeWitt & Brady, 2003; Worsfold, Worsfold, & Bradley, 2007). The friendly encounters customers experience in B2C environments are often the results of rapport, personalization, or both. The employee is establishing rapport with the customer by, e.g. illustrating what they know about a product, being friendly or emphatic, or simply having an enjoyable conversation with a customer, going beyond the objective of making a sale (Gremler & Gwinner, 2008). Examples of personalization can include employees remembering customers' names, or talk about shared interests (Surprenant & Solomon, 1987). Often, customers respond positively to rapport or personalization. That is why these two concepts are explored as possible determinants for social richness.

This research hypothesizes that increasing social richness, in this case through establishing rapport and displaying personalization, has positive effects on the perceived quality of the interaction a customer has with a company. Additionally, rapport, personalization, and the perceived interaction quality could influence customers' overall evaluation of the company and their willingness to engage in positive word-of-mouth. Insights into these relationships can be valuable for companies. However, little is known about interactions in B2B environments. Therefore, the central research question of this study is:

“What is the influence of “social richness”, established through rapport and/or personalization, on the perceived quality of customer-company interactions, customers' overall company evaluation, and their willingness to engage in positive word-of-mouth?”

The context of this study is a service failure of a large, Dutch telecom company. It takes a specific focus by looking at the social richness of e-mail interactions between a customer that experiences a problem, and a company that tries to solve that problem. This study is structured as follows: first, hypotheses to support the main research question are formulated based on existing literature. This is followed by the method section, explaining the research design and data collection. After that, results are presented together with statistical analyses of the manipulation of social richness through rapport and/or personalization. The report ends with a conclusion, and a thorough discussion and reflection on the Social Richness Theory, as well as limitations, theoretical and practical implication, and suggestions for future research.

2. Theoretical framework

This chapter will introduce relevant concepts involving the Social Richness Theory. Additional academic literature is used to formulate the hypotheses. The hypotheses provide expectations regarding rapport and personalization in interactions between customers and companies.

As mentioned in the introduction, rapport and personalization will be explored into further detail. It is hypothesized that rapport and personalization influence customers' overall evaluation of the company and their willingness to engage in positive word-of-mouth. This influence could be direct, but it could also be contingent on a customer's perceived quality of the interaction. This chapter will first start with a review of the perceived quality of the interaction.

2.1 Perceived quality of customer-company interaction

Increasing social richness in interactions could possibly increase the perceived quality of interactions. However, the exact conceptualization of 'interaction' and 'quality' is still vague. This paragraph will identify the meaning of the perceived quality of interactions by linking it to classic literature on service quality.

B2C research suggests that it is beneficial to create value in interactions between customers and company, as it can influence the service quality perceptions of customers (Bitner, Booms, & Mohr, 1994; Brady & Cronin Jr, 2001; Gremler & Gwinner, 2000; Menon & O'Connor, 2007). "*Customers may derive benefits not only from the core service provided by a firm, but also from the personal recognition and social support resulting from their relationships with service staff*" (p. 2498) (Worsfold et al., 2007). Strong interpersonal relationships between customers and employees in service environments can lead to more word-of-mouth engagement (Gremler, Gwinner, & Brown, 2001; Menon & O'Connor, 2007), and every contact moment is an opportunity to create value for the customer (Menon & O'Connor, 2007), which is beneficial for the company.

A customer can interact directly or indirectly with the company (Baxendale, Macdonald, & Wilson, 2015; Grönroos & Voima, 2013). As Grönroos and Voima (2013) state: "*In direct interactions with the customer, the firm may have an opportunity to engage with the customer's value creation process and take on the role of value co-creator.*" (p. 141). For clarity, this research only considers contact wherein the company is directly involved in the customer interaction. Indirect interactions, e.g. interaction with a product or service at home, are not considered.

Now that it is clear what is meant by the 'interaction', it is necessary to also look at the 'quality' component of this concept. Parasuraman et al. (1988) have laid the foundation for service quality determinants in their articles. When working on their service quality questionnaire, the SERVQUAL scale, they came to five dimensions that make up service quality (p. 23):

1. *“Tangibles: the physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of personnel.*
2. *Reliability: the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately.*
3. *Responsiveness: the willingness to help customers and provide prompt service.*
4. *Assurance: the knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence.*
5. *Empathy: the caring, individualized attention the firm provides its customers.”*

For this research, only responsiveness, assurance, and empathy are relevant. Responsiveness is relevant, since customers prefer to experience quick service. The other two dimensions, assurance and empathy, contain elements that represent communication, credibility, courtesy, and understanding the customer (Parasuraman et al., 1985, 1988), which are all important dimensions to keep in mind when researching the perceived quality of the interaction. Responsiveness, assurance, and empathy are more closely related to the actual customer-company interaction than the other dimensions and could potentially increase social richness when operationalized correctly. For this research, the dimension of tangibles is irrelevant and the dimension involving reliability will be a given in the conversation used in the experiment, as the problem will be solved satisfactory.

Taking the beforementioned and the insights from Parasuraman et al. (1988) together, one can conclude that the perceived quality of the interaction between a customer and a company can be conceptualized as follows: *“the extent to which a customer experiences responsiveness, assurance, and empathy in an interaction”*.

2.2. Rapport

Rapport is interpreted differently among literature. For example, rapport can be understood as having a ‘click’ or ‘chemistry’ between two people (Gremler et al., 2001; Tickle-Degnen & Rosenthal, 1990). LaBahn (1996) defined rapport as *“the client’s perception that the personal relationships have the right “chemistry” and are enjoyable”* (p. 4). It can also be titled as “small talk” according to Hultgren (2011). Furthermore, it is said that rapport is no personality trait, but something that exists between individuals (Tickle-Degnen & Rosenthal, 1990). Rapport can help a company move forward in their relationship with the customer (Campbell & Davis, 2006; Campbell, Davis, & Skinner, 2006). It also has a positive influence on customer satisfaction and loyalty (Biedenbach et al., 2011; Gremler & Gwinner, 2008; Worsfold et al., 2007). When employees genuinely want to help customers, there is a positive influence on customer satisfaction (Keh, Ren, Hill, & Li, 2013). Customers can even experience social benefits from their relationships with a company (Campbell et al., 2006; Kevin P. Gwinner, Gremler, & Bitner, 1998; Price & Arnould, 1999; Reynolds & Beatty, 1999). Finally, Hess, Ganesan, and Klein (2003) found that relationships between the customer and employee can buffer negative effects of service failure. Worsfold et al. (2007) researched how rapport specifically influences customer attitudes towards the company after a service failure. They found out that establishing rapport had a positive influence

customer's attitude. This finding was also supported by DeWitt and Brady (2003), who found that rapport can indeed buffer negative effects of service failures.

Further conceptualizing the concept of rapport, Gremler and Gwinner (2000) found that there are two dimensions of rapport: (1) enjoyable interaction, and (2) personal connection. People have an enjoyable interaction when they like each other (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000). Adding to this, Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal (1990) state that individuals exchange positivity and attractiveness cues if they are interested or warmed by one another. An enjoyable interaction with an employee is brought about through interpersonal interaction elements, such as language or by displaying positive emotions (Giebelhausen, Robinson, Sirianni, & Brady, 2014; Gremler & Gwinner, 2000; Keh et al., 2013). People have a personal connection when they bonded over something (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000; Gremler et al., 2001; Price & Arnould, 1999). Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal (1990) say that people are in harmony, or 'in sync'. When both an enjoyable interaction and a personal connection are present in the interactions, it has a positive influence (Campbell et al., 2006) on, for example, word-of-mouth engagement (Gremler et al., 2001).

Taking these insights into account, one can conceptualize rapport as follows: *"the extent to which a customer experiences an enjoyable interaction and personal connection during an interaction"*. This concept is operationalized through the rapport building behaviors mentioned below.

2.2.1. Establishing rapport

Rapport can be established by displaying several behaviors. These behaviors have been observed by Gremler and Gwinner (2008) in their study on retail employees. To properly operationalize rapport, these behaviors are applied to the scenarios of the current study:

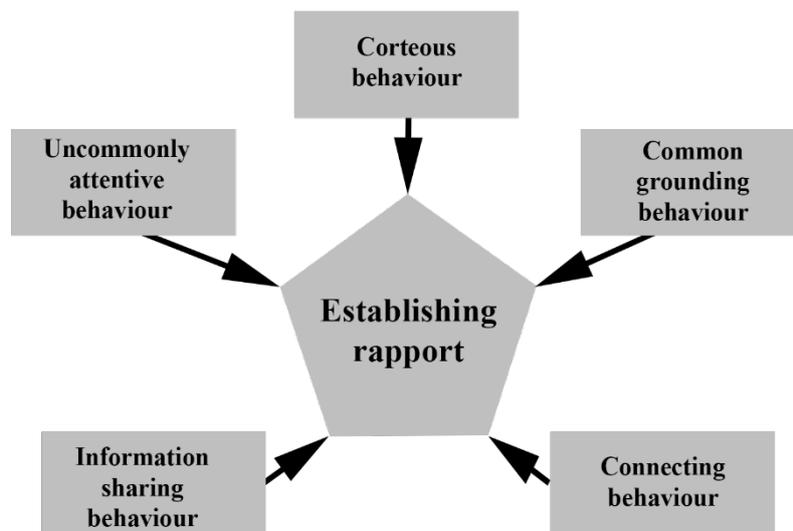


Figure 1 – Overview of strategies to establish rapport (Gremler and Gwinner, 2008)

1. Uncommonly attentive behavior; an employee goes ‘above-and-beyond’ for the customer. This category consists of atypical actions (going out of their way for a customer), personal recognition (knowing personal details about a customer, going beyond small talk), and intense personal interest (employee is more concerned about the customer than making a sale). Campbell et al. (2006) also emphasize that trust is important in forming a relationship with the customer.
2. Courteous behavior; the employee sees what he/she and the customer have in common. This category consists of identifying mutual interests (identify common interests to keep the conversation flowing) and finding other similarities (have smaller details in common, such as age). Hultgren (2011) also mentions this in his observations of call-center employees.
3. Common grounding behavior; the employee demonstrates natural courteous behavior, as if it was part of his/her personality. This category consists of unexpected honesty (the employee is truthful and would even recommend another place than the own workplace), civility (the employee is helpful, pleasant, and friendly), empathy (the employee displays concern and care).
4. Connecting behavior; the employee wants to bond with the customer. This category consists of using humor (making jokes), pleasant conversation (having an enjoyable conversation with the customer), and friendly interaction (the employee is particularly friendly, or warm). Barrick et al. (2012) mention this behavior too. They say that people connect by making light conversation, e.g. about actualities or the weather.
5. Information sharing behavior; sharing or gathering information during an interaction. This category consists of giving advice (making suggestions), imparting knowledge (the employee demonstrates specialized knowledge and experience) and asking questions to understand customer needs (help the employee gain a better understanding of his/her needs).

While this list includes five “clear-cut” examples of behavior, they almost never appear in isolation. Often, two or more rapport behaviors are used together to be effective (Grewler & Gwinner, 2008).

As the quality of a service is influenced by dimensions such as responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Parasuraman et al., 1988), it is logical to propose that the perceived quality of a customer-company interaction increases, when company representatives establish rapport in their interaction with the customer. Therefore, the following hypothesis is tested:

H1: Establishing rapport increases the perceived quality of interactions, whereas not establishing rapport does not increase the perceived quality of interactions.

2.3. Personalization

Mittal and Lassar (1996) state that personalization is the social component of an interaction between a customer and the company. The way employees speak to a customer can be different for each customer. This is confirmed by Gwinner, Bitner, Brown, and Kumar (2005) who mention that knowledge about the customer in question can help employees adjust their service offering. Personalization can have

advantages. For example, applying personalization in e-mails is beneficial to customer satisfaction (Strauss & Hill, 2001). It was also found that personalization can positively influence patronage decisions (Mittal & Lassar, 1996).

Surprenant and Solomon (1987) identified personalization when it comes to customer services. They found that displaying personalization in interactions can have beneficial effects on customer satisfaction and loyalty. In their analysis, they link service quality dimensions, as researched by Parasuraman et al. (1985), to the delivery of service. These involve the dimension of courtesy, communication, credibility, and understanding. These subdimensions are captured in the SERVQUAL dimensions of assurance and empathy (Parasuraman et al., 1988) and can be linked to rapport and social richness.

Surprenant and Solomon (1987) mention programmed and customized personalization in their study. In these types of personalization, one presents customers with the impression of a service tailored to them personally by using information about that customer, e.g. demographic information or specific needs and wants (Surprenant & Solomon, 1987). White, Zahay, Thorbjonsen, and Shavitt (2008) also mention this as a way of personalizing messages in advertising. They state that companies could use personal information, such as demographic information or preferences and interests, to add a more individualized touch to the message. The more personal information used in the message, the more it is distinctively personalized to that person. While this type of strategy does not work well for simple services, it performs in a difficult setting. Therefore, it might be a useful strategy to explore when there is a service failure.

Taking all these insights together, personalization in an interaction can be conceptualized as: *“the extent to which the customer feels the conversation is addressed to them personally”*.

Seeing how personalization can have positive effects for companies, it is logical to assume that displaying personalization in interactions can contribute to social richness and with that increase the perceived quality of interactions. Therefore:

H2: Displaying personalization increases the perceived quality of interactions, whereas not displaying personalization does not increase the perceived quality of interactions.

While personalization is not the same as rapport, the two concepts are closely interrelated. Personalization can seamlessly blend into the Social Richness Theory alongside rapport. Rapport and personalization are means to the same end. Displaying the behaviors equals trying to influence certain outcomes, such as the willingness to engage in word of mouth or the overall evaluation of the company. The difference between the two factors lies in the way they achieve these goals. Rapport could be applied to customers in general: one could speak about the nice weather to anyone. However, comments about a customer's hobbies cannot be used in all conversations. Where rapport stops, personalization goes on, and vice versa. Just talking about someone's hobbies does not automatically imply that the interaction

is enjoyable, and if it is not enjoyable it could result in friction. The two concepts together enrich the interaction even more. Because this statement has not been researched by other authors, it lays ground for an additional hypothesis. Therefore:

H3: A combination of rapport and personalization increases a customer's perceived quality of interaction.

2.4. Overall evaluation of the company

According to Kardes, Cline, and Cronley (2011), an attitude is an “*evaluative judgement, or rating of how good or bad, favorable or unfavorable, or pleasant or unpleasant consumers find a particular person, or issue*” (p. 164). Since favorable attitudes can lead to purchase of a brand, companies know consumer attitudes are important (Kardes et al., 2011), especially in a context where a service fails. Taking these insights together, one can conclude that, in this study, the overall evaluation of the company can be summarized as: “*the attitude a customer has of the company, after experiencing an interaction with it*”.

Favorable attitudes can be traced back through many factors, such as customer loyalty. Customer loyalty is a difficult concept that needs to be looked at from different points of view. Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, and Gremler (2002) define customer loyalty as “*customer's repeat purchase behavior that is triggered by a marketer's activities*” (p. 231). Loyalty in turn results from customer satisfaction (Gronholdt, Martensen, & Kristensen, 2000; Hallowell, 1996). When customers are satisfied, they often have favorable attitudes about a company. Research indicated that service recovery strategies can positively influence a customer's satisfaction with the company patronize intentions (Smith & Bolton, 1998). However, a customer's state of mind, his or her mood, the involvement, and many other factors can influence one's attitudes of a company or product as well (Kardes et al., 2011). That is why it is relevant to research whether social richness could positively influence a customer's attitude. Therefore:

H4: Increasing social richness by (a) establishing rapport, and/or (b) displaying personalization directly positively influences the overall evaluation of the company.

H5: The effect of (a) rapport or (b) personalization and the overall evaluation of the company is mediated by the perceived quality of interaction.

2.5. Positive word-of-mouth engagement

Word-of-mouth lives alongside customer attitudes. When customers do not think favorably about a company, they will not engage in word-of-mouth (Kardes et al., 2011). Positive word-of-mouth communication is defined as the informal communications between customers about the evaluation of goods and services. These evaluations are about pleasant, vivid, or novel experiences, displaying the product, and about recommending the product to others (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002). Customers engaging in word-of-mouth display true affection towards the company (Ranaweera & Prabhu, 2003). There is no commercial self-interest in genuine word-of-mouth (Van Hove, Weijters, Lievens, & Stockman, 2016).

Word-of-mouth works because people consider it to be authentic and genuine. When a recommendation comes from a friend or colleague, people are more inclined to believe it than when it comes from a stranger or (celebrity) endorser (Kardes et al., 2011; Wirtz & Chew, 2002). Adding to this, people prefer genuine word-of-mouth as opposed to word-of-mouth sparked by a monetary compensation (Van Hoye et al., 2016).

Taking all these insights together, one can conclude that positive word-of-mouth engagement is important for companies. It can be conceptualized as follows: “*the extent to which customers are willing to share something positive about the company and/or interaction*”.

Word-of-mouth influences brand consideration (Baxendale et al., 2015) and buying intentions of the reader or listener (Baker, Donthu, & Kumar, 2016; Berger, 2014; Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Hennig-Thurau, Walsh, & Walsh, 2003). Word-of-mouth specifically engaged in through online channels is also important and effective for companies (Li & Du, 2017; Tsao, Hsieh, Shih, & Lin, 2015; Zhang, Zhao, & Gupta, 2018) as it could have similar benefits as offline word-of-mouth. Satisfied customers engage more in word-of-mouth (Brown, Barry, Dacin, & Gunst, 2005; Dick & Basu, 1994; Mohtasham, Sarollahi, & Hamirazavi, 2017; Ranaweera & Prabhu, 2003). Going beyond customer expectations to positively influence word-of-mouth engagement is important and valuable for businesses (Mohtasham et al., 2017; Popp & Woratschek, 2017).

It is assumed that customers are more willing to engage in positive word-of-mouth when they perceive the interaction to be more valuable. However, it could also be the case that social richness directly influences word-of-mouth engagement. Therefore:

H6: Increasing social richness by (a) establishing rapport, and/or (b) displaying personalization directly positively influences the willingness to engage in word-of-mouth.

H7: The effect of (a) rapport or (b) personalization and the willingness to engage in word-of-mouth is mediated by the perceived quality of interaction.

3. Social Richness Model

The beforementioned theory and hypotheses form the basis for the “Social Richness Model”:

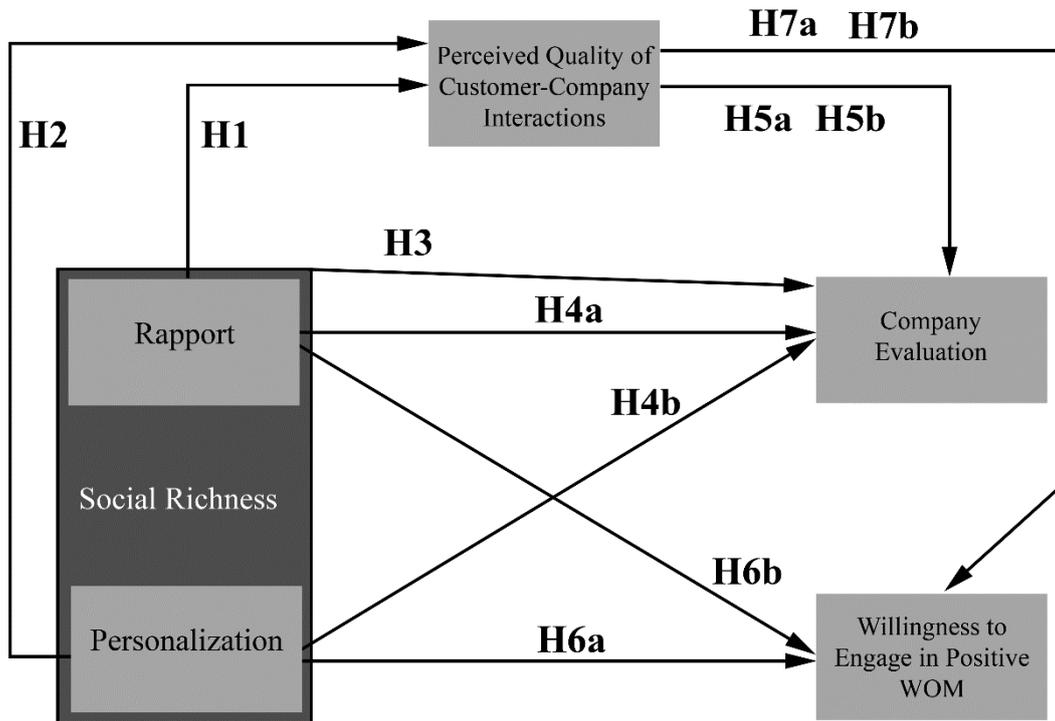


Figure 2 – Social Richness Model

Overview of hypotheses

Table 1 - Summary of the hypotheses

Hypothesis and description	
H1	Establishing rapport increases the perceived quality of interactions
H2	Displaying personalization increases the perceived quality of interactions.
H3	A combination of rapport and personalization increases the perceived quality of interactions.
H4a	Increasing social richness by establishing rapport directly positively influences the overall evaluation of the company.
H4b	Increasing social richness by displaying personalization directly positively influences the overall evaluation of the company.
H5a	The relationship between rapport and the overall evaluation of the company is mediated by the perceived quality of interaction.
H5b	The relationship between personalization and the overall evaluation of the company is mediated by the perceived quality of interaction.
H6a	Increasing social richness by establishing rapport directly positively influences the willingness to engage in WOM.
H6b	Increasing social richness by displaying personalization directly positively influences the willingness to engage in WOM.
H7a	The relationship between rapport and the willingness to engage in word-of-mouth is mediated by the perceived quality of interaction.
H7b	The relationship between personalization and the willingness to engage in word-of-mouth is mediated by the perceived quality of interaction.

4. Methodology

In this research the effects of rapport and personalization on perceived interaction quality, overall company evaluation, and willingness to engage in word-of-mouth are examined with a 2x2 between subject experiment. Scenarios were used to simulate the interaction between the customer and the company. The use of scenarios has been frequently used in service and word-of-mouth research (e.g. Hess et al. (2003), Wentzel, Tomczak, and Henkel (2014), Cheema and Kaikati (2010), or Wirtz, Orsingher, Chew, and Tambyah (2013)). Advantages hereof include completely controlled conditions and easy manipulation, keeping the experiment clean. It also provides a standardized setting for each participant. Adding to this, if participants were to be put into a real-life case, with them being unaware of the experiment, the study might withhold them an interaction in which proper customer service and kind conversation reflect. This is considered unethical. The data was collected via an online questionnaire, which are frequently used and easy to administer methods in social research (Babbie, 2013; Kardes et al., 2011).

4.1. Procedure

Rapport and personalization are reflected in the ways the conversation is structured. The scenarios display a mock-up e-mail conversation regarding a telecom problem to test the manipulations (See Figure 3 on page 20). The scenarios are based on a real-life situation: a problem with the internet or phone connection. They were pre-tested by discussing them with marketing- and telecom professionals to test the realism of the scenario and script. For the participants, sessions took approximately 5 to 10 minutes. The procedure is as follows:

1. Participants read an informed consent message.
2. If they consented, they were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions.
3. An introductory text explaining the procedure was presented.
4. Participants filled out demographic questions.
5. Participants read through the text in the scenarios.
6. Participants filled out the questionnaire.
7. Participants were thanked for their participation, signifying the end of the questionnaire.

4.2. Pre-test

A pre-test is a valuable method to determine if a questionnaire and/or stimulus materials can be adequately used for the experiment (Hinkin, Tracey, & Enz, 1997). For this research, the objective of the pre-test was three-fold. It (1) checked whether the chosen scenario was realistic, (2) made sure there were no unclarities in the scenarios and/or questions, and (3) made sure other incongruencies were filtered out before sending out the final questionnaire to the actual participants. The validity of the study was assessed in a two-stage pre-test. First, the scenario was consulted with marketing professionals and representatives of the telecom company. This ensured the scenarios were realistic and relatable for the participants. Second, pre-testers were recruited to read through the final scenario and fill out the questionnaire to check for mistakes.

The pre-test questionnaire yielded 40 responses. Of these 40 responses, six were not useful as these people did not consent or finish the whole questionnaire ($n = 34$). The pre-test contained additional open questions, so participants could type out exactly what was unclear or wrong about the questionnaire as it was at that time. For example, questions like “*Did you understand everything in this scenario, and if no, what did you not understand?*”, or “*Was there anything unusual you noticed about this questionnaire?*” were included.

After additional consulting with the telecom company, the service failure involving the connection problem was titled most realistic. This scenario was chosen since this is one of the most frequently occurring problems customers experience, according to the company. That way, it was ensured that the participants would be able to relate to the scenario, ensuring realism and reliability.

4.3. Data collection

Data for the final questionnaire was collected through an anonymized survey made in Qualtrics. A conscious decision was made to only e-mail and call people that were linked to one telecom company. Because of the explorative nature of this study, it is desired to keep the type of industry constant. This was achieved through this variant of purposeful sampling. The questionnaire was distributed and available via e-mail to customers of the telecom company from May 14 to 28, 2018. A sample of 489 Dutch customers and partners of the company was e-mailed the link of the survey. Through a two-step approach of e-mailing followed up with telephone call, the survey yielded 123 responses. 42 of them were invalid because the participant did not answer “yes” to the informed consent question, did not finish the questionnaire, or something went wrong in any other way. In total, the survey yielded 81 valid responses.

4.4. Method

4.4.1. Participants

The participants ($n = 81$) were all connected to the telecom provider through their services. These services are delivered to businesses and not end-customers. Participants either receive internet or telephone from the company or are partners of the company. 19 participants are a partner of the company, 33 get their telephone connection from the company, and 29 get their internet from the company. 64 participants were male and 17 were female (see Table 2), a large share of them was aged between 36 and 55.

Table 2 – Overview of the experiment conditions

		Personalization	
		No	Yes
Rapport	No	1 ($n = 20$)	2 ($n = 19$)
	Yes	3 ($n = 23$)	4 ($n = 20$)
		Males	Females
Condition	1	15	5
	2	15	3
	3	15	9
	4	19	1

4.4.2. Materials

Scenarios: A scenario describing a telecom connection problem was written up. It involved a customer e-mailing the company and informing there is a problem with their internet or phone connection. The company responds, and the problem is solved in a total of five e-mailed messages back and forth. Minimal changes in the script were made to fit the type of customer (receiving phone or internet) that participated, but the overall storyline was the same. It is assumed participants can envision themselves in the scenario, since they all have experience in the B2B environment, and a problem with their telephone or internet connections are situations that frequently occur in business, as well as their personal life. They were written in Dutch, as the telecom provider only has Dutch customers. All participants got into a conversation with a fictional man: Jan de Vries, the company representative of their telecom company. The scenarios were all identical, except for the manipulation of the independent variables. An example can be seen in Figure 3.

Independent variables: Participants imagined they were a customer of a telecom company. They had e-mailed the company because they had a problem with their telephone or internet connection. In two of the scenarios, the company representative established rapport in building the conversation. In this case, the company representative demonstrated empathy and compassion for the problem, apologized for the inconvenience, provided more transparency when talking about the problem, and the conversation followed a friendly narrative. To be able to correctly measure the concepts mentioned in the Social Richness Model (Figure 2), the operationalization for establishing rapport was drawn from the previously mentioned list of rapport building behaviors. (Barrick et al., 2012; Campbell et al., 2006; Gremler & Gwinner, 2008; Hultgren, 2011). In the other two scenarios, personalization was displayed in the conversation. Personalization is operationalized by calling the customer by his/her name, instead of just using general pronouns (sir/madam) and paying extra attention to the needs or problem the customer proposes. The company representative addressed the customer by his/her name and spoke about an unrelated matter in the end: an event they will both visit. Personalization was also displayed by having “Jan de Vries” as the recipient, instead of “Customer Service”. Finally, a picture of Jan was provided in the bottom left-hand corner (See Figure 3). This would provide the conversation with a more individualized and knowledgeable touch. These behaviors are in line with the strategies from the article of Surprenant and Solomon (1987) and White et al. (2008). The condition without any rapport or personalization was short and concise. No friendly tone was used, just a business-like tone, and no picture was used to have customers identify with. In all four conditions, a Microsoft Outlook format was used as a ‘background’ for the conversation.

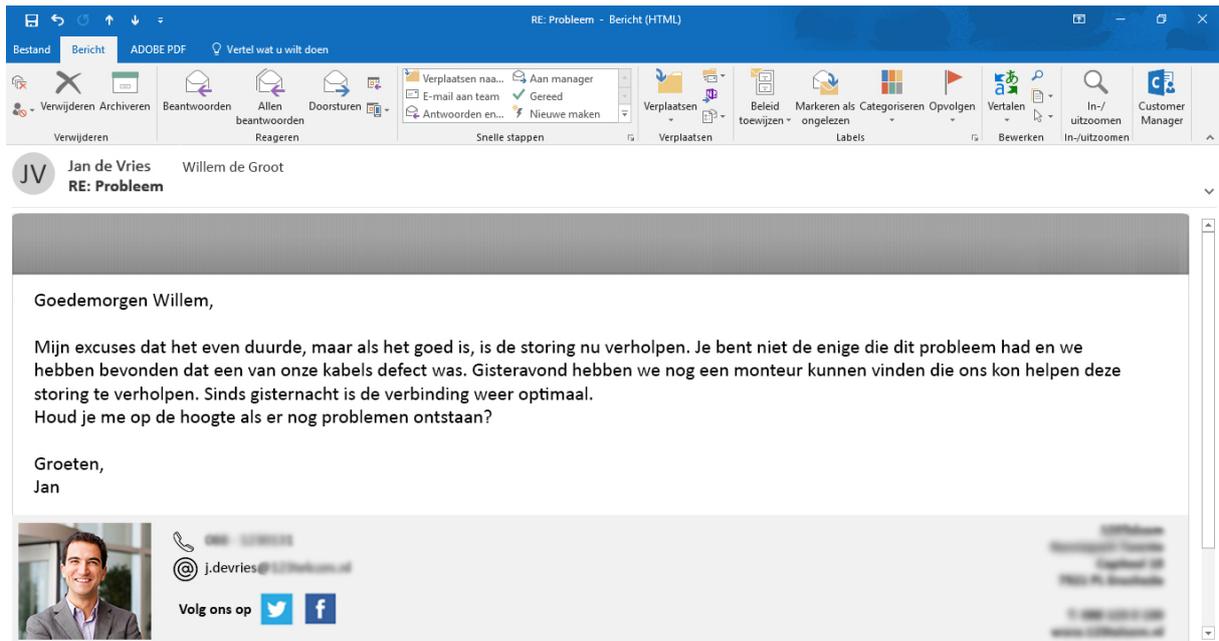


Figure 3 – Example of stimulus materials

* Blurred out words were visible for the participants, this is an anonymized version.

Rapport and personalization were manipulated as follows, the first sentence shows condition 1, which displays neither of the two, the second sentence shows condition 4, which displays both rapport and personalization. The messages were translated from Dutch to English. The overall message of the two sentences is the same:

“Dear Madam,

We have resolved the problem and hope your problem is hereby solved.

*Yours sincerely,
Jan de Vries”*

Good morning Hannah,

My apologies it took a while, but if I am correct, the disturbance is now fixed. You were not the only one experiencing this problem and we have found one of our cables to be broken. Yesterday evening, we found a mechanic that could solve the problem for is. Since last night, the connection should have been optimal again.

Will you let me when you still experience any problems?

Kind regards,

Jan de Vries

Dependent variables: The dependent variables were measured using adaptations of existing scales, completed with additional questions. The perceived quality of the interaction and the overall evaluation of the company were measured by items based on SERVQUAL items, by Parasuraman et al. (1988) and adjustments on SERVQUAL from Brady and Cronin Jr (2001). The construct “perceived quality of interactions” was build up using questions measuring assurance, responsiveness, and empathy. Sample items are: “*Overall, I would say the quality of my interaction with John Carpenter is excellent*”, “*I receive quick service from Jan de Vries*”, or “*I thought this conversation was sincere*”. Willingness to engage in word-of-mouth was measured by different items. A sample item is: “*I would recommend this company to others*”. Overall evaluation of the company was measured with other items. A sample items is: “*I am satisfied with TelecomX*”. Responses to all questions were rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The complete list of measurement items, in Dutch, can be found in the Appendix.

Manipulation checks: The manipulation of all independent variables was checked using multi-item scales. They were also measured on 7-point Likert scales with the same scale points. Rapport was tested with a number of questions adopted from the rapport behaviors described by Gremler and Gwinner (2008), for example: “*Jan de Vries was friendly*”. Questions involving the personalization variable were developed for this study, such as: “*I thought this interaction was personal*”. The complete list of measurement items, in Dutch, can be found in the Appendix. An overview in English can also be found on the next page (see Table 3).

5. Analysis

Principal component analyses with varimax and reliability measures were used to determine whether the measurement items corresponded with the constructs they were in. Table 3 provides an overview of the found values.

Table 3 – Overview of the constructs, items, and reliability (translated from Dutch)

	Factor ^a	Cronbach's α
Rapport		.91
<i>Jan de Vries was helpful</i>	.86	
<i>Jan de Vries thought along with me</i>	.85	
<i>Jan de Vries showed he understood my problem</i>	.85	
<i>Jan de Vries was friendly</i>	.84	
<i>Jan de Vries had an enjoyable conversation with me</i>	.80	
<i>Jan de Vries was polite</i>	.78	
<i>Jan de Vries showed extraordinary service</i>	.77	
<i>Jan de Vries wants the best for me</i>	.55	
<i>Jan de Vries was business-like</i>	.21	
<i>Jan de Vries was abrupt</i>	.50	
Personalization		.93
<i>I thought this conversation was personal</i>	.93	
<i>I got individual attention</i>	.90	
<i>I thought this conversation was not personal</i>	-.90	
Relationship		.71
<i>I got the impression that Jan de Vries knew my business</i>	.92	
<i>I got the impression that Jan de Vries knew whom I was</i>	.77	
Interaction quality		.86
<i>I thought this conversation was of high quality</i>	.89	
<i>I thought this conversation was valuable</i>	.88	
<i>In general, I would say the quality of this conversation was excellent</i>	.85	
<i>I thought this conversation was sincere</i>	.80	
<i>I receive quick service from Jan de Vries</i>	.58	
Company evaluation		.88
<i>I am happy with this company</i>	.62	
<i>I think the company wants the type of experience I expect to get</i>	.86	
<i>I think the company offers me excellent service</i>	.80	
<i>This conversation gave me a good experience with the company</i>	.75	
<i>I think the company wants to deliver a good experience</i>	.70	
<i>In the future, I would get telephone/internet with this company again</i>	.60	
Repeat business		.66
<i>I would contact the same person again [to fix another problem]</i>	.53	
<i>I would call the same company again</i>	.85	
<i>I would call a different employee of the company</i>	.89	
<i>I would call an external mechanic</i>	.62	
Willingness to engage in WOM		.93
<i>I would recommend this company to others that need a telephone/internet connection</i>	.97	
<i>If I am employed by a different company in the future, and they would need a telephone/internet connection, I would recommend this company.</i>	.96	
Willingness to share on social media		.94
<i>I would share a message on the Facebook page of my company</i>	.94	
<i>I would share a message on the LinkedIn page of my company</i>	.94	
<i>I would share a message on my own Facebook page</i>	.85	
<i>I would share a message on my own LinkedIn page</i>	.93	

a. To form a construct, the factor had to be $> .50$

The factor analysis resulted in the values that can be found in Table 3. The following constructs were formed:

- Rapport: stayed the same ($\alpha = .91$).
- Personalization: split into ‘Personalization’ ($\alpha = .93$) and ‘Relationship’ ($\alpha = .71$).
- Interaction quality: stayed the same ($\alpha = .86$).
- Company evaluation: split into ‘Company Evaluation’ ($\alpha = .88$) and ‘Repeat Business’ ($\alpha = .66$).
- Willingness to engage in WOM: split into ‘Willingness to engage in WOM’ ($\alpha = .93$) and ‘Willingness to share on social media’ ($\alpha = .94$).

All the items that were based on the SERVQUAL-scale questions ended up in the same construct.

After dividing these variables and forming new constructs, reliability analysis on the scales was performed. For constructs that existed out of 2 or 3 items, a correlation check was performed to strengthen the analysis. For constructs with two items, the correlation was checked. For constructs with three items, the intercorrelations were checked (see Table 4). All constructs were significant on the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 4 – Pearson’s correlations per construct

	Personalization	1	2	3
1	<i>I got individual attention</i>	-	-	-
2	<i>I thought this conversation was personal</i>	.90	-	-
3	<i>I thought this conversation was not personal</i>	-.75	-.80	-
	Relationship			
1	<i>I got the impression that Jan de Vries knew whom I was</i>	-	-	
2	<i>I got the impression that Jan de Vries knew my business</i>	.56	-	
	Repeat business			
1	<i>I would call the same company again</i>	-	-	-
2	<i>I would contact the same person again [to fix another problem]</i>	.39	-	-
3	<i>I would call an external mechanic</i>	-.40	-.38	-
	Willingness to engage in WOM			
1	<i>I would recommend this company to others that need a telephone/internet connection</i>	-	-	
2	<i>If I am employed by a different company in the future, and they would need a telephone/internet connection, I would recommend this company.</i>	.86	-	

The scale for Repeat Business scored a Cronbach’s α of .66, and additional correlation analysis was significant. Therefore, nothing was changed about this scale. The Relationship scale scored a .71 α and was significantly correlated. The other scales were all good or excellently reliable with the lowest score being .86.

6. Results

This section presents the analysis of the results and with that explanations for the hypotheses. It starts with a manipulation check, continues with MANOVA and ANOVA analyses, and ends with mediation analyses.

6.1. Manipulation checks

To check for manipulations, questions measuring the amount of rapport and personalization were asked in the questionnaire. Three univariate ANOVAs were conducted to check whether the presence of rapport and/or personalization in the conditions caused people to score higher on the rapport and personalization questions respectively, Table 5 provides an overview.

Table 5 – Manipulation check results

Independent variable	Dependent variable ^a	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Rapport (yes)	Rapport scale	5.45	.87	7,98	.01
Rapport (no)	Rapport scale	4.87	.99	7,98	.01
Personalization (yes)	Personalization scale	4.47	1.42	.09	.77
Personalization (no)	Personalization scale	4.57	1.59	.09	.77
Personalization (yes)	Relationship scale	4.56	1.09	.77	.38
Personalization (no)	Relationship scale	4.79	1.26	.77	.38

a. degrees of freedom = 79

The analysis for rapport demonstrates a main effect of rapport on the rapport manipulation scale, $F(1,79) = 7.98$, $p < .01$. As can be seen in Table 5, rapport is experienced more in the rapport conditions ($M = 5.45$; $SD = .86$), than in the conditions rapport is not present ($M = 4.87$; $SD = .99$).

The analysis for personalization does not demonstrate a main effect of personalization on the personalization scale, $F(1,79) = .088$, $p = .77$. It also does not reveal a main effect of personalization on the relationship scale, $F(1,79) = .769$, $p = .38$. To check for individual manipulations per item, a separate analysis was done per question. However, none of these checks turned out to be significant. This means the manipulation check did not work the way it was supposed to work. Nevertheless, analyses are continued, because of the promising results of rapport. This point is reflected upon in the discussion.

6.2. Hypothesis testing

The analyses were started with a multivariate ANOVA, to see whether the results were significant. However, only the influence of rapport revealed to be marginally significant $F(1,77) = 1.94$, $p < .10$ (see Table 6). Nevertheless, analyses for the other constructs was conducted using univariate ANOVAs, because rapport revealed a promising result. In univariate analysis, three significant ($0.01 < p < 0.05$) and three marginally significant ($0.05 \leq p \leq 0.1$) effects were found:

Table 6 - Results of the MANOVA and the univariate ANOVAs

MANOVA ^a						
Independent variable	Dependent variable	F	p	Partial Eta ²		
Rapport						
	Pillai's Trace	1,94	,099*	,12		
	Wilks' Lambda	1,94	,099*	,12		
	Hotelling's Trace	1,94	,099*	,12		
	Roy's Largest Root	1,94	,099*	,12		
Personalization						
	Pillai's Trace	,94	,46	,06		
	Wilks' Lambda	,94	,46	,06		
	Hotelling's Trace	,94	,46	,06		
	Roy's Largest Root	,94	,44	,06		
Rapport x Personalization						
	Pillai's Trace	1,03	,41	,07		
	Wilks' Lambda	1,03	,41	,07		
	Hotelling's Trace	1,03	,41	,07		
	Roy's Largest Root	1,03	,41	,07		
ANOVAs ^b						
Independent variable	Dependent variable	M	SD	F	p	R ²
Rapport (no)						
	Perceived Quality of Interactions	4.52	1.09	.63	.43	.08
	Company Evaluation	4.81	1.05	6.85	.01**	.14
	Repeat Business	5.46	.81	2.25	.14	.04
	Willingness to Engage in WOM	4.59	1.27	4.21	.04**	.10
	Willingness to Share on Social Media	2.41	1.30	.37	.54	.05
Rapport (yes)						
	Perceived Quality of Interactions	4.73	1.05	.63	.43	
	Company Evaluation	5.39	.92	6.85	.01**	
	Repeat Business	5.78	1.04	2.25	.14	
	Willingness to Engage in WOM	5.17	1.25	4.21	.04**	
	Willingness to Share on Social Media	2.27	1.30	.37	.54	
Personalization (no)						
	Perceived Quality of Interactions	4.82	.95	2.88	.09*	
	Company Evaluation	5.31	.82	3.12	.08*	
	Repeat Business	5.73	.77	1.05	.31	
	Willingness to Engage in WOM	5.17	.92	4.21	.04**	
	Willingness to Share on Social Media	2.45	1.40	.49	.49	
Personalization (yes)						
	Perceived Quality of Interactions	4.41	1.15	2.88	.09*	
	Company Evaluation	4.90	1.18	3.12	.08*	
	Repeat Business	5.51	1.11	1.05	.31	
	Willingness to Engage in WOM	4.59	1.57	4.21	.04**	
	Willingness to Share on Social Media	2.22	1.17	.49	.49	
Rapport x Personalization						
	Perceived Quality of Interactions	4.63	1.07	2.18	.14	
	Company Evaluation	5.11	1.02	1.81	.18	
	Repeat Business	5.63	.95	.01	.93	
	Willingness to Engage in WOM	4.90	1.29	.221	.64	
	Willingness to Share on Social Media	2.33	1.30	3.30	.07*	

a. degrees of freedom = 73

b. degrees of freedom = 77

* = p < .01

** = p < .05

*** = p < .001

6.2.1. Interaction quality

It was found that personalization had a marginally significant negative effect on the interaction quality ($M = 4.41$; $SD = 1.15$), $F(1,77) = 2.88$, $p = .09$ (see Table 6). This means that participants judged the interaction as less valuable when they were in a condition that displayed personalization.

6.2.2. Company evaluation

It was found that rapport has a direct significant effect on company evaluation ($M = 5.39$; $SD = .92$), $F(1,77) = 6.85$, $p = .01$ (see Table 6). This means that the company was in general more favorably judged when rapport was established in the scenario these participants were in.

It was also found that personalization had a direct marginally significant negative effect on company evaluation ($M = 4.90$; $SD = 1.18$), $F(1,77) = 3.12$, $p = .08$ (see Table 6). This means that participants in general judged the company less favorably when they were in a condition that displayed personalization.

6.2.3. Willingness to engage in word-of-mouth

It was found that both rapport and personalization have a direct significant effect on the willingness to engage in word-of-mouth. The following values were found for rapport ($M = 5.17$; $SD = 1.27$), $F(1,77) = 4.21$, $p = .04$ (see Table 6). Establishing rapport does result in overall higher ratings. The following values were found for personalization ($M = 4.59$; $SD = 1.57$), $F(1,77) = 4.21$, $p = .04$ (see Table 6). This means that personalization negatively affects the willingness to engage in positive word-of-mouth.

6.2.4. Willingness to share on social media

Lastly, it was found that there was a direct marginally significant interaction effect on the willingness to share on social media $F(1,77) = 3.30$, $p = .07$ (see Table 6). In the condition in which rapport is present, but personalization is not, the following values were found: $M = 2.61$; $SD = 1.43$. The condition in which both personalization and rapport are present scores differently: $M = 1.89$; $SD = 1.05$. This shows that the willingness decreases when both the factors are displayed. When performing a univariate test on rapport, personalization, and the willingness to share on social media, this effect can be found in the rapport variable, as can be seen in Table 7 and 8.

Table 7 - Means and standard deviations for the willingness to share on social media

Rapport	Personalization	Mean	Standard deviation	N
No	No	2.26	1.39	20
	Yes	2.58	1.22	18
	Total	2.41	1.30	38
Yes	No	2.61	1.43	23
	Yes	1.89	1.05	20
	Total	2.27	1.30	43
Total	No	2.45	1.40	43
	Yes	2.22	1.17	38
	Total	2.34	1.30	81

Table 8 – Univariate test of rapport and the willingness to share on social media

Rapport	Sum of squares ^a	Degrees of Freedom	Mean ²	F	Significance	Partial Eta ²
No	.98	1	.98	.59	.45	.01
Yes	5.56	1	5.56	3.36	.07	.04

Each F tests the simple effects of personalization within each level combination of the other effects shown. These tests are based on the linearly independent pairwise comparisons among the estimated marginal means.

a. *df* = 77

This means that the willingness to share on social media decreases whenever rapport and personalization are displayed together (see Figure 4).

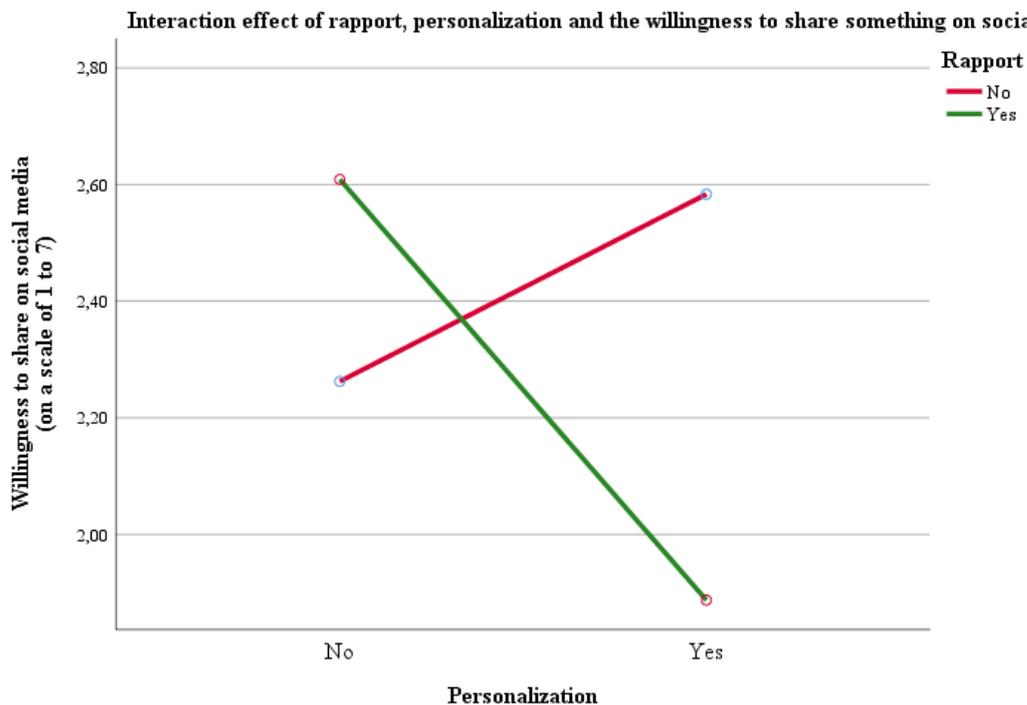


Figure 4 – Interaction effect of willingness to share on social media

6.3. Mediation analysis

To test whether the Perceived Quality of Interaction (PQI) mediated the overall evaluation of the company and the willingness to engage in word-of-mouth, as hypothesized, additional analyses were done with the SPSS extension PROCESS. Additional linear regression analyses were performed to check the found significance.

Perceived quality of interaction and overall company evaluation

Rapport

When looking specifically at rapport as the independent variable, mediation analyses revealed that perceived quality of interaction (PQI) did not mediate company evaluation (CE) or repeat business (RB).

Therefore, the perceived quality of interaction does not mediate the relationship between rapport and the overall evaluation of the company.

Personalization

When looking at personalization as the independent variable, other results came up with the PROCESS analysis. It illustrated that Personalization is a marginally significant predictor of PQI ($p = .08$). It was also found that personalization is a marginally significant predictor for CE ($p = .08$). Adding to this, P|PQI is significant predictor of CE ($p = .00$). However, the reverse relationship, PQI|P is not significant, meaning the effect of the independent variable, Personalization, is no longer significant in the presence of a mediating variable. This confirms the full mediating effect of perceived quality of interaction on the relationship of personalization and company evaluation. In this case, the effect size of the mediator is $-.29$, with a 95% confidence interval; meaning the effect was significantly greater than zero at $\alpha = .05$. A Sobel test also confirmed the mediation. The results of the PROCESS and regression analyses can be found in Tables 9 and 10:

Table 9 – Mediation analysis results

Path	β (Unstandardized)	σ	β (Standardized)	Significance
C (Pers. to CE)	-.40	.22	-.20	0.08
A (Pers. to PQI)	-.42	.23	-.20	0.08
B (PQI to CE)	.69	.08	.72	0.00
C^x (Pers. to CE)	-.11	.16	-.06	0.48

Table 10 – Sobel's Z test

Test Value	σ	Significance
-1.75	0.16	0.08

Figure 5 illustrates how the mediation works, the paths from Table 9 correspond with the paths in the figure. It was found that PQI only mediated the relationship between personalization and CE. This means that personalization lowers the PQI and with that the company evaluation.

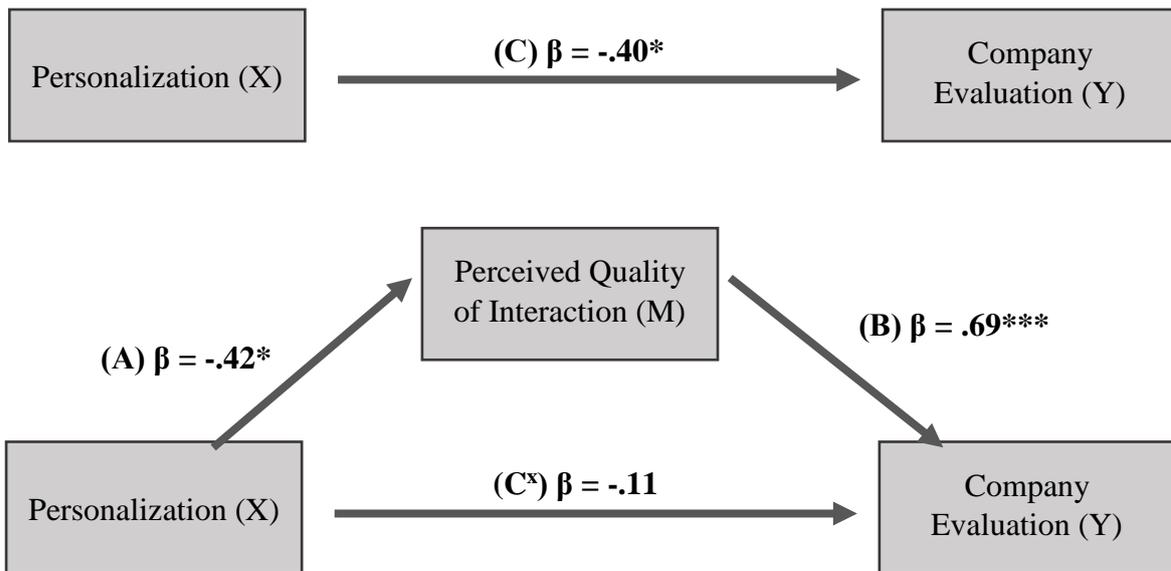


Figure 5 – Mediation between PQI, Personalization, and CE

* = $p < .10$

** = $p < .05$

*** = $p < .001$

For the repeat business dependent variable, similar mediation effects were found. It turns out that the mediation effect of PQI between personalization and RB is marginally significant ($p = .08$). Analysis reveals that personalization is a significant predictor of PQI ($p = .03$). However, it was found that personalization is not a significant predictor for RB ($p = .30$). Nevertheless, PQI is significant ($p = .03$). The reverse, P|PQI, is no significant predictor of RB ($p = .54$). This does not confirm the mediating effect of perceived quality of interaction on the relationship of personalization and repeat business.

Perceived quality of interaction and willingness to engage in word-of-mouth

Rapport

When having rapport as the independent variable, PROCESS mediation analyses revealed that Perceived Quality of Interaction (PQI) did not mediate willingness to engage in word-of-mouth (WOM) or willingness to share on social media (SM). Therefore, the perceived quality of interaction does not mediate the relationship between rapport and these two variables.

Personalization

Again, having personalization as the independent variable results in marginally significant mediation effects in the case of WOM ($p = .08$). This means that personalization is a significant predictor for PQI. Personalization is also a significant predictor of WOM ($p = .04$). It turns out that P|PQI is a significant predictor of WOM ($p = .00$), but PQI|P is not ($p = .19$). This confirms the full mediating effect of PQI on the relationship of personalization and WOM. In this case, the effect size of the mediator is $-.25$, with a 95% confidence interval; meaning the effect was significantly greater than zero at $\alpha = .05$.

Unfortunately, a confirming Sobel's test resulted in non-significant results, which means the mediation is not significant after all. The results can be found in Tables 11 and 12.

Table 11 – Mediation analysis results

Path	β (Unstandardized)	σ	β (Standardized)	Significance
C (Pers. to WOM)	-.58	.28	-.23	.04
A (Pers. to PQI)	-.42	.23	-.20	.08
B (PQI to WOM)	.60	.12	.49	.00
C ^x (Pers. to WOM)	-.33	.25	-.13	.20

Table 12 – Sobel's Z test

Test Value	σ	Significance
-1.21	2.07	0.227

Figure 6 illustrates how the mediation works, the paths from Table 11 correspond with the paths in the figure. It was found that perceived quality of interaction only mediated the relationship between personalization and willingness to engage in WOM. This means that personalization lowers the PQI and with that the willingness to engage in WOM.

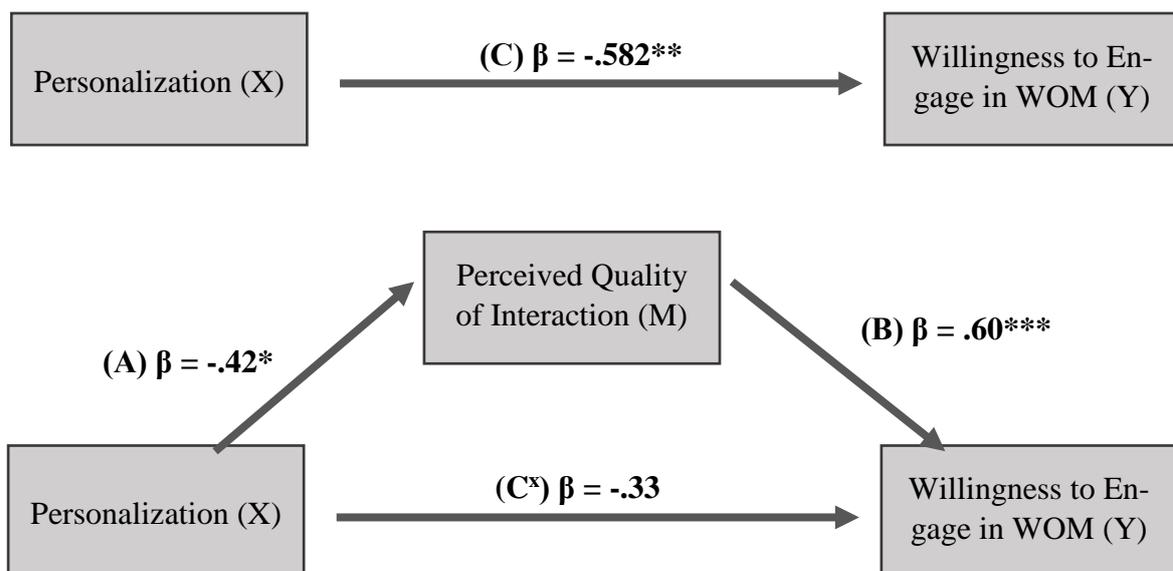


Figure 6 – Mediation between PQI, Personalization, and WOM

* = $p < .10$

** = $p < .05$

*** = $p < .001$

Similar effects are found for the relation between personalization and the SM ($p = .08$). This means that personalization is a significant predictor for PQI. However, personalization is no significant predictor for SM ($p = .43$). Nevertheless, it turns out personalization|PQI is a significant predictor ($p = .02$) for SM, where PQI|personalization is not ($p = .73$). However, this does not confirm a mediating effect of PQI between personalization and willingness to share on social media.

7. Conclusion

This research provides insights into the effects of rapport and personalization as a part of the newly introduced “Social Richness Theory”. Through experimental research and statistical analyses, the effect of rapport and personalization on the perceived quality of customer-company interactions, the overall evaluation of the company, and the willingness to engage in positive word-of-mouth was measured. This was tested in a real-life, B2B context, taking the form of scenarios that involved a telecom connection issue.

It was found that rapport had a positive impact on the company evaluation and on the willingness to engage in word-of-mouth. Personalization had a negative impact on interaction quality, company evaluation, and the willingness to engage in word-of-mouth. Additionally, the relationship between personalization and the overall evaluation of the company is mediated by a lower interaction quality, causing the company to be evaluated less favorably because of a perceived lower quality of the interaction. One interaction effect was found: the willingness to share on social media turned out to decrease when rapport and personalization are displayed together.

Summarizing, we can say there is indeed an influence of rapport and/or personalization on the perceived quality of the interaction, the company evaluation, the willingness to engage in word-of-mouth, and the willingness to share on social media. Rapport influences the factors positively, and personalization mainly negatively. Rapport seems to be a promising variable to include in the Social Richness Theory, and personalization seems to be a variable which requires additional research before implementing into interactions.

8. Discussion

This section discusses the results of this research and provides an answer to the central research questions. Furthermore, theoretical and practical implications, future research directions, and limitations are discussed.

The main research questions posed for this research reads: “*What is the influence of “social richness”, established through rapport and/or personalization, on the perceived quality of customer-company interactions, customers’ overall company evaluation, and their willingness to engage in positive word-of-mouth?*”

This paper introduced the Social Richness Theory (see Figure 7). The two variables looked at in this research were rapport and personalization, as these are two variables mainly used to increase social richness in B2C environments.

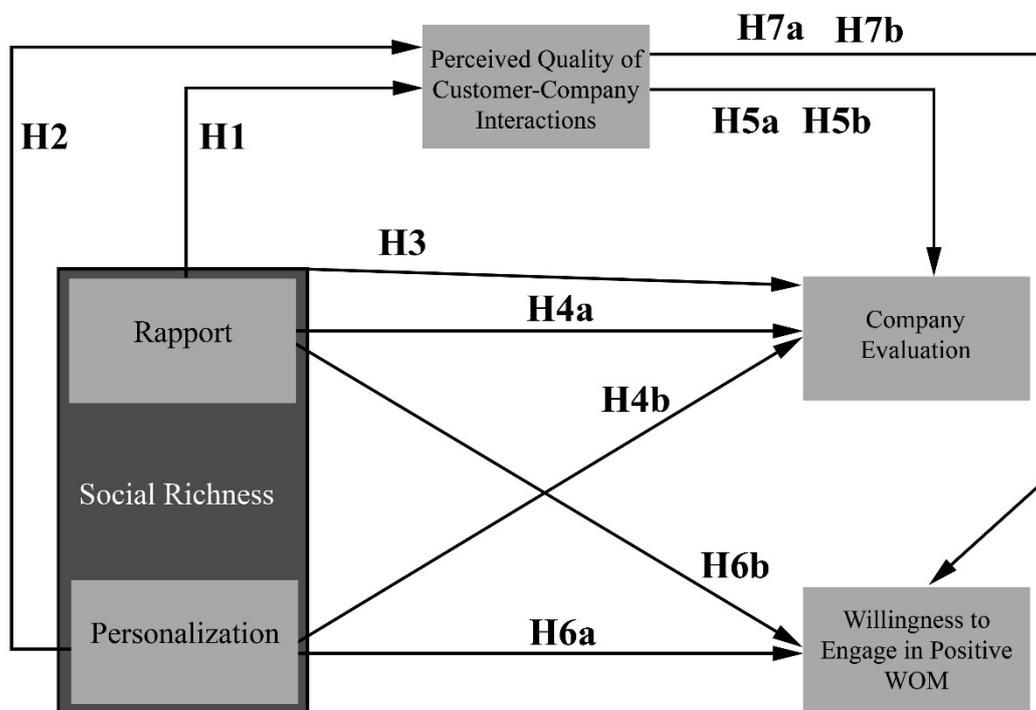


Figure 7 – Social Richness Model

It was hypothesized that social richness influences the perceived quality of customer-company interactions, the overall evaluation of the company, and the willingness the engage in positive word-of-mouth. Social richness can be increased by establishing rapport and displaying personalization. These two factors could also directly influence the overall evaluation of the company and customers’ willingness to engage in word-of-mouth.

After several analyses, six main effects were found (see Table 13). Rapport had a positive impact on the company evaluation and on the willingness to engage in word-of-mouth. Personalization had a

significant negative impact in all three cases. It negatively influenced interaction quality, company evaluation, and the willingness to engage in word-of-mouth. One interaction effect was found: the willingness to share on social media decreased in cases where both rapport or personalization had been present. The significance of this interaction effect is found in the rapport factor.

Table 13 – Hypotheses results

Hypothesis and description		Found results	
H1	<i>Establishing rapport increases the perceived quality of interactions, whereas not establishing rapport does not increase the perceived quality of interactions.</i>	Refuted	No significant effect was found.
H2	<i>Displaying personalization increases the perceived quality of interactions, whereas not displaying personalization does not increase the perceived quality of interactions.</i>	Refuted	Personalization has a direct negative effect on the perceived quality of interactions.
H3	<i>A combination of rapport and personalization increases the perceived quality of interactions.</i>	Refuted	One direct interaction effect was found: the presence of either rapport or personalization influences the willingness to share on social media. Having both reveals a negative influence.
H4a	<i>Increasing social richness by establishing rapport directly positively influences the overall evaluation of the company.</i>	Accepted	✓
H4b	<i>Increasing social richness by displaying personalization directly positively influences the overall evaluation of the company.</i>	Refuted	Personalization has a direct negative effect on the overall evaluation of the company.
H5a	<i>The relationship between rapport and the overall evaluation of the company is mediated by the perceived quality of interaction.</i>	Refuted	No significant effect was found.
H5b	<i>The relationship between personalization and the overall evaluation of the company is mediated by the perceived quality of interaction.</i>	Partially accepted	Instead of the expected positive mediation, there is a negative mediation.
H6a	<i>Increasing social richness by establishing rapport directly positively influences the willingness to engage in WOM.</i>	Accepted	✓
H6b	<i>Increasing social richness by displaying personalization directly positively influences the willingness to engage in WOM.</i>	Refuted	Personalization has a direct negative effect on the willingness to engage in WOM
H7a	<i>The relationship between rapport and the willingness to engage in word-of-mouth is mediated by the perceived quality of interaction.</i>	Refuted	No significant effect was found.
H7b	<i>The relationship between personalization and the willingness to engage in word-of-mouth is mediated by the perceived quality of interaction.</i>	Refuted	While analysis revealed a negative mediation between personalization, perceived quality of interaction, and WOM, the Sobel's test provided insignificant results.

To summarize, this makes the following revised Social Richness Model:

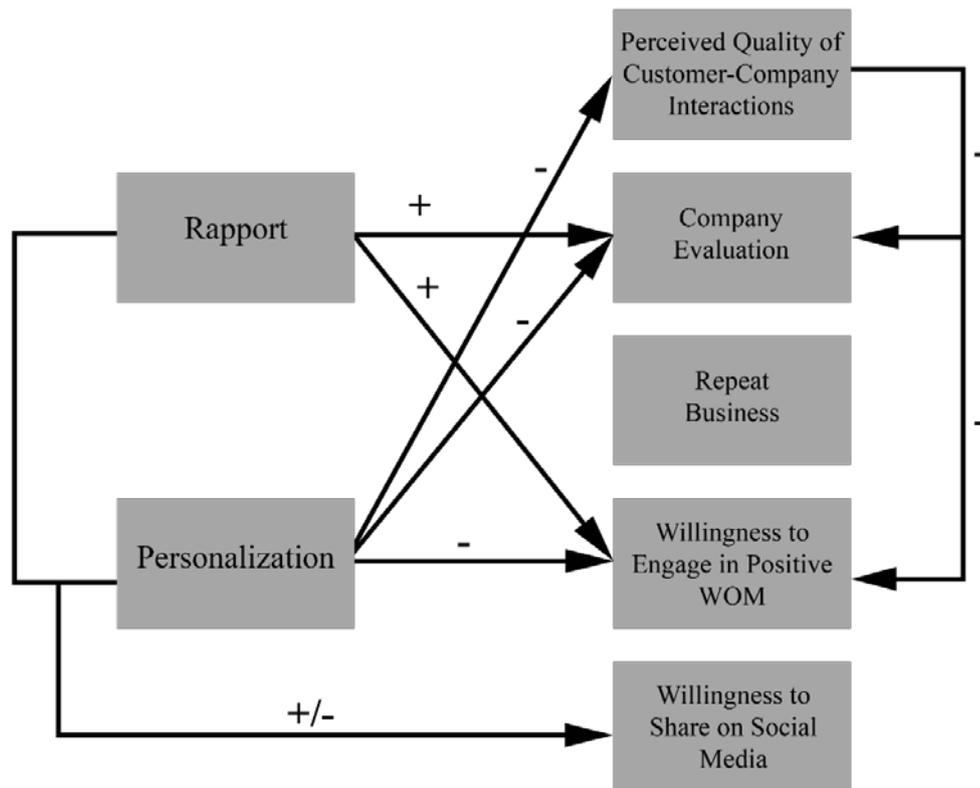


Figure 8 – Revised Social Richness Model

8.1. Discussion of research results

It was found that rapport has a direct positive influence on the overall evaluation on the company and on customers' willingness to engage in positive word-of-mouth. This is in line with existing research. Establishing rapport in interactions could have positive effects for companies. Examples include cases in which the company moved forward in their relationship with the customer (Campbell & Davis, 2006; Campbell et al., 2006), or increased customer satisfaction and loyalty (Biedenbach et al., 2011; Gremler & Gwinner, 2008; Worsfold et al., 2007). In 2007, Worsfold et al. specifically researched the relation between rapport and service failure, through which they found positive results for the inclusion of rapport. Analyses revealed that rapport indeed has a positive effect on the company evaluation of a customer and the willingness to engage in word-of-mouth. Therefore, being friendly, transparent, and emphatic with customers clearly works positively.

It was found that personalization has a negative effect on the perceived quality of interaction, the company evaluation, and the willingness to engage in word-of-mouth. Adding to this, there was a mediation effect found for personalization. It turns out that personalization decreases the perceived quality of customer interactions, which caused respondents to evaluate the company less favorably and be less inclined to engage in word-of-mouth. Personalization also directly negatively influences the overall company evaluation and the willingness to engage in word-of-mouth. While this is in contrast to B2C

personalization literature, there are some authors that include negative remarks on personalization in their own studies. Surprenant and Solomon (1987) included three types of personalization in their paper. In this current research, only two of those types were included in the scenarios: programmed and customized personalization because of relevance reasons. In their research, Surprenant and Solomon (1987) hypothesized that programmed personalization could have negative effects on the provider and the satisfaction with the service, if option personalization, the ability to choose your service requirements from a variety of options, was also high. The reason being that option personalization increases the cognitive load, and this causes the negative effects. Eventually, they found that customers were less satisfied with the competence of the employees whenever option personalization was high and customized personalization was increased. While their research different, it does illustrate that too much personalization can have counterproductive results. White et al. (2008) confirm this as well in their research. Adding to this, Gwinner et al., (2005) mention that successful personalization, as a form of tailoring the conversation to the individual, requires the input of information about this customer. However, in the current study, there was no prior knowledge about the participants when drafting the scenarios. Looking further into it, one could argue that authenticity is a deciding factor. Whenever you experience a service, you would like the employee to be sincere and authentic with you. In the case of the present research, this could have been experienced differently, since the character 'Jan de Vries' was imaginary. Therefore, it could be that the participants experienced a cognitive discrepancy that resulted in their negative judgements in the personalization conditions.

One could continue this line of argumentation when thinking about the interaction effect. It was found that people are inclined, to a certain extent, to share a message on social media when only one of the two variables was displayed. However, when personalization and rapport were both present, the willingness decreased. A probable reason for this could be that participants experienced personalization and rapport together as too much. Nevertheless, the fact that participants are willing to share a message on social media is an insightful result on its own. The willingness to share on social media was not even explicitly outlined as a variable, but only done so after the factor analysis. There was little literature available and used that solely focused on people's willingness to share messages on social media. However, research found that online word-of-mouth is often motivated by social and functional drivers (Lovett, Peres, & Shachar, 2013), making a satisfactory problem solution a functional driver. One could therefore conclude that solving a problem satisfactory, while demonstrating either rapport or personalization, can seduce people into sharing something on social media.

While personalization is an often-used concept in B2C research, this study has illustrated that it is not always successful. While this can be contributed to the previous reasons, the negative effect of personalization could potentially be explained by the context it was portrayed in. As mentioned before, there is little literature available on service quality in B2B contexts, let alone an article that implements elements of personalization into a B2B service interaction. Therefore, this article could be one of the first

exhibits to indicate that personalization and B2B contexts do not mix very well together. It would be interesting to look at this phenomenon into further detail in future research.

8.2. Social Richness Theory

As said before, rapport could be a promising factor to explore further, but personalization was not successful in this study. The negative effects of personalization might not have been significant, since the manipulation check did not confirm that the participants fully grasped this manipulation. However, this study only says something about the opinions of 81 customers of a telecom company. If this sample was different, results could be different. Therefore, this paragraph only looks at the possible applications for the concept “rapport”, since this did have significant positive effects and is a promising variable to explore further. The results on rapport in this study do provide evidence for a successful integration of social richness in electronic interactions. Consequently, this study could still be a great starting point to elaborate on the Social Richness Theory.

Looking at rapport, inspiration for the scenarios was found in the articles of Gremler and Gwinner and their endless research on rapport and rapport-building behaviors. Study by observation, the design they maintained, is an ideal way to test social richness in interactions. Social richness could be measured by non-obtrusive observation, because of it being un-biased. The researcher could contact businesses to alter mannerisms in their conversation(s) with customers, without letting their customers know. This could be a robust way of finding out, maybe even cross-industry, what type of interactions customers prefer and how this could affect their evaluation of the company, their willingness to engage in word-of-mouth, on- or offline, or even other factors a company is interested in.

Looking at the present case, rapport has made a convincing impact on several important KPIs and provides a tangible option for improvement for many companies. Further applications, suggestions, or limitations are discussed in the following sections.

8.3. Limitations

8.3.1. Manipulation check results

As mentioned before, the manipulation check for personalization turned out to be insignificant. While a failed manipulation check does not automatically mean the manipulation of the scenarios was unsuccessful, it is something to take into consideration. It makes one think about the manipulations.

It can be concluded that all participants recognized the rapport elements in the way they were intended, as the check for rapport came up significant. When it came to the items on personalization and relationship, the recognition was apparently less clear. It can be argued that these items were too difficult to properly conceptualize and operationalize, as they are subject to one’s own interpretation. Where everyone can distinguish whether someone is e.g. friendly or helpful, distinguishing personalization might be more difficult. When asking someone, *do you feel like this [action] is personal*, one person might

say that he thinks it is, while someone else does not agree in the slightest. This might have been the case for this study.

Another possible explanation for this could be the fact that the participants did not know “Jan de Vries”, their company representative, personally. The picture and name used for him were made-up and found online. Therefore, having a personal conversation with an imaginary person could come off as strange and might even work counteractive. Had the research been conducted differently, e.g. with people the participants knew, the results could be different and maybe even be positive.

Finally, the sample might have been too small and there could have been too much variance between subgroups. Nevertheless, the only data we have is from 81 customers of a telecom company. It might have been a different case with a different sample.

It can be concluded that rapport is a concept that can easily be implemented into a research design. In contrast, personalization is more difficult to outline. To avoid alike limitations as in this research, make sure to have a solid conceptualization and operationalization of personalization when working with this concept.

8.3.2. Other limitations

While the strength of this research lies in the controlled scenario conditions, this is also a weakness. As can be seen in the results of the personalization variable, people did not appreciate the personalization for how it was displayed. Participants might have missed the intended personal connection to their company representative, Jan de Vries, making him come off as insincere or unauthentic. No participant knew this man in real life, because he is a fictitious character designed for this study. When participants were asked if they noticed anything positive or negative about this interaction, they often mentioned that their conversation included unnecessary information, or that it was too personal, and they did not feel like these types of mentions were appropriate in a formal e-mail exchange. In addition to these explanations, another explanation for the negative results could be the sample size, or the sample distribution, as there were little females included in the sample, especially in conditions 2 and 4 that contained personalization. This might have caused the overall negative trend.

Adding to this, the scenarios themselves might be flawed as there is no place for non-verbal communication, the greatness of the actual problem is not considered, and the response speed was not emphasized because of a possible bias. In addition, the questions used as basis from the service quality scales, e.g. SERVQUAL, were valid and reliable, but only in B2C environments. This could have an influence on the replication of these questions in a B2B environment. Also, the participants in this research were real-life customers of the company they had a scenario on. This might have biased their responses to some of the questions asking to evaluate the company.

Another bias could result from the fact that all participants interacted with a man, no matter if they were male or female. It might be the case that establishing rapport is easier when interacting with someone from the same sex. However, there were so little females in this sample that analysis to check that assumption is not possible. Also, the number of females were not divided equally in the four conditions.

Finally, the sample size might have been too small. The manipulation check results and the insignificant Sobel's test in the mediation analysis could be due to a small sample size.

8.4. Theoretical and practical implications

8.4.1. Theoretical implications

The contribution to theory for this research is twofold. This study (1) could be a starting point to elaborate on the newly introduced Social Richness Theory, and (2) it provides important insights into B2B environments, whereas previous research has not touched upon this subject.

As mentioned before, Social Richness Theory is newly introduced and is currently only supported by one convincing factor: rapport. However, since this study only tested two variables to begin with, there is space left to explore. Social Richness Theory has the potential to become a robust and inclusive theory, shining a light on the black box that is B2B customer interactions. This research kickstarted this by presenting surprising results, such as the interaction effect concerning social media. Existing literature is provided with a blank canvas to color in by this theory. It would be exciting to see this theory grow into an accepted guide in the future.

Coming back to the black box, not so much is known about the way companies interact with their executive customers. As mentioned in the introduction, there is barely any literature available elaborating on the subject. This study fills a gap in that area. The theoretical framework elaborates on the factors linked to B2B interactions and the actual study tests out the preferences of a large pool of telecom customers. It is hoped that this thesis inspires other researchers to present B2B customer interactions with some necessary attention.

8.4.2. Practical implications

This study also has several practical implications. For starters, the results for rapport could be used to enrich (electronic) interactions with customers. As it turns out, the friendlier and more the transparent companies are towards their customers, the more they appreciate the company's business and the more they are inclined to recommend the company to others.

Companies could use the insights of this research to alter their (electronic) communications. For example, they should be more transparent when explaining problems to their customers. They should also be more emphatic. Participants appreciated the transparent and friendlier way of communicating. Often, whenever there is a problem, people just receive an automatic e-mail stating the message is being considered. When the reply to the mention of the problem is more customer-focused, appreciation is higher. These insights can be used to practically train employees in better understanding customer preferences

and eventually having higher quality interactions with their customers. Even though this is a great starting point, more research is still needed to be more certain of the effects of social richness variables on customer behavior.

8.5. Suggestions for future research

This research has provided a starting point for the Social Richness Theory. Where the two tested variables gave different effects, rapport is indeed an effective starting point for increasing social richness in customer interactions. Future work should (1) focus on finding other variables suited for inclusion in the Social Richness Theory, (2) find other contexts in which rapport could be more effective, (3) determine whether and how gender and/or age could influence the perceived interaction quality, the overall evaluation of the company, and/or the willingness to engage in word-of-mouth when subjected to social richness, (4) look deeper into the interacting effect found in this research, (5) find out whether the negative effects of personalization can be contributed to the participant's preferences, or whether the research design was flawed and personalization indeed has different effects, and (6) focus on other possible methods to uncover more success factors for B2B customer interactions, starting with the different industries that might have different results than this study.

Adding to this, an interesting direction for future research could also be the connection between personalization and the B2B context. As mentioned before, this study could be one of the first to illustrate that personalization as a concept may falter when placed in a B2B context. It would be interesting to find out whether the effects found in this study are like the effects found by other researchers, when placing personalization into a B2B context.

9. Overall conclusion

This research has shown some interesting and significant effects in relation to the newly introduced Social Richness Theory. This study is valuable because it enriches existing theory with experimental research. In this case, rapport and personalization have been researched in a real-life B2B context together. The results indicated that rapport is a good concept to implement into interactions, while personalization is best left out when increasing social richness in customer-company interactions. In addition, this study has shown that the prime position of personalization as a marketing element, might not be so stable after all and that the context could potentially play a huge role in this. In conclusion, this study contributes to existing literature with unique research results and provides numerous directions for future research.

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Appendices

A - Questionnaire

Nederlands:

1. Heel erg oneens
2. Oneens
3. Een beetje oneens
4. Noch eens, noch oneens
5. Een beetje eens
6. Eens
7. Heel erg eens

Consent

Dit is een onderzoek over interacties met klanten. Tijdens dit onderzoek zal u als deelnemer een scenario te zien krijgen, waarin een klant contact opneemt met een bedrijf, omdat er een probleem is met de levering van een product. Hierna volgt een vragenlijst. Uw antwoorden worden gebruikt om een advies uit te brengen aan bedrijven klantinteracties.

Uw gegevens blijven te allen tijde anoniem. De resultaten van dit onderzoek zullen anoniem en vertrouwelijk worden behandeld. U behoudt zich daarbij het recht voor om op elk moment zonder opgaaf van redenen uw deelname aan dit onderzoek te stoppen.

Aan het eind hebt u de optie uw e-mailadres achter te laten indien u een rapport wilt ontvangen als het onderzoek ten einde loopt.

Wilt u verder naar de enquête? → Ja/Nee

Demographics

1. Ik ben een man/vrouw
2. Mijn leeftijd is [18 – 25], [26 – 35], [36 – 45], [46 – 55], [Ouder dan 55]
3. Welk scenario is voor u van toepassing?
 - a. Ik ben klant van TelecomX en neem hier telefonie af
 - b. Ik ben klant van TelecomX en neem hier internet af
 - c. Ik ben partner van TelecomY

Introtext

Telephone

Stelt u zich voor, uw naam is Willem de Groot/Hannah Janssen en u bent al eventjes klant van TelecomX, uw telefonie leverancier.

Voorheen hebben jullie amper problemen gehad met TelecomX. Nu is er wel een probleem: een storing met jullie telefonie. Wanneer jullie worden gebeld, stoort het geluid. Hoewel jullie de klant nog steeds kunnen verstaan, is het wel een vervelend probleem. U besluit daarom meteen contact op te nemen met TelecomX.

Wat u in de volgende afbeeldingen ziet, is uw e-mailwisseling met uw contactpersoon van TelecomX, Jan de Vries. Probeert u zich maximaal in te leven in deze scenario's en de vragen hiernaar te beantwoorden.

Internet

Stelt u zich voor, uw naam is Willem de Groot/Hannah Janssen en u bent al eventjes klant van TelecomX, uw internet leverancier.

Voorheen hebben jullie amper problemen gehad met TelecomX. Nu is er wel een probleem: jullie internet is traag. Er kan nog steeds gewerkt worden, maar u merkt dat iedereen er wel last van heeft. U besluit daarom meteen contact op te nemen met TelecomX.

Wat u in de volgende afbeeldingen ziet, is uw e-mailwisseling met uw contactpersoon van TelecomX, Jan de Vries. Probeert u zich maximaal in te leven in deze scenario's en de vragen hiernaar te beantwoorden.

Partner

Stelt u zich voor, uw naam is Willem de Groot/Hannah Janssen en u bent al eventjes partner van TelecomY, uw glasvezel leverancier.

Voorheen hebben jullie amper problemen gehad met TelecomY. Nu is er wel een probleem: een storing met de telefonie van een van jullie klanten. Wanneer ze worden gebeld, stoort het geluid. Hoewel ze de klant nog steeds kunnen verstaan, is het wel een vervelend probleem. U besluit daarom meteen contact op te nemen met TelecomY.

Wat u in de volgende afbeeldingen ziet, is uw e-mailwisseling met uw contactpersoon van TelecomY, Jan de Vries. Probeert u zich maximaal in te leven in deze scenario's en de vragen hiernaar te beantwoorden.

Rapport tactics

In hoeverre bent u het eens met deze stellingen over uw gesprek met Jan de Vries?

Jan de Vries...

1. ...was kortaf
2. ...was zakelijk
3. ...had een goed gesprek met mij
4. ...liet buitengewoon goede service zien
5. ...was beleefd
6. ...was behulpzaam
7. ...was vriendelijk
8. ...dacht met me mee
9. ...heeft het beste met me voor
10. ...liet zien dat hij mijn probleem begreep

Personalization

In hoeverre bent u het eens met deze stellingen over uw gesprek met Jan de Vries?

1. Ik kreeg persoonlijke aandacht
2. Ik vond dit gesprek persoonlijk.
3. Ik vond dit gesprek onpersoonlijk.
4. Ik kreeg de indruk dat Jan de Vries wist wie ik was
5. Ik kreeg de indruk dat Jan de Vries wist waar ik mee bezig ben.

Interaction quality

In hoeverre bent u het eens met deze stellingen over uw gesprek met Jan de Vries?

1. Ik vond dit gesprek oprecht.
2. Ik vond dit gesprek waardevol.
3. Ik vond dit gesprek van hoge kwaliteit.

4. De kwaliteit van mijn gesprek met Jan de Vries was excellent.
5. Ik ontvang snelle service van Jan de Vries.

Overall evaluation of the company

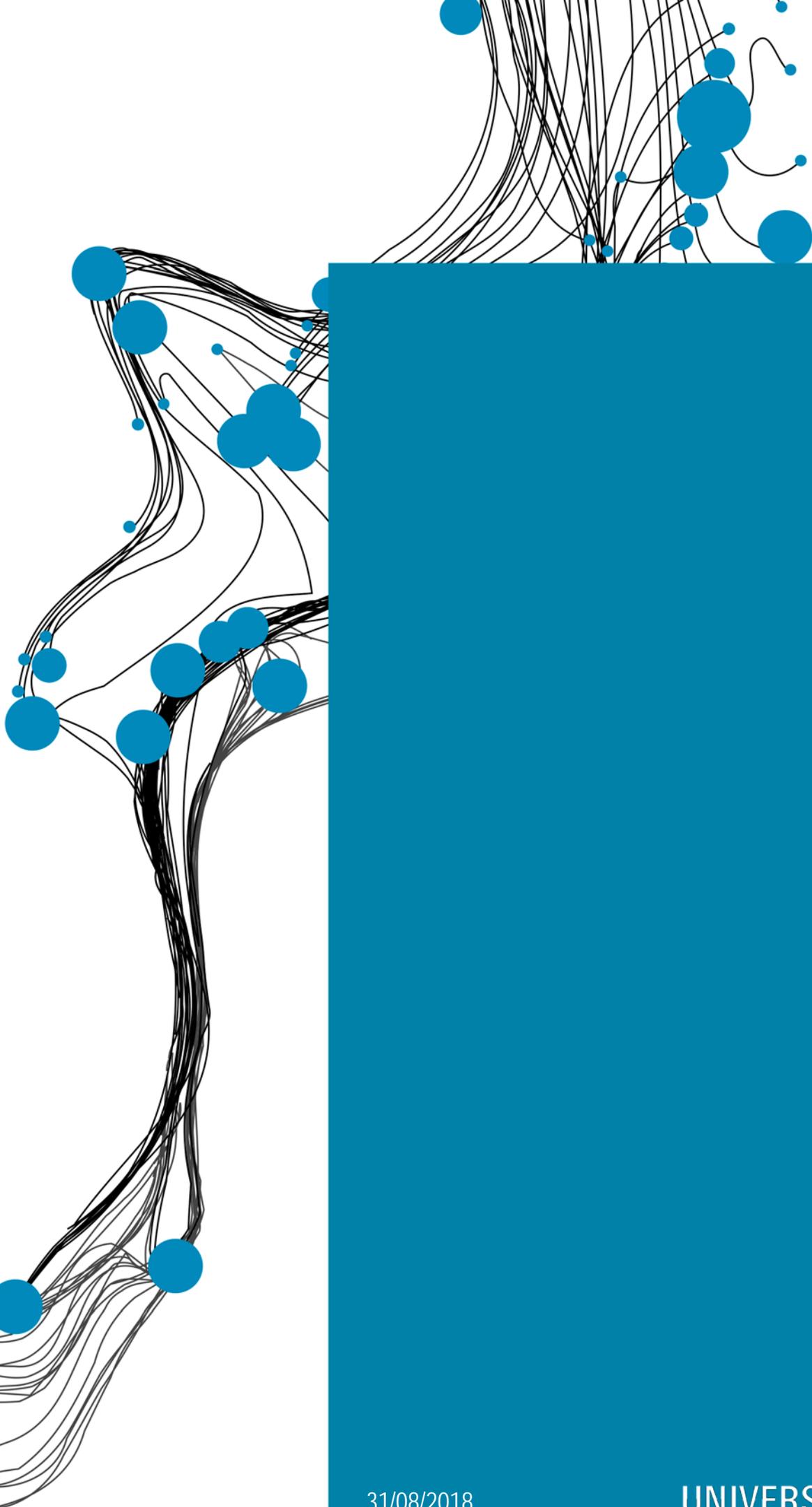
Hoe vond u deze benadering? Naar aanleiding van het voorafgaande gesprek zouden wij graag weten in hoeverre bent u het eens met deze stellingen over TelecomX/TelecomY.

1. Dit gesprek heeft mij een goede ervaring met TelecomX/TelecomY opgeleverd.
2. Ik denk dat TelecomX/TelecomY mij een goede ervaring wil bezorgen.
3. Ik denk dat TelecomX/TelecomY weet wat voor ervaring ik verwacht te krijgen.
4. Ik denk dat TelecomX/TelecomY excellente service biedt.
5. Ik ben tevreden met TelecomX/TelecomY.
6. Volgende keer zou ik weer een verbinding via TelecomX/TelecomY nemen.
7. Wat vond u vooral goed/niet goed aan dit gesprek? Wat heeft u positief/negatief verrast in dit gesprek?
8. Het is vier weken later, er is weer een leverprobleem met de producten van TelecomX/TelecomY. In hoeverre ben je het eens met deze stellingen?
 - a. Ik bel weer met TelecomX/TelecomY om het op te lossen.
 - b. Ik neem weer contact op met Jan de Vries.
 - c. Ik zou contact opnemen met een andere werknemer van TelecomX/TelecomY
 - d. Ik zou een externe monteur bellen.

Willingness to engage in word-of-mouth

In hoeverre zou u TelecomX/TelecomY aanbevelen naar aanleiding van dit gesprek?

- a. Ik zou dit bedrijf aanbevelen bij anderen die een zakelijke verbinding nodig hebben.
 - b. Als ik in de toekomst werkzaam zou zijn bij een bedrijf dat nog geen verbinding heeft via TelecomX/TelecomY, zou ik hen aanbevelen als nieuwe partner.
2. In hoeverre bent u bereid een bericht te plaatsen op social media over dit gesprek en/of TelecomX/TelecomY?
 - a. Uw persoonlijke Facebook pagina
 - b. De Facebookpagina van uw bedrijf
 - c. Uw persoonlijke LinkedIn pagina
 - d. De LinkedIn pagina van uw bedrijf
3. Wat zou u delen?



31/08/2018

UNIVERSITY OF TWENTE.