

**Emotional Convergence in Service Relationships:  
The Shared Frontline Experience of Customers and Employees**

**ABSTRACT**

The literature establishes that customer and FLE emotions converge during their encounters as a result of a transient, contagion-based process in which emotions flow from one actor to another. Recent evidence suggests, however, that this transient process does not produce emotional convergence among frontline dyads engaged in ongoing exchange, a surprising finding given the wealth of evidence in support of the idea that customers and FLEs engaged in relational exchange strongly influence one another. In light of this evidence, we argue here that customers and FLEs engaged in ongoing exchange experience similar emotions not as a result of the transient transfer of emotions, but because they develop the tendency to undergo a similar emotional response to relationship events, a phenomenon we call the *shared frontline experience*. Informed by the social psychology literature, we support this idea by advancing a conceptual model that highlights the role of relationship closeness, personality similarity, and dyadic attachment style in producing the shared frontline experience. The proposed model also suggests that firms stand to benefit from the shared frontline experience of customers and FLEs if they provide the dyad with autonomy, a decision not without risk. Future research directions suggested by this perspective are discussed.

*Keywords: Shared frontline experience, emotional convergence, emotions, customer-FLE relationship*

The encounters that occur between a customer and frontline employee (FLE) are fundamental to facilitating exchange. These encounters have important implications for customer satisfaction (Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault 1990), FLE welfare (Rafaeli et al. 2012) and, by extension, firm performance (Ployhart, Weekley, and Ramsey 2009). Research suggests that the nature and outcomes of frontline encounters are shaped by intrapersonal (e.g., Wang, Beatty, and Liu 2012), interpersonal (e.g., Oliver and Swan 1989), and situational (Homburg and Stock 2004) factors. One such factor – the emotions of customers and FLEs – is our focus here.

Research on emotions in the frontlines suggests that when FLEs display emotion it can be transferred through contagion to customers (Pugh 2001). That emotion transfer can, in turn, influence customers' evaluation of and satisfaction with an encounter (Mattila and Enz 2002; Tan, Der Foo, and Kwek 2004). Other studies find analogous effects in the opposite direction. When customers display emotions, they can affect the emotions FLEs experience (Rupp and Spencer 2006) and the amount of stress-inducing emotional labor FLEs perform during an encounter (Rupp et al. 2008). Regardless of the direction of influence, research seems to strongly support the conclusion that customer and FLE emotions converge<sup>1</sup> during an encounter as a result of a transient process in which emotions flow from one actor to another.

Prior research largely assumes that this transient process produces emotional convergence during frontline encounters regardless of whether a customer and FLE are interacting for the first time or already know each other well. This assumption, however, has been recently called into question by research which suggests that contagion-based emotional transfer is more likely in

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<sup>1</sup> Convergence refers to “the tendency for two individuals to become more alike over time” (Gonzaga, Campos, and Bradbury 2007, p. 36). We use the term and its variants to refer to a convergence in customer-FLE emotions that may occur over a relatively short (i.e., over the course of an encounter) or long (i.e., over the course of multiple encounters) period of time. The extant literature on emotional contagion focuses on customer-FLE emotional convergence over the course of an encounter. Customer-FLE emotional convergence over the course of multiple encounters (within the context of an ongoing relationship) has not been considered in prior research and is our focus here.

transactional contexts than in relational settings where repeated exchange is the norm (Gabriel, Acosta, and Grandey 2015). This evidence implies at least two possibilities: emotional convergence is less likely when exchange is facilitated through service relationships<sup>2</sup> or the mechanisms that produce emotional convergence differ in transactional and relational contexts. Given the preponderance of evidence in support of the idea that customers and FLEs engaged in relational exchange have a strong influence on one another (Zablah et al. 2016), we argue that the latter is more likely. Hence, our objective in this manuscript is to introduce an alternative perspective on emotional convergence that is better-suited for explaining why customers and FLEs engaged in ongoing exchange may come to experience the same emotions during relationship encounters. With that end in mind, we propose that emotional convergence occurs in relational contexts not because of the transient transfer of emotions from one frontline actor to another, but because the customer and FLE grow to experience the same emotions in response to relationship events. The following scenario illustrates this core aspect of our thinking:

*A romantic, enthusiastic bride-to-be and a worn out, seemingly jaded wedding planner have spent the past six months arranging the bride's perfect wedding. At the beginning of the process, the bride cries heartfelt tears of joy as she selects her bouquet and china, while the weary wedding planner experiences little emotion in crossing these items off her to-do list. Later on, as the bride gleefully samples wedding cakes and dreams of her fairytale life with her husband-to-be, the wedding planner finds herself becoming more emotionally stirred. Finally, as the bride tries on wedding gowns, the wedding planner is gushing along with her in the bridal salon. They cry together as they select the perfect veil and shoes. During the course of the planning process, the two have developed a very close relationship, and the bride's optimistic and enthusiastic outlook on life has managed to color how the typically emotionless wedding planner reacts to the planning milestones they experience together.*

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<sup>2</sup> Gutek and colleagues (1995; 1999) identify three different mechanisms utilized to facilitate exchange between a firm and its customers: encounters, pseudo-relationships, and service relationships. Encounters are akin to transactional exchange and involve customer interactions with different providers over time. Pseudo-relationships involve repeated interactions between a customer and firm over time, but with different FLEs across interactions. Service relationships, which are the focus of this research, involve repeated interaction between one customer and the same FLE over time. Service relationships occur, for example, between realtors and their clients, salespeople and their accounts, and waiters and their "regular" customers.

To formalize the preceding ideas, we introduce to the literature the notion of a *shared frontline experience*, defined as the tendency of a customer and frontline employee to undergo a similar emotional response to events that occur within their exchange relationship. This construct is derived from the social psychology literature on interpersonal relationships (e.g., Anderson, Keltner, and John 2003), and provides the starting point for our views on why emotional convergence occurs in contexts where service relationships (rather than isolated encounters) are utilized to facilitate exchange. In support of our perspective, we also propose a dyadic-level nomological network that highlights the antecedents and consequences of a shared frontline experience.

The ideas advanced in this manuscript contribute to the frontline literature in three distinct ways. First and foremost, we contribute to the literature on affect in the frontlines by proposing that, over time, customer-FLE dyads engaged in repeated exchange develop a tendency to react similarly to relationship events, and thus experience the same emotions in response to stimuli encountered during the course of exchange. In so doing, we offer a complementary explanation for why emotional convergence occurs in the frontlines that contrasts sharply with that espoused by extant research; namely, that emotional displays underlie the emotional convergence of customer-FLE dyads. This aspect of our study is noteworthy because it acknowledges that customers and FLEs may have a far more pervasive influence on each other's emotions than implied by a display-based explanation of frontline emotional convergence. Relatedly, this is an important contribution in light of both recent evidence suggesting FLE emotional displays have a diminished impact on customer outcomes in relational contexts (Gabriel, Acosta, and Grandey 2015), and the paucity of research on emotional convergence in situations where repeated encounters are common. Second, we contribute to the literature on affect in the frontlines by proposing that a shared frontline experience has

implications not merely for the evaluation of individual exchange encounters but also for the functioning of the exchange relationships themselves. Whereas prior research has only considered why the emotions customers experience have an impact on their evaluation of an exchange encounter, we articulate why and under what conditions the emotions a dyad experiences are likely to either enhance or detract from the functioning of the exchange relationship itself. Finally, we contribute to the literature on emotional convergence by positing that the dyad's attachment style plays a hitherto unacknowledged but important role in emotional convergence processes. That is, we argue that attachment style not only promotes close relationships but also determines whether the members of a dyad are likely to make the adaptations necessary for emotional convergence to occur. To contextualize our knowledge contributions, we begin our exposition with a review of representative research on affect in the frontlines.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

We begin our literature review by distinguishing between affect, emotions, and moods (Bagozzi, Gopinath, and Nyer 1999). Using Bartel and Saavedra's (2000) seminal study on mood convergence in workgroups as a basis for our thinking, we define (1) *affect* as an umbrella term that is used to describe both emotions and moods, (2) *emotions* as "brief reactions to particular persons or events" that are intense and manifest distinctly, for example, as anger, joy, and fear, and (3) *moods* as "relatively enduring affective states that lack an object to which the affect is directed" and are, in part, a consequence of the emotions individuals experience in response to persons or events (p. 199).

With these definitions as a foundation, we now turn our attention to published research on affect in the frontlines to provide a contrast between extant research and the ideas we espouse in this manuscript. To aid in our review of the literature, we provide a summary of representative

empirical studies on affect in the frontlines in Table A1, found in Web Appendix A. These studies generally provide indirect evidence in support of emotional convergence in the frontlines and of the impact of said process on organizationally-valued customer and FLE outcomes. The empirical research reviewed considers both the role of emotions and moods in the frontlines (with the specific type of affect considered in some studies not always clear); hence, when appropriate, we employ the broader term affect when describing insights derived from this collective body of research. It is important to underscore, however, that our focus in this manuscript is ultimately on the emotions customers and FLEs experience in response to events encountered during the exchange process; that is, the *shared frontline experience* concept we introduce to the literature and develop later in this manuscript is concerned with event-induced emotions and not moods.

Extant research on frontline affect has largely been concerned with examining the causes and consequences of three different affective factors: FLE emotional labor or the regulation of employee affect in support of their work role (Groth, Hennig-Thurau, and Walsh 2009; e.g., surface acting versus deep acting), FLE and customer affective displays (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2006; e.g., smiling), and FLE and customer affect (e.g., anger). Out of these three factors, the impact of FLE affective displays on frontline outcomes has been the most often investigated, with the customer affect resulting from those FLE affective displays receiving the second most attention. Studies that consider these two factors in combination generally find support for the proposition that FLE displays of affect are causally antecedent to customer affective responses (e.g., Tsai and Huang 2002). Importantly, extant research also establishes that the affect customers display can influence the affect FLEs' experience causally; hence, while fewer in number, several studies find support for the flow of affect from customers to FLEs (e.g., Dallimore, Sparks, and Butcher 2007; Rupp et al. 2008).

The central role ascribed to the display of affect within this literature has influenced the trajectory of extant research in two important ways. First, this focus on the display of affect has contributed to the extensive use of dyadic research designs which are particularly well-suited for exploring how the affect displayed by one frontline actor impacts the reactions (affective or otherwise) of the other actor. In particular, studies often employ survey and observational data in tandem (e.g., Pugh 2001) with information frequently collected on or from both members of the dyad (e.g., Doucet 2004). In fact, the most common design employed by the extant studies reviewed involves the observation and recording of FLE affective displays coupled with the collection of customer survey data to gauge the impact of such displays on customer responses, such as their satisfaction with the encounter (Grandey et al. 2005) and future intentions (Tsai 2001).

Second, the focus of extant research on affective displays has also contributed to a strong preference for investigating emotional convergence in transactional rather than relational contexts (e.g., food service and retail; Gabriel, Acosta, and Grandey 2015), most likely because it is easier for researchers to observe emotion displays in such environments (e.g., supermarket) than in more relational settings (e.g., doctor's office). In fact, our review uncovered only two studies on affect in the frontlines that consider emotional convergence in exchange contexts where ongoing service relationships are present. In particular, a study by Groth, Hennig-Thurau and Walsh (2009) examines whether the exchange context (high versus moderate service contact) moderates the relationship between FLE emotional labor and customers' evaluation of the service, but finds no evidence in support of such a relationship. Gabriel and colleagues (2015), on the other hand, consider whether the impact of FLE affective displays on customer service evaluations varies as a function of service familiarity, and find that the impact of FLE

affect displays on service evaluations becomes weaker or non-significant in situations where customer-FLE familiarity exists.

Our review of the theoretical mechanisms proposed to underlie frontline emotional convergence uncovered three explanations for the effect: (1) unconscious emotional contagion due to mimicry, (2) conscious emotional contagion due to social comparison, and (3) conscious emotional contagion due to signaling. A majority of published studies explain emotional convergence in the frontlines as resulting from unconscious emotional contagion. This affect transfer mechanism is proposed to involve a two-step mimicry process whereby an individual (receiver) spontaneously imitates another's facial expressions (sender) thus eliciting a physiological response that leads to felt emotions which are congruent with the sender's original facial expression (Pugh 2001). A study by Barger and Grandey (2006) provides the strongest evidence in support of frontline mimicry effects as they find that FLE smiling increases customer smiling which, in turn, has a positive effect on customer mood. The second proposed mechanism, conscious emotional contagion through social comparison, suggests that individuals compare their affective state with that of others and, when appropriate, adjust their affect to match (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2006). To the best of our knowledge, direct evidence in support of this mechanism does not exist. Finally, Gabriel, Acosta, and Grandey (2015) propose yet another conscious mechanism for affect transfer in the frontlines. They construe FLE emotional displays as "self-presentational" or impression management behaviors and argue that such behaviors signal FLEs' intentions toward customers during an encounter (e.g., the desire to cooperate). The researchers further argue that, in transactional contexts, FLE affective signals carry information that influences customer affective and cognitive responses because customers tend to be unsure about FLEs' true intentions toward them (i.e., in transactional contexts, FLE displays of emotion are meaningful in that they provide information the customer does not already have about the

FLE). Gabriel, Acosta, and Grandey further posit that when the customer and FLE are well acquainted, such signals (e.g., a warm smile) have less influence on customer affective and cognitive responses because the information carried is already known to the customer.

### **EMOTIONAL CONVERGENCE IN CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS**

Our perspective on emotional convergence in the frontlines – which contrasts sharply with the dominant view suggested by our literature review – is grounded in two influential studies that adopt a socio-psychological lens to examine the emotional convergence of individuals in close relationships. The first paper, authored by Anderson, Keltner, and John (2003), reports on three studies that document the emotional convergence of dating partners and same sex college roommates using both cross-sectional and longitudinal research designs. In the longitudinal studies, a dyad's emotional response (in the form of anger, contempt, discomfort, disgust, fear, guilt, or sadness) to some event or stimuli was captured at two different points in time. The study data provide strong evidence in support of emotional convergence over time; that is, the studies reveal that the dyads became more similar in their emotional response to events and thus converged in terms of their emotional experience. In addition, they find that emotional convergence is an adaptive and asymmetrical process, with one member of the dyad often changing more than the other, and that the result of this process is an increase in relationship satisfaction. Importantly, the data also offer strong support for the proposition that emotional convergence occurs even when the members of a dyad cannot observe each other's displays of emotion.

The second paper, by Gonzaga, Campos, and Bradbury (2007), reports the results of two studies – one cross-sectional and the other longitudinal – that provide further evidence in support of emotional convergence processes among dating and married couples. They find that the emotional similarity of a dyad mediates the effects of personality similarity on the dyad's

satisfaction with the relationship. Moreover, their research once again shows that dyads in close relationships become more similar in their emotional responses over time and that such convergence is significantly related to changes in dyadic relationship satisfaction.

While neither of these two foundational studies empirically establish the socio-psychological processes that may account for the emotional convergence of individuals in close relationships, Anderson, Keltner, and John (2003) suggest three complementary mechanisms that may explain why dyads are likely to become more similar in the emotions they experience over time. We anticipate these three mechanisms may contribute, at least partially, to a shared frontline experience and thus discuss each next.

The first proposed mechanism centers on the idea that emotional convergence results because individuals engaged in a close relationship create a *shared affective context* that “colors their reaction to outside events,” and leads them to respond in a similar manner to occurrences when together. For example, individuals in a supportive relationship are more likely than those engaged in a less supportive one to experience a positive emotion in response to an ambiguous (neither clearly positive nor negative) shared event. This proposed convergence mechanism is most closely aligned with mood-as-information theory (Schwarz and Clore 1983, 2003), which posits that mood provides individuals with information about their current situation (Agrawal, Menon, and Aaker 2007) and motivates mood-congruent responses (DeSteno et al. 2000). As applied here, the enduring mood that characterizes an ongoing relationship represents the *shared affective context* that provides the baseline for a dyad’s emotional response to relationship events. Said differently, the long-term affect that pervades a dyadic relationship contributes to emotional convergence by serving as an important source of information that shapes both actors’ emotional response to events experienced together.

Appraisal tendency theory (Lerner and Keltner 2000) informs the second proposed convergence mechanism. This theoretical lens posits that (1) the way individuals appraise events determines the emotions they experience in response to said events (e.g., individuals that perceive an event as dangerous, uncontrollable, and certain are likely to experience fear; Smith and Ellsworth 1985), and (2) the emotions individuals experience in response to an event predispose them to appraise future events in a certain way as well (Lerner and Keltner 2001). From this theoretical vantage point, emotional convergence is said to result because individuals in a close relationship develop similar appraisal styles and thus routinely perceive relationship events in a similar way (e.g., pleasant, certain, or controllable). This shared perception, in turn, produces a similar emotional response among the members of the dyad that subsequently influences their perceptions of future events. For example, if a customer and salesperson grow to develop a similar appraisal style, they each might construe a shipping delay as a controllable event under the purview of others in the selling firm, leading to a convergence in their emotional response (e.g., anger) to the delay. This shared emotional response, in turn, is likely to influence how both members of the dyad perceive the firm's service recovery efforts (e.g., inadequate) and, by extension, their emotional response (e.g., contempt) to the recovery attempt. In contrast, when such a tendency has not developed within a dyad, a disparate emotional response to a delay is more likely; the customer may, for instance, experience anger in response to the shipping delay (because he perceives the event to be controllable) while the salesperson may not even register an emotional response to the event (because she views the event as uncontrollable).

The third and final proposed mechanism suggests that emotional convergence occurs because, over time, individuals engaged in a close relationship develop similar

emotional patterns or habits that result from the emotional contagion that can occur during initial exchange encounters. Naturally, this proposed mechanism has its origins in the unconscious, mimicry-based emotional contagion process that underlies affect transfer in transactional contexts (Pugh 2001). From this vantage point, emotional convergence is the result of emotional learning that occurs within the dyad during initial encounters. As Anderson and colleagues (2003, p. 1066) explain, this proposed mechanism implies that if “individuals continually ‘catch’ their friend’s negative emotions in specific contexts, they might develop a habit of responding negatively to events when with that friend.”

While the extent to which each of the proposed mechanisms contributes to emotional similarity is still unknown, what these two influential studies do establish is that the emotions of those in close relationships often converge and such convergence cannot be solely explained by a transient contagion process in which emotions transfer from one actor to another during encounters (Anderson, Keltner, and John 2003; Gonzaga, Campos, and Bradbury 2007). Grounded in this understanding, we now proceed to develop our alternative perspective on emotional convergence in the frontlines, and begin our effort with a careful delineation of the domain and characteristics of the shared frontline experience construct.

### **SHARED FRONTLINE EXPERIENCE**

We define a *shared frontline experience* as *the tendency of a customer and frontline employee to undergo a similar emotional response to events that occur within their exchange relationship*. Several aspects of our conceptualization deserve further elaboration and are discussed next. First, the shared frontline experience construct refers to a truly dyadic phenomenon that results from convergence processes or “the tendency for two individuals to

become more alike over time” (Gonzaga, Campos, and Bradbury 2007, p. 36). It is important to underscore that a shared frontline experience is dyad-specific, implying that an FLE who has close relationships with multiple customers (or a customer who has close relationships with multiple FLEs) may experience different emotions in response to the same event, depending upon the relationship in which said event occurs (Anderson, Keltner, and John 2003).

Moreover, our definition suggests that a shared frontline experience is characterized by the convergence of a dyad’s emotional *response* to an event. Hence, while similar customer-FLE emotions are proposed to characterize a shared frontline experience, it is possible for a shared experience to manifest as the absence of emotions in response to an event. To illustrate, a shared frontline experience can occur when a realtor and his client fail to register an emotional response after their carefully crafted offer is rejected by the seller’s agent.

Furthermore, two temporal aspects related to our definition are worth underscoring. As noted earlier, the shared frontline experience construct is concerned with emotions and not moods. This is an important point of contrast relative to research on emotional convergence in workgroups which focuses on how longer-lasting, shared moods emerge within teams (e.g., Bartel and Saavedra 2000). In addition, while an ongoing service relationship is necessary for a shared frontline experience to occur; this relationship need not be of unlimited duration. Said differently, a shared frontline experience may occur in short-lived service relationships and in those in which the likelihood of future exchange is uncertain, as occurs, for example, in the case of extended service encounters (Arnould and Price 1993) between physical therapists and their patients, or tour guides and their clients.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> It is possible for a customer and FLE engaged in transactional exchange to feel similar emotions during their one-time encounter. Their convergent emotional response may result, for example, as a consequence of incidental similarities in their personalities. To the extent that this occurs, their experience can be described as shared. However, we anticipate that the shared frontline experience largely results from convergence processes that occur over time and materialize as a dyadic tendency to respond in similar ways to events that occur within the

Finally, it is important to underscore that the shared frontline experience refers to a dyad's emotional response to *events* encountered during the course of an exchange relationship. That is, we argue for a convergence in dyad members' subjective and independent emotional reactions to events or occurrences within a relationship such as unexpected problems, achievement of goals, or changes in firm policies that affect the dyad (e.g., product deletions). This aspect of our conceptualization is noteworthy in that it contrasts directly with extant work on affect in the frontlines which is largely concerned with frontline actors' reactions to each other's emotional displays as opposed to events that occur during the relationship.

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In support of our preceding exposition, Figure 1 identifies the antecedents and consequences of a shared frontline experience. To ground this model, we once again rely on the insights afforded by the work of Anderson, Keltner, and John (2003) and Gonzaga, Campos, and Bradbury (2007). In particular, five key insights derived from these two studies guide the development of the model. First, emotional convergence most likely occurs among dyads that have a close relationship. Hence, we posit that *relationship closeness*, which is defined as the extent to which members of a dyad engage in frequent, diverse, and mutually influential interactions with each other (Berscheid, Snyder, and Omoto 1989), is a proximate predictor of a shared frontline experience.

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Second, the characteristics of the dyad itself play a prominent role in facilitating emotional convergence and, more importantly, such characteristics influence this process by

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relationship. As a consequence, we consider the shared frontline experience concept to be most relevant in relational contexts and to be more useful for understanding how emotions influence the functioning of ongoing relationships rather than for explaining the outcomes of transactional encounters.

predisposing dyad members to experience events similarly and/or by encouraging members of the dyad to make the adaptations necessary for convergence to occur. Hence, we consider how personality similarity and dyadic attachment style contribute to a shared frontline experience. Specifically, we build on the work of Gonzaga, Campos, and Bradbury (2007, p. 34) to propose that *personality similarity* (defined as the extent to which members of a dyad are characterized by the same enduring, individual differences that predispose them to think, feel, and act in certain ways) is both a direct and indirect (through relationship closeness) determinant of the shared frontline experience. Moreover, consistent with Anderson and colleague's (2003) finding that emotional convergence is an adaptive process, we borrow from the relationship marketing literature to propose that the dyad's *attachment style* is an important determinant of a shared frontline experience (Mende, Bolton, and Bitner 2013). In particular, we argue that the dyad's attachment style – which refers to the extent to which both the customer and FLE are “able to trust and depend on other people” (Ben-Ari and Lavee 2005, p. 622) – is both antecedent to relationship closeness and moderates the effect of relationship closeness on the shared frontline experience. Hence, the dyad's attachment style determines whether or not dyad members adapt sufficiently for emotional convergence to occur.

Third, both studies posit that emotional convergence improves the coordination of repeated social interactions and – consistent with this argument – find that emotional convergence has a positive effect on the outcomes of interpersonal relationships. As such, we propose that a shared frontline experience is positively related to *relationship sustaining behaviors*, which refer to actions the dyad undertakes that contribute to mutually beneficial outcomes in the future (Simpson 2007; Park et al. 2010).

Fourth, Anderson, Keltner, and John (2003) suggest that situational factors may play an important role in determining the extent to which emotional convergence improves the

functioning of interpersonal relationships. While the literature offers numerous ideas about relevant situational factors in frontline contexts, one that has received a wealth of attention is autonomy, a critical job design characteristic that has substantial implications for FLE motivation and performance (Marinova, Ye, and Singh 2008). Hence, we posit that *dyadic autonomy* – defined here as the degree to which a frontline dyad has control over the parameters (e.g., rules, norms, and procedures) that govern its exchange relationship (cf. Cordery et al. 2010; Haas 2010) – is a critical situational factor that moderates the positive effect of the shared frontline experience on relationship sustaining behaviors.

Finally, although implicit in our preceding exposition, it is worth underscoring that these studies construe emotional convergence as a process that transpires over time and is shaped by both stable and dynamic factors. As is illustrated in Figure 1, the stable factors in our model are personality similarity, dyadic attachment style, and dyadic autonomy, all of which remain fixed as a customer-FLE relationship evolves over time. In contrast, relationship closeness, shared frontline experience, and relationship sustaining behaviors are all dynamic in that they change as the relationship develops and influence each other in a reciprocal manner over time (as indicated by the feedback cycle depicted in Figure 1). For instance, a customer and FLE may not be close as a relationship begins, but as each invests more in the sustenance of the relationship, they grow closer until their frontline experience eventually becomes shared. We thus encourage readers to keep this critical point of distinction (as well as the other ideas that ground our model) in mind when envisioning the relationships suggested by the research propositions we develop next.

## **RESEARCH PROPOSITIONS**

### **Close Relationships are Necessary for Shared Frontline Experiences to Occur**

The arguments and ideas we have presented thus far emphasize that a close relationship is critical for two individuals to converge in the emotions they experience in response to shared

events over time (Gonzaga, Campos, and Bradbury 2007). Customers and FLEs are said to have a close relationship when their interactions are frequent (occurring on a regular basis), diverse (focus on different specific activities), and mutually influential (with each actor affecting the other; Berscheid, Snyder, and Omoto 1989). While frequency, diversity, and mutual influence are all necessary, to some extent, for a close relationship to result, no dimension is more important than the other and no minimum amount of each is necessary for a close relationship to result. For instance, a patient with a chronic disease and a medical specialist may establish a relationship characterized by frequent and mutually influential but not highly diverse interactions. This relationship would still be considered close as the frequency of contact and depth of mutual influence compensate for the lack of diversity in the specific activities the patient and doctor engage in together.

Importantly, customers and FLEs often establish and maintain relationships with each other that exist independently of their relationship with the firm (Palmatier, Scheer, and Steenkamp 2007). That is, customers with strong relationships with specific FLEs (customer-FLE relationships) can also have strong or weak relationships with the companies that employ the FLEs (customer-firm relationships). Close (or strong) customer-FLE relationships are commonly deemed advantageous by firms (Dagger, Danaher, and Gibbs 2008), often leading managers to encourage their employees to direct effort toward establishing and maintaining such relationships. For firms, the importance of strong customer-FLE relationships – relative to strong customer-firm relationships – is described by Palmatier and colleagues (2007, p. 151) as follows: “...the results suggest that customer relationships have stronger effects on exchange outcomes when their target is an individual person than when their target is a selling firm.”

Similarly, customers often find that close relationships with the firm and its employees confer important advantages (Reynolds and Beatty 1999). Specifically, prior research finds that

customers derive three distinct kinds of benefits from establishing a close relationship with the firm: (1) *confidence* that the exchange process will produce a satisfactory outcome, (2) *social benefits* derived from establishing an interpersonal connection with the firm's employees, and (3) *special treatment* such as preferential pricing and faster service (Gwinner, Gremler, and Bitner 1998). The social benefits that accrue to customers from their relationship with FLEs are of particular relevance to our purposes here, as they refer to the "emotional part of the relationship and are characterized by personal recognition of customers by employees, the customer's own familiarity with employees, and the creation of friendships between customers and employees" (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, and Gremler 2002, p. 234). That is, social benefits refer specifically to the advantages that a customer derives from maintaining a close bond with an FLE.

While personal and commercial relationships are qualitatively different (Blocker, Houston, and Flint 2012), we anticipate that – as has been shown in the case of couples who are dating, college roommates, and spouses – customer-FLE dyads that establish a close commercial relationship are also likely to converge emotionally. That is, we expect such dyads can and often do develop a shared emotional context, adopt similar appraisal styles, and acquire similar emotional patterns in response to the events that occur within their relationship, all of which underlie emotional convergence (Anderson, Keltner, and John 2003). Our expectation is rooted in the recognition that while personal and commercial relationships differ along important dimensions (such as in their degree of instrumental orientation), *close* personal and commercial relationships share many of the same features that contribute to emotional convergence, including strong social bonds between dyad members, high levels of intimacy facilitated by mutual self-disclosure, and mutual supportiveness (Price and Arnould 1999). This expectation is empirically substantiated by Iacobucci and Ostrom (1996) who find that the type of personal relationships in which convergence has been empirically observed to occur (e.g., a husband and

wife relationship) and certain commercial relationships (e.g., that of a hairstylist and client) have a high degree of commonality, particularly as it relates to how close and supportive both types of relationships are. Hence, we propose that the extent to which a shared frontline experience is likely to occur among frontline dyads depends primarily on how close the customer and FLE are.

P1: Relationship closeness is positively related to the shared frontline experience of customers and employees.

### **Personality Similarity Promotes Shared Frontline Experiences Directly and Indirectly**

Research suggests that individuals' personality (or enduring predisposition to act, feel, and think in a certain way) influence both their emotional response to evocative stimuli and their ability to regulate their own emotions (Tobin et al. 2000). For instance, research has shown that conscientious individuals experience less anger in response to negative feedback and are also less likely to act on their felt anger (by engaging in aggression) than their less conscientious counterparts (Jensen-Campbell et al. 2007). Similarly, agreeable individuals have been found to be less likely (when compared to less agreeable individuals) to engage in aggressive behaviors following exposure to aggression-inducing stimuli, such as violent media (Meier, Robinson, and Wilkowski 2006). As a final example, negative emotions have been found to be more common among neurotic individuals while positive emotions have been found to occur more frequently among those who are extroverts (Watson and Clark 1992).

Personality has been found to influence individuals' emotional responses to events because it leads them to react in predetermined ways when confronted with emotion-inducing stimuli (Jensen-Campbell et al. 2007). We thus anticipate that if two individuals are similar in terms of their personality, they are likely to undergo a similar emotional response to events experienced together. This expectation has been empirically supported by research which posits and finds that personality similarity is an important determinant of emotional similarity among

married couples (Gonzaga, Campos, and Bradbury 2007). This line of reasoning and available evidence thus imply that customers and FLEs who have similar personalities are more likely than those who do not to experience similar emotions in response to events that occur within their ongoing exchange relationship. Hence,

P2: Personality similarity is positively related to the shared frontline experience of customers and employees.

Moreover, relationship research in marketing and in social psychology suggests that dyadic similarity is an important determinant of relationship quality, which is used as an umbrella term to describe diverse relationship outcomes including satisfaction, commitment, and trust. For instance, two meta-analyses of the relationship marketing literature find that dyadic similarity (both at the individual and firm level) is an important driver of the quality of exchange relationships (Palmatier et al. 2007; Verma, Sharma, and Sheth 2016). Likewise, meta-analytic work in the social psychology space suggests that similarity plays an important role in the quality of marital relationships (Karney and Bradbury 1995). Research within this domain has directed a disproportionate amount of attention toward clarifying the relationship between personality similarity and relationship outcomes (Gaunt 2006), with recent evidence confirming that personality similarity has a meaningful impact on the quality of a married couple's relationship (e.g., Schaffhuser, Allemand, and Martin 2014).

Consistent with the preceding exposition, we posit here that customer-FLE dyads which are similar in terms of their personality are more likely to establish close relationships (relative to dissimilar dyads) because their similarity enables members to understand each other better, thus facilitating the coordination of dyadic activities and ultimately providing for the formation of deeper and longer lasting bonds (Luo and Klohn 2005). In sum, given that (1) personality

similarity is expected to enhance relationship closeness, and (2) relationship closeness is antecedent to the shared frontline experience, we propose that:

P3: Personality similarity has a positive indirect effect on the shared frontline experience of customers and employees that is mediated by relationship closeness.

### **Dyadic Attachment Style Predicts Relationship Closeness and Moderates its Effect on the Shared Frontline Experience<sup>4</sup>**

Relationship research in both marketing (e.g., Mende and Bolton 2011) and social psychology (e.g., Mikulincer et al. 2002) posits that attachment style is an important determinant of a myriad of relationship outcomes, including relationship stability (e.g., Kirkpatrick and Davis 1994) and relationship closeness (e.g., Tucker and Anders 1998). Of particular relevance is empirical work by Mende, Bolton, and Bitner (2013) who find that a customer's attachment style is a stronger predictor of relationship closeness than other constructs (e.g., trust, commitment, etc.) which have consistently been shown to be important determinants of relationship outcomes.

Attachment styles can be broadly construed as “stable patterns of relational cognitions and behaviors” that reflect the way in which an individual tends to relate to others (Mikulincer and Florian 2000, p. 261). Individual attachment styles are generally classified as secure or insecure, with these two labels referring to opposite ends of the same continuum. An individual is said to have a secure (insecure) attachment style when he or she feels confident (does not feel confident) that others will be available when needed, and is comfortable (uncomfortable) establishing a close relationship with others (Girme et al. 2015; Mikulincer and Shaver 2007).

Whereas the marketing literature has examined the influence of customers' attachment style on relationship outcomes, it has, to the best of our knowledge, not explored how FLEs'

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<sup>4</sup> Our model depicts a dynamic process in which dyadic attachment style (a stable factor) initially predicts relationship closeness and subsequently moderates its effect on the shared frontline experience. Cross-sectional data cannot be used to test these effects. Rather, longitudinal data are necessary so that relationship closeness can take on different values at time 1 (attachment style → relationship closeness) and time 2 (attachment style \* relationship closeness → shared frontline experience).

attachment style influences the outcomes of exchange relationships. Although – for strategic reasons – FLEs may choose or be mandated to build relationships with customers, we anticipate that their attachment style plays an important role (beyond any strategic motivations) in determining whether FLEs establish close relationships with customers. Consequently, we posit that a frontline dyad’s attachment style, defined as the extent to which both the customer and FLE are “able to trust and depend on other people” (Ben-Ari and Lavee 2005, p. 622) is an important determinant of relationship closeness. Per our definition, dyads that score “high” on their ability to trust and depend on other people would be described as having a secure attachment style, dyads that score “low” on their ability to trust and depend on other people would be described as having an insecure attachment style, and dyads in which one member scores “high” and the other “low” on their ability to trust and depend on other people would be described as having a mixed attachment style.

Prior research suggests that relationship outcomes are maximized when both members of a dyad are characterized by a secure attachment style, and that poorer outcomes result when either both members of a dyad have an insecure attachment style or their attachment styles are mixed (Ben-Ari and Lavee 2005). Importantly, prior research finds that secure dyads exhibit more nonverbal closeness (Tucker and Anders 1998) and are able to develop more intimate relationships than insecure dyads because their ability to trust in and feel comfortable with others supports behaviors (e.g., self-disclosure) necessary for establishing strong interpersonal bonds (Grabill and Kerns 2000). Thus,

P4: A secure (insecure) dyadic attachment style increases (decreases) customer-FLE relationship closeness.

Beyond predicting relationship closeness, we anticipate that dyadic attachment style also moderates the effect of relationship closeness on the shared frontline experience. As explained

earlier, emotional convergence is an adaptive process which requires one or both members of a dyad to change their emotional response to events that occur within the relationship (Anderson, Keltner, and John 2003). While these adaptations are likely to naturally occur as relationship closeness increases, we anticipate that a dyad's attachment style may either accelerate or constrain the rate of adaptation. In particular, we posit that the positive effect of relationship closeness on the shared frontline experience will be stronger among frontline dyads characterized by a secure (rather than insecure) attachment style because customers' and FLEs' ability to trust in and feel comfortable with one another will help accelerate the rate at which they adapt to one another. This expectation is supported by research in social psychology which finds that newlywed couples characterized by a secure (as opposed to insecure or mixed) attachment style are more (less) likely to effectively adapt to one another because they achieve greater intimacy, function better as a unit, and respond more constructively to conflict (Senchak and Leonard 1992).

P5: Dyadic attachment style moderates the positive effect of relationship closeness on the shared frontline experience of customers and employees such that the effect is stronger (weaker) when a dyad is characterized by a secure (insecure) attachment style.

### **The Shared Frontline Experience Predicts Customer-FLE Relationship Sustaining Behaviors**

Emotions and the ability to understand the emotions of others play a vital role in facilitating the coordination of social interactions (Delcourt et al. 2016). At a most basic level, emotions and their display provide others with an indication of an actor's current affective state and about his or her interaction intentions (Keltner and Haidt 1999). Empirical evidence also suggests that dyadic actors' *emotional similarity* confers members with important psychological benefits (Townsend, Kim, and Mesquita 2014), and serves to enhance the functioning and thus outcomes of interpersonal relationships (Gonzaga, Campos, and Bradbury 2007). As it relates to

this latter benefit of emotional similarity, Anderson and colleagues (2003) suggest the following three factors explain why such similarity aids relationship functioning: (1) it helps dyads effectively respond to opportunities and threats in the environment because it allows them to seamlessly coordinate their actions, (2) it provides dyadic actors with a better understanding of their partner's motives and intentions as it improves the accuracy of interpersonal perception processes, and (3) it validates the emotions that dyadic actors experience in response to events that occur within the relationship because the sharing of emotions with others serves to legitimize emotions. Building on this prior research, we propose that as their emotional and subjective responses to encounters converge, the customer and FLE will develop a commitment to enhancing and sustaining the relationship itself. The dyad will function as a distinct unit, maximizing mutual benefit (Korschun 2015). We thus expect that customers and FLEs will display greater cooperation, mutual loyalty, and improved functional performance as a result of the shared frontline experience, which helps sustain the relationship. More formally,

P6: The shared frontline experience of customers and employees is positively related to dyadic relationship sustaining behaviors.

### **Dyadic Autonomy Moderates the Effect of the Shared Frontline Experience on Relationship Sustaining Behaviors**

While the shared frontline experience is expected to increase the extent to which customers and FLEs engage in relationship sustaining behaviors, we predict that such an outcome is less likely when the environment imposes constraints on the dyad's behaviors. In particular, we propose that the autonomy which an organization grants customer-FLE dyads plays an important role in determining whether the shared frontline experience promotes relationship sustaining behaviors. Our proposal is rooted in the belief that a shared frontline experience is more likely to encourage relationship sustaining behaviors when the dyad has been granted the autonomy necessary to craft and implement creative solutions in response to the

events that occur within the relationship. Our expectation is supported by a variety of studies which find that autonomy is a necessary ingredient for activating the creative potential of individuals, dyads, and teams (e.g., Dong et al. 2015; Seibert, Wang, and Courtright 2011). Perhaps of most relevance here is research which suggests that autonomy improves team performance because it allows the team to creatively adjust to unexpected situations that threaten goal attainment (Haas 2010). Consistent with the preceding arguments and findings, we thus propose that dyadic autonomy moderates the effect of the shared frontline experience on relationship sustaining behaviors. In particular, we argue that the positive relationship between the two constructs strengthens with increasing dyadic autonomy because it allows the dyad to explore and enact creative solutions that maximize mutual welfare in the short-term, thus setting the stage for exchange in the long-run. Hence,

P7: Dyadic autonomy moderates the positive effect of the shared frontline experience on relationship sustaining behaviors such that the effect is stronger (weaker) when dyadic autonomy is high (low).

### **THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS**

Like others before us (e.g., Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh 1987), this paper draws from the relationship literature in social psychology in hopes of improving understanding of the factors that affect the development and functioning of commercial relationships; in this case, the relationship between customers and the frontline employees who serve them. In so doing, our research contributes to frontline theory in several ways, four of which we highlight next.

Our core thesis in this manuscript is that the emotions of a customer and FLE in a close relationship converge because, over time, they develop a tendency to experience the same emotions in response to relationship events. This perspective extends prior research on the customer experience (e.g., Bolton et al. 2014; Puccinelli et al. 2009), which is concerned with the “...the internal and subjective response customers have to any direct or indirect contact with a

company” (Meyer and Schwager 2007, p. 118). While this literature has not considered the intersection between customers’ and FLEs’ experience, we propose here that, in relational contexts, these are not independent phenomena. Rather, customers’ and FLEs’ experiences are shared and tightly intertwined, which amplifies the importance of the shared frontline experience for understanding and predicting relationship outcomes of value to the firm, most notably whether FLEs are able to establish and maintain close relationships with customers.

Second, extant research is implicitly rooted in the view that the emotions customers and FLEs experience during an encounter are primarily driven by their reactions to the emotions the other actor displays. In contrast, we propose that an important source of the emotions that FLEs and customers experience when interacting with one another over time is rooted in the events (e.g., completion of a project) that occur within the relationship itself. Our view is consistent with prior research in transactional contexts which finds that environmental factors, most notably the busyness of a store, modulate the expression of emotion displays among FLEs (e.g., Rafaeli and Sutton 1990). We interpret this finding to suggest that the events that occur within frontline encounters have a meaningful effect on the emotions experienced and thus displayed by customers and FLEs. Importantly, we do not discount the role of interpersonal dynamics in eliciting emotional responses; rather we simply argue that, in relational contexts, the events which surround an encounter may be more predictive of emotional convergence than interpersonal displays of emotion (e.g., smiling).

Third, whereas prior frontline research on affect suggests that emotions impact customers’ evaluation of exchange encounters (Mattila and Enz 2002), we argue here that emotions also impact the functioning of frontline relationships. Our view has received broad empirical support in the social psychology literature which finds that emotions serve to facilitate social coordination (Keltner and Haidt 1999). Importantly, while recognizing that customer-FLE

relationships characterized by negative emotions are unlikely to be satisfactory or continue into the future, our development of the shared frontline experience construct allows for the possibility, for instance, that shared negative emotions may promote greater joint effort by a dyad thus providing for the quick resolution of an unsatisfactory experience.

Finally, the relationship marketing literature has recently begun to explore the impact of customer attachment on frontline outcomes (e.g., Mende and Bolton 2011). We extend this line of research by proposing that FLEs can also be understood in terms of their attachment styles. While it is true that FLEs may be driven to form close relationships with customers for strategic reasons, we anticipate that their attachment style also plays a prominent role in determining how close they truly become with customers. We build on this idea to posit that frontline dyads can also be described in terms of their attachment styles, a proposition consistent with the social psychology literature that has rarely received attention in the literature (see Ben-Ari and Lavee 2005; Grabill and Kerns 2000; Tucker and Anders 1998 for notable exceptions). Given our theorizing here, we are optimistic that frontline research can greatly benefit from the exploration of attachment as a dyadic phenomenon.

### **MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

The notion of the shared frontline experience has important implications for managing the frontlines in service organizations as well. First, our theorizing in this manuscript suggests that, when repeated encounters are the norm, customers and FLEs are likely to undergo a similar emotional response to environmental stimuli. Hence, managers must begin to recognize that stimuli which have an impact on employees are likely to influence customers as well, and vice-versa. Thus, managerial actions must be considered in light of their potential effect on frontline dyads, rather than on customers and FLEs in isolation (as is often the norm). For instance, reward benefits directed toward customers in a quest to promote their continued loyalty may also

have positive consequences for FLEs' emotional states if those additional benefits are delivered via FLEs rather than through some other mechanism (e.g., a bonus gift delivered via mail). By considering both sides of the frontline dyad when making such decisions, managers can maximize the returns on frontline investments.

Second, we contend that the emotional similarity of customers and FLEs engaged in repeated exchange is likely to have positive effects on relationship continuation into the future. From a firm's standpoint, such an outcome is highly desirable as past research has shown that strong customer-FLE bonds confer the organization with important benefits (Korschun, Bhattacharya, and Swain 2014; Palmatier et al. 2007). However, our theorizing also implies dyadic autonomy is likely necessary for the shared frontline experience to bear fruit. Such autonomy, however, does not come without risk for the firm. For example, organizational efficiency may suffer when autonomous frontline dyads "waste time replicating solutions that could have been more efficiently imported from" other dyads (Haas 2010, p. 991). Likewise, the freedom afforded to autonomous dyads may lead FLEs to collude with customers, with lower margins due to sweethearting deals being the end result (Brady, Voorhees, and Brusco 2012). Moreover, autonomous dyads are less likely to form a strong bond to the firm, which implies that customers may follow an FLE if he or she changes jobs to work with another organization, resulting in poorer outcomes for the firm (Palmatier, Scheer, and Steenkamp 2007). Hence, to capitalize on the shared frontline experience of customers and FLEs, managers would be well-advised to not only provide frontline dyads with autonomy, but also to invest in structures, systems, and procedures (e.g., an ethical climate, strong accountability standards, etc.) that minimize the potential downside of such autonomy.

Finally, our research implies that the emotions of customers and FLEs may be rooted in their interaction history and thus resistant to managerial efforts to influence the emotional tone of

frontline experiences (e.g., investments in customer “delight” may not be effective if a shared frontline experience has already been established). As such, managers would be well-advised to focus both on ensuring their FLEs are prone to experience positive emotions (e.g., through selection and retention) and shaping the direction of emotional convergence so that customers become more emotionally similar to FLEs rather than the other way around. As to this latter point, the literature suggests that the least powerful member of a dyad changes more than the other during the process of emotional convergence (Anderson, Keltner, and John 2003). Consequently, managers should attempt to influence the direction of emotional convergence by ensuring FLEs do not feel weak or powerless in the face of “important” customers, but rather feel they are critical participants in the value creation process.

### **FUTURE RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Our exposition on the shared frontline experience suggests seven research questions whose answers may help improve understanding of the role of affect in service relationships. We present those questions next, organized by their level of priority for advancing understanding of this important yet underexplored topic.

#### **Research Question #1: How Common Is the Shared Frontline Experience?**

Inherent in the shared frontline experience construct is the idea that dyads engaged in ongoing exchange develop a tendency to undergo similar emotional responses to events that occur within their relationship. While empirical evidence supports the notion of emotional convergence among dyads engaged in close personal relationships, no such evidence is available when it comes to commercial relationships. Hence, longitudinal research which investigates the extent and dynamics of emotional convergence processes among customer-FLE dyads engaged in service relationships is a top priority. Such research could also explore related issues, such as

what relationship – if any – exists between the shared frontline experience and the divergence or convergence of customer-FLE goals, cognitions, and values.

### **Research Question # 2: How Quickly Does a Shared Frontline Experience Form?**

Our exposition suggests that a close customer-FLE relationship is a critical precursor to a shared frontline experience. Thus, the time it takes for a shared frontline experience to occur is likely to be a function of how long it takes the dyad to establish a close relationship.

Unfortunately, prior empirical work is generally silent about how long it takes for close relationships to form and about the factors that increase or decrease the rate at which this happens. On this issue Berscheid and colleagues (1989) note that the impact of relationship duration on relationship closeness is an empirical question whose answer is likely to vary depending on context. In contexts that afford the opportunity for high frequency, high diversity, and high strength interactions (e.g., as occur between a critically injured client and her physical therapist), emotional convergence is likely to occur quickly. However, when frequent, diverse, and strong interactions are less common (e.g., as is the case between a pharmacist and her patient), emotional convergence may not occur for years because a fundamental change must occur in the state of the relationship (e.g., patient becoming chronically ill) for the dyad to grow closer. Empirical insight into the time it takes for a shared frontline experience to result is thus critical for an adequate understanding of the emotional convergence of customers and FLEs.

### **Research Question # 3: What Mechanisms Underlie a Shared Frontline Experience?**

In line with prior social psychology research, we propose that a shared frontline experience occurs because, over time, customers and FLEs (1) develop a shared emotional context for understanding events, (2) adopt similar appraisal styles when evaluating events within their relationship, and (3) acquire similar emotional patterns in response to such events.

While each of these mechanisms offers a plausible explanation for why a shared frontline

experience occurs, the adequacy of each of these proposed mechanisms has yet to be explored empirically. Research that addresses this knowledge gap is thus crucial, and may shed light on the relative importance of each of the proposed mechanisms, as well as offer insight into alternative explanations in support of emotional convergence in commercial contexts.

#### **Research Question # 4: How Much Autonomy Should Frontline Dyads Receive?**

Our theorizing here suggests that the benefits customer-FLE dyads derive from the shared frontline experience are contingent upon the degree of autonomy they receive from the organization. However, we are unaware of any research examining the benefits or risks of dyadic customer-FLE autonomy. As such, it is unclear how much autonomy frontline dyads should receive. For instance, it is possible that the net effect of dyadic autonomy (above and beyond its moderating effect proposed here) is curvilinear, declining after reaching some optimal point. Likewise, what kind of autonomy should frontline dyads be granted? Should they be allowed control over some aspects of the exchange process (e.g., where and how frequently the dyad interacts) but not others (e.g., the types of solutions crafted to address customer problems)? Answers to these and related questions on dyadic autonomy can advance understanding of how a shared frontline experiences impacts the functioning of frontline relationships.

#### **Research Question # 5: Does FLE Attachment Style Influence Relationship Outcomes?**

Relationship marketing research has recently turned its attention toward examining how a customer's attachment style influences the outcomes of frontline relationships, with empirical work generally affirming its explanatory power (Mende, Bolton, and Bitner 2013). In this manuscript, we broach the idea of FLE attachment style, which represents a natural complement to the customer construct and forms part of the dyadic attachment concept in the proposed model. We anticipate that FLEs' attachment style has an important effect on customer and dyadic outcomes, and thus encourage research on this unexplored phenomenon. In particular,

conceptual and empirical work on FLEs' attachment style, considered jointly with customers' attachment style (perhaps as part of a broader dyadic attachment construct as done here), may help improve understanding of the factors that determine the durability of frontline relationships.

#### **Research Question # 6: Who Changes to Facilitate the Shared Frontline Experience?**

Anderson and colleagues (2003) conclude that emotional convergence is an adaptive and asymmetrical process, with the least powerful member of the dyad changing more than the other. In the case of customer-FLE relationships, what determines which member of the dyad changes more? And, perhaps more importantly, does it matter if customers converge toward FLEs or FLEs converge toward customers? For instance, if FLEs change more to become like customers, does that undermine organizational goals or increase the likelihood that negative emotions permeate the relationship? From a practical standpoint, insight regarding the direction of convergence is crucial for managers interested in prioritizing investments intended to shape or influence the emotional content of frontline interactions (Zablah et al. 2016).

#### **Research Question #7: Does a Shared Frontline Experience Operate at the Team Level?**

While our focus in this manuscript is on the shared frontline experience of a customer and FLE, frontline exchange may involve repeated interactions among multiple employees who serve one or more customers. Is it possible for a shared experience to occur at the team level, with the FLE team and the customers the team serves all becoming emotionally similar over time? We suspect that, given customers' common point of contact (i.e., the FLE team) and their exposure to the same firm-level environmental stimuli (e.g., the servicescape), a shared experience may be possible within teams that include multiple customers and multiple FLEs. Scholars interested in exploring this possibility may find research in the management field, which has confirmed mood convergence within employee-only teams, to offer a particularly beneficial starting point (e.g., Bartel and Saavedra 2000).

## CONCLUDING THOUGHT

The notion of emotional contagion – or of emotional convergence primed by displays of emotion – is well-established in the frontline literature. Motivated by both the realization that evidence in support of emotional contagion processes is provided by studies carried out primarily in transactional contexts and recent evidence suggesting emotional displays are less likely to influence customers and FLEs who are engaged in repeated exchange, this manuscript explores emotional convergence processes in relational contexts. Toward that end, we introduce and develop the notion of the shared frontline experience, a construct which captures a dyad's tendency to undergo the same emotional response to events that occur within the exchange relationship. In so doing, our hope is to encourage future research that improves understanding of frontline exchange in relational settings and is grounded in the understanding that the emotional connection between customers and FLEs runs much deeper than what is currently implied by contagion-based models.

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**FIGURE 1**  
**Antecedents and Consequences of the Shared Frontline Experience**

