Birds of a Feather *Feel* Together: Emotional Ability Similarity in Consumer Interactions

BLAIR KIDWELL
VIRGINIE LOPEZ-KIDWELL
CHRISTOPHER BLOCKER
ERICK M. MAS

The authors introduce *emotional ability similarity* to explain consumer satisfaction in interactions with frontline sales and service employees and other consumers beyond the effects of traditional relational variables in the similarity–attraction paradigm. Four studies examine how and why similar abilities for using emotional information between two people promote relational success in marketplace exchanges. We find that, when interacting with others, consumers who exchange nonverbal information with their partners experience (dis)similarity in their emotional ability (EA). Similar dyads who rely on expressive (high–high EA pairs) or inexpressive (low–low EA pairs) emotion norms experience significantly greater satisfaction in their interactions than consumers with dissimilar norms (high–low EA pairs). Together, these findings advance the understanding of consumer relationships and satisfaction by establishing EA similarity as a new avenue for consumer research.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, consumer relationships, similarity–attraction, emotional ability similarity

Interpersonal similarity fundamentally shapes how marketplace interactions create value and meaning for people within selling, services, and consumer relationships ([Lim, Lee, and Foo 2017](#); [Palmatier et al. 2006](#);

[Rosenbaum et al. 2007](#)). The relevance of similarity for relationship development is one of the most widely accepted findings in social science ([Mackinnon, Jordan, and Wilson 2011](#)). Yet, despite a large body of research, scholars continue to debate the precise nature of interpersonal similarity and the underlying mechanisms that drive its relational effects ([Tidwell, Eastwick, and Finkel 2013](#)). For decades, scholars have assumed that similarity of attitudes, beliefs, and other characteristics enhances mutual liking over time ([Davis and Rusbult 2001](#)). However, a meta-analysis of 313 studies finds that this link actually weakens and even disappears for partners with increasing interaction ([Montoya, Horton, and Kirchner 2008](#)). Thus, researchers have called for further investigation into other potentially more powerful marketplace relationship facilitators, such as interaction patterns, conversational flow, and social connectedness ([Jiang et al. 2010](#); [Koudenburg, Gordijn, and Postmes 2014](#); [Montoya et al. 2008](#)).

We take these insights as a point of departure to investigate a new form of similarity that reflects the norms that frontline sales and service employees and consumers use to communicate emotions between them. Emotional ability

(EA), commonly known as ability-based emotional intelligence, is a person's ability to reason about and apply emotional information to achieve desired outcomes (Mayer and Salovey 1997). EA explains how well people are able to recognize, interpret, understand, and regulate emotions in themselves and others (Fitness 2001; Kidwell, Hardesty, and Childers 2008a).

We propose the dyadic phenomenon of *emotional ability similarity* as a form of deep-level interpersonal similarity that operates beyond the effects of traditional physical and attitudinal similarity in the formation of marketplace relationships. EA similarity captures how two individuals with similar abilities for processing emotional information use those abilities to understand, communicate, and align expectations in their interactions with each other. This deep-level similarity influences the relationship formation and satisfaction between frontline sales and service employees and consumers (e.g., real estate agents and homebuyers), as well as the relationships among people who purchase and consume together (e.g., families, roommates).

Previous research suggests that one person's high EA, regardless of the other person's EA, promotes mutually positive outcomes across selling interactions (Kidwell et al. 2011), service encounters (Giardini and Frese 2008), and interpersonal relationships (Lopes et al. 2004). Presumably, the higher EA partner provides enough emotional skill to help both succeed. Yet scant empirical evidence or theory supports this "helping" assumption or sheds light on the bidirectional effects between partners in exchange relationships with similarly high or low EA or partners with dissimilar EA. Although one person's high EA may assist a low EA partner to varying degrees, it likely comes at a cost. Both individuals may expend emotional resources in the process, especially when one or both partners are not receptive to the emotional assistance. We instead propose that exchange partners with similarly high or similarly low EA are more likely to experience satisfaction in their marketplace interactions because of their congruent expectations for using emotions. The ability to exchange nonverbal emotional information underlies these effects.

Intuitively, two high EA consumers, who are adept at using emotions, are more likely to experience positive interactions. However, it is less intuitive to expect that two low EA partners will also experience beneficial outcomes. Across both types of interactions, we theorize that congruent emotion norms, based on similar EA, prevail. In particular, when emotional information is similarly processed, whether in mutually high EA dyads or mutually low EA dyads, these partners communicate using congruent emotion norms (Ekman, Friesen, and Ellsworth 1972). Emotion norms are often described as "feeling rules" (Hochschild 1979), "display rules" (Ekman 1982), or using a common "emotional dialect" (Jiang et al. 2015). In the same way

that people who speak different language dialects have a difficult time understanding each other, the verbal and nonverbal norms expressed through different emotional dialects create differences in how comfortable, understood, and validated consumers feel in exchange interactions with others. Furthermore, how consumers perceive and experience these emotions can promote significant differences in (dis)satisfaction (Elfenbein et al. 2007; Masuda et al. 2008). Thus, consumers with low (high) EA are likely to experience greater comfort, understanding, and validation as they communicate with another consumer or frontline employee with low (high) EA, who uses emotional information similarly (i.e., congruent emotion norms).

By contrast, high and low EA partners who use emotional information in dissimilar ways must contend with each other's incongruent emotion norms. Such interactions must overcome different emotional dialects and are likely to involve discomfort, misunderstanding, and invalidation (Elfenbein et al. 2007; Masuda et al. 2008). Notably, in light of various mediums (e.g., in person, phone, texting, email), we expect to find this pattern of effects primarily in contexts in which people have the capacity to exchange nonverbal emotion, as nonverbal cues are a fundamental mode of sharing emotional information (Hareli and Hess 2012).

Thus, we examine EA similarity beyond the effects of traditional physical and attitudinal similarity and investigate the underlying mechanism of emotional exchange that facilitates consumers' ability to align their expectations, ultimately leading to satisfying interactions (figure 1). Our findings suggest that EA similarity offers a new path for understanding how consumer interactions are formed and why these interactions flourish or fail to develop.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Similarity in Interpersonal and Exchange Relationships

Research has investigated how people relate to others who share similar beliefs (Byrne 1961), attitudes and values (Duyssen and Teske 1993), personality (Krebs and Adinolfi 1975), education and socioeconomic status (Feingold 1988), and self-concept (Bailey and Kelly 1984). It has also connected attractiveness and physical similarity with interpersonal cohesion and stability (Mackinnon et al. 2011). However, questions remain about whether conventionally measured forms of similarity (e.g., attitudes, beliefs, values) retain the power to bring people closer after initial interactions (Koudenburg et al. 2014; Montoya et al. 2008).

Moreover, research in marketing has explored similarity effects and found mixed results. Some studies find that similarity in values, preferences, personality, and even incidental information (e.g., shared birthday) predicts

FIGURE 1.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF EA SIMILARITY IN CONSUMER INTERACTIONS
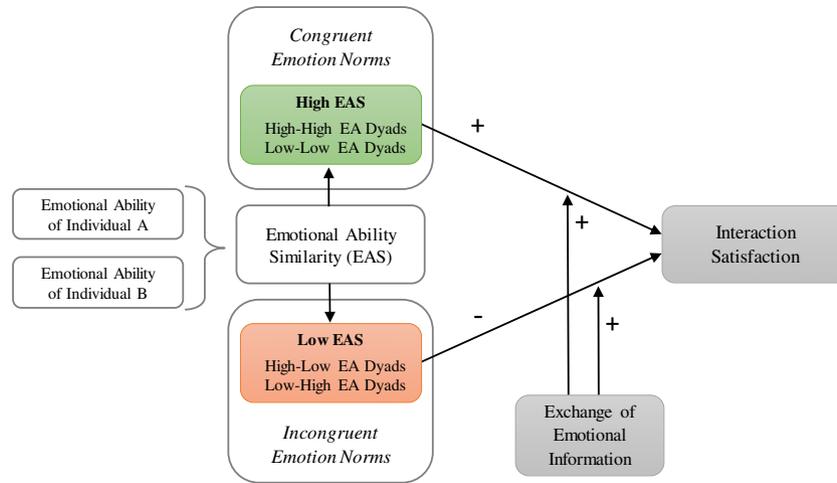
consumer outcomes (Doney and Cannon 1997; Netemeyer, Heilman, and Maxham 2012; Wan and Wyer 2019), while other studies find weak (Crosby, Evans, and Cowles 1990) or nonexistent (Dwyer, Orlando, and Shepherd 1998; Leonard, Levine, and Joshi 2004) effects. As a result, scholars have questioned the forms of similarity and underlying mechanisms that promote relational effects (Montoya and Horton 2013; Montoya et al. 2008; Tidwell et al. 2013). Two contemporary streams of similarity research have (a) explored how certain forms of similarity can be more important than others and (b) investigated diverse theory explanations for similarity effects. The current research contributes to both.

Forms of Similarity. Researchers have distinguished between surface-level similarity (e.g., physical appearance, attractiveness) and deep-level similarity (e.g., values, beliefs, attitudes). Surface-level similarities are visible and often short-lived, whereas deep-level similarities are expressed by exchanging meaningful cognitive information (Echterhoff, Higgins, and Levine 2009; Harrison et al. 2002; Liao, Chuang, and Joshi 2008). This stream of research has primarily focused on the conscious exchange of people's similar evaluations of others or objects (Brockner and Swap 1976; Riordan, Oliver, and Donnelly 1977; Shaikh and Kanekar 1994). For example, a customer and salesperson who share the same opinion (i.e., attitudinal similarity) about a sports team are likely to experience more familiarity (Riordan et al. 1977). However, the nature and extent of *emotional* information shared between two people are likely to have explanatory value that extends beyond attitudes. In particular, a customer and salesperson with similar emotional abilities, whether higher or lower in

ability, are likely to feel greater mutual comfort, understanding, and validation as their interaction progresses across a range of topics. These positive outcomes are driven by both individuals sharing a common emotional dialect, whereby they use emotional information similarly and align with each other's expectations in the conversation. Thus, the sharing of emotional information can perhaps play an even more powerful role in shaping interactions than traditional forms of deep-level similarity and surface-level similarity.

Theoretical Explanations for Similarity Effects. Researchers have also offered two explanatory models for similarity effects. Reinforcement models suggest that the similarity–attraction link is a function of perpetual reinforcement of similar needs, whereas information-processing models propose that the similarity–attraction link is a function of the information being processed about the other party (Montoya and Horton 2013). In line with both models, we investigate EA similarity as a function of two people communicating nonverbal emotional information in a congruent way that aligns with each other's expected norms. In doing so, we integrate theories of emotion as social information (Keltner and Haidt 1999; Van Kleef 2016), normative emotional responses (Salovey and Grewal 2005), and satisfaction (Mano and Oliver 1993) to explore how EA influences the satisfaction of consumer interactions.

Emotions as Social Information

Emotional processes create a state of readiness for action or "motion," prompting distinct behavioral responses

within one's environment (Keltner and Haidt 1999). Nonverbal behavior is the fundamental mode by which emotion is communicated (Hareli and Hess 2012), including eye gaze, facial expression, tone of voice, and timing and intensity of bodily gestures (Ekman 1993; Hareli et al. 2013). The way this nonverbal information is expressed and understood varies widely between individuals (Bruder et al. 2012), and it characterizes a person's emotional dialect and how he or she interacts with others (Elfenbein et al. 2007; Van Kleef 2016).

Expression of emotion varies significantly in range, intensity, and duration across people who process it differently (Cesario and Higgins 2008; Westbrook and Oliver 1991). People with higher abilities for processing emotion generally express their feelings more clearly, as they use emotion norms with more developed feeling or display rules. Conversely, those with lower emotional abilities communicate with norms that tend to be less expressive and use more matter-of-fact styles of communication (Elfenbein et al. 2007). Yet, whether expressive or inexpressive, both styles of expression provide meaningful information for both parties (Masuda et al. 2008) and influence interactions in ways that transcend other factors that people bring into an exchange (Lazarus 1968). The way people use emotion when interacting can promote coordinated thought and action, mutual understanding, trust, and reconciliation (Van Kleef, Homan, and Cheshin 2012). For example, when people perceive others' emotional expressions, they unconsciously mimic facial expressions and vocalizations, causing them to experience similar emotions (Barsade 2002; Cesario and Higgins 2008). The "sending" and "catching" of cheerfulness through smiling helps explain positive consumer–service interactions (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2006). However, beyond the passive transmission of facial expressions, an individual's ability to use emotion (i.e., EA), has been the subject of increasing attention among consumer researchers (Hasford, Kidwell, and Hardesty 2018; Kidwell, Hasford, and Hardesty 2015; Mayer, Roberts, and Barsade 2008).

Emotional Ability

EA encompasses consumers' skills for processing emotion-laden information, specifically how they perceive and interpret emotions, understand how emotions make them feel, and regulate emotions in consumption settings (Kidwell, Hardesty, and Childers 2008a) and marketing exchanges (Kidwell et al. 2011). Research has shown that EA is even more important than IQ in understanding human behavior (Goleman 1995, 1998) and links it to decision-making and behavioral outcomes (for a review, see Martins, Ramalho, and Morin 2010). For example, high EA consumers are more likely to choose objectively superior products (Kidwell, Hardesty, and Childers 2008a), make healthier food decisions (Kidwell et al. 2015), and be

less susceptible to impulsivity (Kidwell, Hardesty, and Childers 2008b). Despite ample research on the positive effects of high EA, scant research has focused on individuals with low EA. One notable exception found that while EA is generally linked to job satisfaction, people whose occupations require little emotional labor, such as auto mechanics, can still be satisfied with their jobs despite a low level of EA (Wong and Law 2002). To our knowledge, our study is the first to examine favorable and unfavorable outcomes for low EA individuals as they interact with high EA individuals or other low EA individuals.

Beyond individual choices, EA plays an important role in relational interactions. For example, EA promotes success in marriage (Fitness 2001), coworker relationships (Caruso and Salovey 2004), friendship (Lopes et al. 2004), salesperson–customer interactions (Kidwell et al. 2011), and client–service provider relationships (Yim, Tse, and Wa Chan 2008). A growing body of EA research examining relational interactions suggests that one high EA individual can promote positive effects (Giardini and Frese 2008; Kidwell et al. 2011; Lopes et al. 2004). However, despite their importance, these studies examine only one side of the interaction, focus primarily on high EA people, and do not account for varied interactions between levels of EA.

While people with higher EA generally have better relationships, valuable insights can be gleaned into how consumers with varying levels of emotional skill relate. Further research is necessary to examine how one person's use of emotions corresponds to another's and how varying configurations of (dis)similarity can influence interaction satisfaction.

EA SIMILARITY

We define EA similarity as a deep-level interpersonal similarity in sharing congruent emotion norms based on similar ability for processing and using emotional information. It is a deep-level similarity because, like shared attitudes, interpersonal similarity goes beyond the surface (e.g., physical appearance). Just as attitudinal similarity forms as people share congruent cognitive information (Pilkington and Lydon 1997; Riordan et al. 1977), EA similarity forms when people share congruent emotion norms.

Emotion Norms

Research across a variety of disciplines has examined emotion norms (Ekman 1982; Ekman et al. 1972) reflected in the range, intensity, and duration of feelings exchanged in given interactions (Clark 1987; Ekman 1993; Hochschild 1979). Emotion norms influence dyadic interactions in two ways. First, they define expectations for which emotions are expressed and are considered appropriate in a social context (Ekman et al. 1972). These

expectations function as "display rules" (Ekman 1982) or "feeling rules" (Hochschild 1979) and govern people's emotional expressions toward others, as well as how they judge the social appropriateness of others' emotions (Clark 1987). Second, emotion norms contribute to the enforcement and maintenance of social norms through evoked positive and negative feelings that signify consequences for behavior. For example, when individuals conform to each other's emotion norms in an interaction, they experience positive feelings of comfort, understanding, and validation (Ekman 1993). Conversely, when emotion norms deviate, defensiveness, annoyance, and insecurities can arise, creating a feeling that the other person "just doesn't get me" (Hareli and Hess 2010).

Emotion Norms at Levels of EA

Emotion norms can vary widely and are based on accumulated knowledge and experiences that develop from using emotions when interacting with others (Miller and Prentice 1996). Though not commonly associated, emotion norms are central to EA (Mayer and Geher 1996; Salovey and Grewal 2005). Druskat and Wolff (2001) found that the EA of group members corresponded to the emotion norms used within the group. For example, lower EA groups tended to use lengthy and less emotionally expressive discussions to solve problems and considered perspectives in a more matter-of-fact way. Conversely, higher EA groups were more emotionally expressive with their partners and displayed better listening skills when communicating. George (2000, 1045) indicated that when emotion norms are reciprocated, they evoke "feelings of 'rightness' between individuals." Thus, emotion norms provide a means to explain how (dis)similar levels of EA promote (un)satisfying interactions by creating (in)congruent expectations of how emotions should be used in interactions.

High EA Similarity (High–High EA Dyads)

Consumer interactions at shared high levels of EA are likely to exhibit greater emotional expression (Elfenbein et al. 2007; Mayer and Geher 1996). This can include the use of expressive voice inflections as more emotional information is integrated into vocal patterns, a higher level of eye contact, a higher level of touch conveying feeling toward the other person, more "emotional talk" between partners, and possibly even a more sophisticated sense of humor (Forbes and Jackson 1980; Lyons and Schneider 2005; Mayer and Geher 1996). At shared high levels of EA, congruent emotion norms can be characterized as highly expressive, as both members of the interaction use their emotions to convey warmth and feeling. In these interactions, both partners feel comfort, understood, and validated through alignment with each other's expectations

of emotion norms (Ekman 1993). As such, we expect similarity at high levels of EA to create highly satisfying interactions between dyad members.

High EA Similarity (Low–Low EA Dyads)

In contrast with high EA, low EA individuals are less skilled at processing and using emotion. They rely more on inexpressive, matter-of-fact information in their interactions (Ekman et al. 1972; Mayer and Geher 1996), and they represent consumers who are more likely to report "infrequent affect of any kind" (Westbrook and Oliver 1991, 89). Accordingly, emotion norms for low–low dyads often include less emotional and personal talk, lower level of eye contact to avoid feelings of vulnerability, less expressive voice inflection, decreased touch, and a cruder sense of humor (Forbes and Jackson 1980; Lyons and Schneider 2005; Mayer and Geher 1996). In general, while low EA individuals still exchange emotional information when interacting, given their emotion norms they prefer and expect more inexpressive display rules in conversations with more matter-of-fact information exchange.

Research indicates that low EA leads to suboptimal decisions and behavioral outcomes (for a review, see Martins et al. 2010). Thus, it may seem counterintuitive that two individuals who are unskilled at using emotion might have highly satisfying interactions. However, the emotion literature indicates that consumers who report low affect can still experience moderate-to-high satisfaction (Westbrook and Oliver 1991). Since low EA individuals have different expectations than high EA individuals in the use of emotion, it follows that when low EA consumers interact, they similarly prefer less emotionally expressive communication. As such, they communicate with congruent emotion norms that help both partners feel more comfortable, understood, and validated, leading to a more satisfying interaction.

Low EA Similarity (Dissimilar EA Dyads)

Prior research suggests that in interactions in which one person has high EA and the other has low EA, the high EA individual will help overcome the low EA of the other (Giardini and Frese 2008; Kidwell et al. 2011; Lopes et al. 2004). However, such efforts, if attempted, assume a willingness of the high EA person to expend emotional resources on behalf of both parties, as well as the interest and receptivity of the low EA person. Furthermore, these emotionally mismatched individuals are speaking different emotional dialects that do not align with each other's emotion norms and thus are likely to be unsatisfying. For example, a high EA person might try to relate to a low EA person by characterizing his or her feelings with emotional language, such as "it sounds like you are feeling very uncertain about this." He or she may also use expressive

TABLE 1

EA SIMILARITY: UNDERLYING CHARACTERISTICS AND MODES OF COMMUNICATION ON CONSUMER OUTCOMES

Level of EA similarity	Relational characteristics	Quality of interaction	Consumer outcome
High–High Dyads (*High EA similarity*)	Congruent use of emotional information. Expressive nonverbal signals, voice inflections, and higher levels of eye contact, touch, personal talk, and shared sophisticated sense of humor	Smooth conversational flow that is comfortable, understood, and validated by partner	Very satisfied, highly loyal to salesperson, high level of commitment
High–Low/Low–High EA Dyads (*Low EA similarity*)	Incongruent use of emotional information. Incongruent nonverbal signals, voice inflections, eye contact, touch, emotional and personal talk, and incompatible senses of humor	Awkward conversational flow that is uncomfortable, misunderstood, and invalidated by partner	Unsatisfied, uncertain loyalty and commitment, likely defection
Low–Low EA Dyads (*High EA similarity*)	Congruent use of emotional information. Inexpressive nonverbal signals, voice inflections, and lower levels of eye contact, touch, personal talk, and shared crude sense of humor	Smooth conversational flow that is comfortable, understood, and validated by partner	Very satisfied, highly loyal to salesperson, high level of commitment

voice inflections and share emotional information, only confusing or frustrating the low EA person who espouses different norms for how emotions should be communicated. The high EA person is also likely to experience confusion and frustration with the lack of emotional information from the low EA person. Both individuals in the interaction are likely to feel uncomfortable, misunderstood, and invalidated, leading to a significantly less satisfying interaction. Table 1 summarizes the underlying characteristics and quality of interactions using a salesperson–consumer buying scenario for similar and dissimilar EA dyads.

Example of EA (Dis)Similarity in a Real Estate Buying Context

To provide a practical example, figure 2 presents characteristic interactions between a customer and salesperson within a home-buying context, highlighting different configurations of EA (dis)similarity. First, customer–salesperson interactions with EA similarity (figure 2b and c) are likely to share congruent emotion norms for how emotions should be expressed (i.e., eye contact, touch, use of emotional talk, and sense of humor), allowing for fluent communication. In a real estate context, this might mean that a customer and a salesperson move more efficiently and in a nonthreatening way through latent emotions, leading to more satisfying interactions.

Second, individuals with dissimilar EA (figure 2a and d) are likely to have disparate expectations for the use of emotion and express emotion in incompatible ways. A high EA salesperson may attempt to probe the deeper feelings of a customer (figure 2d) but be met with disinterest or confusion by a low EA customer, who finds the emotional probing distracting or annoying. The low EA customer's expectation of the interaction (i.e., emotion norms) does not involve sharing or exploring feelings with the salesperson. Rather, he or she uses information in a more matter-

of-fact and less emotionally expressive way, creating an awkward and uncomfortable buying situation. If the roles are reversed (figure 2a), a high EA customer, who desires more emotional expression, may feel disregarded by a low EA salesperson who comes off as inattentive to his or her feelings. This divergence likely creates confusion, difficulty in communicating, and awkward silences as the customer wonders why the salesperson would overlook his or her emotion (figure 2a) or perceives the probes from a high EA salesperson as irrelevant or odd (figure 2d) .

Dissimilar dyads may believe that the other person is either underreacting to emotional information (figure 2a) or overreacting and perhaps being "too emotional" (figure 2d). These dissimilar EA dyads are likely to view the interaction differently and misunderstand each other, as they speak different emotional dialects and thus experience difficulty relating. For example, a low EA salesperson might highlight a home's impressive physical attributes, while a high EA customer cares more about the feelings a home can provide, including how the layout makes him or her feel and whether he or she can envision raising family in the neighborhood.

In summary, exchange partners with EA similarity are exemplified by closer alignment in their emotion norms based on each person's use of emotion when interacting, vocal intensity and inflection, eye contact, use of emotional talk, sense of humor, and touch (Cappella 1981; Mayer and Geher 1996). Thus, we expect similar EA dyads, with congruent emotion norms, to exhibit significantly greater satisfaction in their interactions. By contrast, exchange partners with dissimilar EA, and thus incongruent emotion norms, are more likely to experience unsatisfying interactions. These dyads will feel uncomfortable, misunderstood, and invalidated from their incongruent expectations of how emotions should be used in the interaction, promoting a fleeting, transactional relationship and ultimately leading to unsatisfying interactions. Thus, as indicated in our conceptual model (figure 1), we predict the following:

FIGURE 2.

EXAMPLE OF EA (DIS)SIMILARITY IN A REAL ESTATE CONTEXT
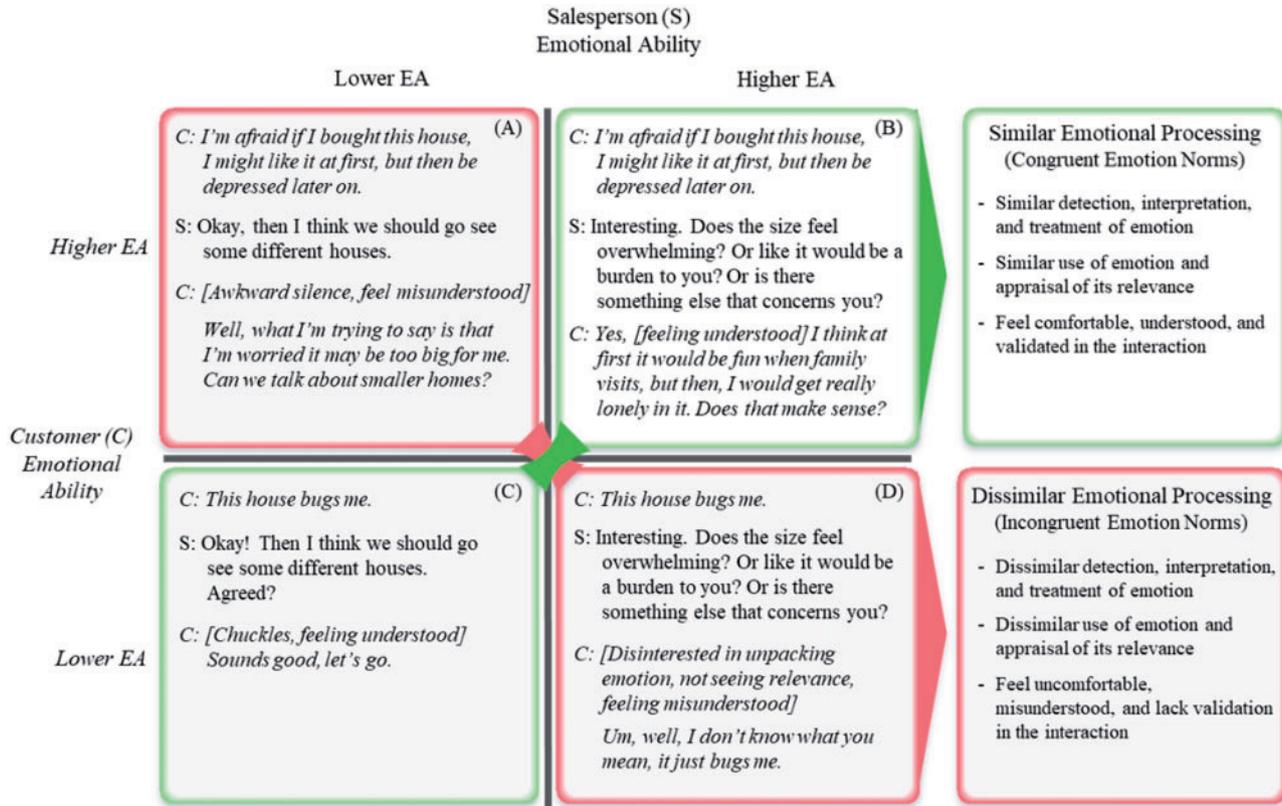
H1: Dyads with EA similarity will exhibit greater dyadic interaction satisfaction than dissimilar dyads, beyond the effects of conventionally measured surface-level attractiveness, physical similarity, and deep-level attitudinal similarity.

The Necessary Exchange of Emotional Information

Foundational research on consumer emotion reveals the complex nature of emotion in product evaluation and its multidimensional influence on satisfaction (Mano and Oliver 1993; Oliver 1993; Westbrook and Oliver 1991). Whereas product evaluation includes emotive assessments of tangible attributes, consumer interactions, such as service interactions, joint consumer decisions, and buyer–seller conversations, take on added complexity when judgments involve socially mediated attributes. We build on this consumer emotion literature by investigating how EA similarity influences interaction satisfaction not only by aligning emotion norms but also through the exchange of emotional information.

Lawler's (2001) affect theory of social exchange suggests that interactions produce affective states that generate stronger or weaker connections. Furthermore, positive affect elicited by an interaction with another person creates expectations for future positive experiences (Koudenburg et al. 2014). Research supports this idea and indicates that the affect elicited during consumption (e.g., enjoyment, discomfort) leaves traces in episodic memory that influence satisfaction assessments (Szymanski and Henard 2001). In addition, Westbrook and Oliver (1991) show that to elicit customer satisfaction, product consumption experiences must generate positive or negative affect along two experiential bases: feeling pleasure and interest. In line with this research, we posit that interaction experiences between consumers generate positive and negative affect (feeling comfortable, understood, and validated) that ultimately lead to satisfying interactions. However, we move beyond the emotive assessments of tangible attributes in product evaluations (Mano and Oliver 1993; Oliver 1993; Westbrook and Oliver 1991) to explore the complex exchange of emotional information that underlies interaction experiences between consumers.

We suggest that EA similarity influences positive affect generated in interactions and, ultimately, interaction satisfaction only when there is an exchange of nonverbal emotional information. The capacity to exchange emotional information is a key underlying mechanism of EA similarity that allows for the alignment of congruent emotion norms between interaction partners. In situations in which nonverbal emotional information—the primary mode for sharing emotion (Hareli and Hess 2012)—can be clearly expressed and interpreted, individuals are able to perceive whether their partner's emotion norms align with their own. When congruence is perceived, either consciously or unconsciously, consumers feel greater comfort, understanding, and validation. These positive affective feelings lead to greater satisfaction with the interaction.

By contrast, when the ability to exchange emotional information is constrained, such as when communicating by phone, partners are unable to access richer contextual cues to correctly interpret each other's affective behaviors (Gao et al. 2017). For example, even a few moments of silence might be misinterpreted in the absence of nonverbal information, as the listener is left wondering whether the person is pausing to think, is distracted, or is perhaps annoyed. Without nonverbal communication, partners have a harder time engaging in "turn-taking" and are more prone to talk over each other, which can promote negative affect (Grammer et al. 2000). Ultimately, when emotional information is constrained, consumers are unable to perceive their partner's emotion norms and are unlikely to generate positive affect that leads to interaction satisfaction. Thus:

> **H2**: The exchange of emotional information moderates the relationship between EA similarity and dyadic interaction satisfaction. Dyads with EA similarity will only exhibit greater satisfaction in their interactions than dissimilar dyads when emotional information is exchanged.

PLAN OF STUDIES

We conducted four studies to examine the effects of EA similarity on consumer relationships and marketing exchange outcomes. Study 1 is a longitudinal field study that demonstrates how EA similarity influences consumers' perceptions of customer–salesperson interactions across real-world interpersonal relationships. Study 2 is a within-subject experimental design that isolates the causal role of EA similarity by manipulating and counterbalancing dyad type (similar vs. dissimilar) to demonstrate changes in interaction satisfaction. Study 3 tests the exchange of emotional information underlying the EA similarity effects by experimentally reducing participants' ability to exchange emotion and align emotion norms with their partner. Study 4 uses an ecologically valid design to further test the exchange of emotional information underlying EA similarity in a common consumer interaction.

STUDY 1: FIELD STUDY OF CUSTOMER–SALESPERSON RELATIONSHIPS

The goal in study 1 is to demonstrate the effect of EA similarity on actual customer–salesperson relationships. Customers and salespeople with EA similarity (i.e., dyads with similar EA scores) are likely to experience greater relational success, which endures over time. Interaction satisfaction is a common indicator of exchange relationship success (Crosby et al. 1990; Yim et al. 2008). To test our conceptual model, we focus on the extended interaction of home buying and capture dyadic responses from customers and their real estate agent over time.

Sample and Procedure

We collected dyadic data by working with the salespeople of a Fortune 1000 real estate firm and their customers. The data collection involved three steps. First, with the help of senior management, we emailed 1,049 salespeople requesting their participation in a survey. The survey instructed salespeople to think about the last customer with whom they worked. This provided a uniform basis for customer selection and ensured that respondents could readily recall the information (Huber and Power 1985). The survey captured salesperson EA and four control variables: attractiveness, perceived similarity, friendliness of the customer, and familiarity with the customer. At the end of the survey, customer contact information was requested. To increase response rates, each salesperson was offered a $25 retail gift card. Within two weeks, we received 347 complete responses, for a response rate of 33%.

The second step involved sending a survey to each customer identified by the salespeople. Customers were asked to respond to questions pertaining to the salesperson with whom they interacted previously. Again, to increase response rates, each customer was offered a $35 retail gift card. We received 172 responses within two weeks, for a response rate of 49%. Surveys with incomplete data or those that did not correctly identify the salesperson were excluded, resulting in 134 complete dyads (a revised response rate of 38%). We assessed customers' EA and four control variables about the salesperson: attractiveness, perceived similarity, friendliness, and familiarity.

The third step involved contacting customers 1 year later to answer questions about their interactions with the agent. We received 69 completed surveys and, thus, usable dyads for our longitudinal analyses. Follow-up items assessed customer satisfaction.

Measures

Consumer EA. We used the Consumer Emotional Intelligence Scale (CEIS) to assess consumer EA (Kidwell, Hardesty, and Childers 2008a; see www.ceis-research.com

for the measure and scoring procedure). The CEIS is an ability-based scale (Kidwell, Hardesty, and Childers 2008a; Mayer et al. 2003) designed to elicit a higher-order factor structure with four reflective first-order dimensions: perceiving, facilitating, understanding, and managing. These four dimensions are represented by a second-order factor of overall consumer EA. The CEIS provides a more precise domain-specific assessment of consumer EA than a domain-general alternative (Mayer–Salovey–Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test [MSCEIT]; Mayer et al. 2003). The MSCEIT is a 143-item measure that predicts EA across a wide range of interpersonal contexts. However, in direct comparison tests, the 18-item CEIS outperformed the domain-general MSCEIT on consumer outcomes (Kidwell, Hardesty, and Childers 2008a; Peter and Kumar 2015). The CEIS also provides advantages, including reduced respondent fatigue and a flexible format, and is freely accessible to researchers.

Salesperson EA. We assessed salesperson EA with a nearly identical scale using the same format and structure as the CEIS, but with items specific to the domain of sales and service employees, called the EIME (Emotional Intelligence for Marketing Exchanges; Kidwell et al. 2011; see https://www.eime-research.com/ for the measure items and scoring procedure). The EIME is a 15-item measure that captures salesperson EA.

Both the CEIS and EIME use a response-scoring method that captures the degree of response correctness, based on a panel of expert judges who provide ratings for the correctness of each item. As Kidwell, Hardesty, and Childers (2008a) indicate, expert judges determine the weights that each response option receives. Then, responses are summed to form an overall composite score. For example, if 90% of the judges indicated that the correct response was "C," respondents choosing "C" would receive 0.90 toward their overall score.

Furthermore, both the CEIS and EIME have a similar number of items, follow the same four-dimension structure, and are scored the same way using expert judges for ratings of correctness. Consistent with the MSCEIT, both measures are normed with a mean of 100 and an SD of 10. The standardized scores across the CEIS and EIME allowed for easy comparison and development of our EA similarity variable. Thus, these two scales provide a meaningful way to measure similarity between a salesperson's and consumer's level of EA.

EA Similarity. EA similarity is the degree of correspondence between levels of EA for two individuals. We subtracted the salesperson's level of EA from the consumer's level of EA to form an EA similarity score. The absolute value of this similarity score helped identify those who are closer to each other in EA (i.e., similarity). EA similarity increases as scores approach zero (i.e., high EA similarity) and decreases as scores get higher, representing a

greater difference in scores (i.e., EA dissimilarity). The specific conditions of the current research warrant the use of difference scores and satisfy important criteria for generating rigorous insights (Homburg, Wieseke, and Bornemann 2009; Kenny and Cook 1999; Kenny, Kashy, and Cook 2006; Peter, Churchill, and Brown 1993), including (1) using dyadic measures from unique respondents (reducing concerns about low reliability), (2) using each component of the difference score (EA score for each respondent in a dyad) as a control variable in our analysis (reducing concerns about spurious correlation), (3) standardizing the EA scores (reducing concerns about restricted variance), and (4) analyzing in conjunction with a robust set of controls to predict our dependent variables. Thus, difference scores allow us to most accurately test our conceptual definition of EA similarity as a form of deep-level similarity between two people. In addition to difference scores, we follow our analyses with planned contrasts by classifying the EA of each member into two separate groups: low (≤ 99) and high (> 100). We then use these groups to compare unique relationships of EA between salesperson and consumer (low–low, high–high, low–high, and high–low dyads).

Customer Satisfaction. Satisfaction with products, services, and salespeople is a central construct in a consumer's buying experience and reflects the fulfillment of needs and desires (Crosby and Stephens 1987). We suggest that when customers use emotional information in congruent ways, they experience higher levels of satisfaction with the personal interaction and the purchase experience.

Controls. Customer (CEIS) and salesperson (EIME) EA scores served as control variables to account for the effect of each person's EA within a given dyad. All analyses included individual EA scores to demonstrate that relational success is not merely based on the individual components of EA from either member; rather, EA similarity drives our effects.

In addition, to assess the influence of commonly measured deep and surface-level similarity across dyads, we included the covariates attractiveness (Ahearne, Gruen, and Jarvis 1999), perceived similarity (attitudes, beliefs, values, and physical appearance; Crosby et al. 1990; Doney and Cannon 1997; Netemeyer et al. 2012), familiarity with the salesperson, and friendliness of the salesperson (Price and Arnould 1999). As customer responses were the dependent variable, we assessed controls from the customer's perspective. We grand-mean-centered all variables across studies.

Results

Test of Main Effects. To test hypothesis 1, we used ordinary least squares regression to test our follow up sample of customers ($N = 69$ dyads), first with a controls only

model and then with the independent variables of interest. The controls included in the first model (adjusted $R^2 = .01$, $F(6, 62) = 1.15$, $p = .343$) were salesperson EA (EIME; $\beta = -.10$, $t(62) = -0.82$, $p = .418$), customer EA (CEIS; $\beta = .08$, $t(62) = 0.62$, $p = .538$), customer assessment of salesperson's attractiveness ($\beta = .16$, $t(62) = 1.28$, $p = .204$), perceived similarity ($\beta = .10$, $t(62) = 0.75$, $p = .457$), familiarity with salesperson ($\beta = .20$, $t(62) = 1.62$, $p = .111$), and friendliness ($\beta = .09$, $t(62) = 0.67$, $p = .508$). In the second model (adjusted $R^2 = .32$, $F(7, 61) = 5.47$, $p < .001$), EA similarity significantly predicted customer satisfaction ($\beta = -.57$, $t(61) = -5.32$, $p < .001$, 95% confidence interval [CI] $[-0.118, -0.054]$) over and above our set of controls. The negative coefficient indicates that dyads with fewer differences among their EA scores (i.e., higher EA similarity) were more likely to report greater relational success. Together, these results offer preliminary support for our first hypothesis.

Planned Contrasts for Similar and Dissimilar EA Dyads. To examine the impact of dyad type on our outcomes, we dichotomized each person's EA score ($M = 100$) into high (>100) and low (≤ 99), to compare the impact of similar EA dyads (low–low and high–high) and dissimilar dyads (low–high and high–low) on satisfaction. Customer satisfaction served as our focal outcome to examine the influence of unique levels of EA.

We assessed the level of EA for each dyadic group onto interaction satisfaction using univariate ANOVA. The results indicate a significant difference between groups ($F(3, 65) = 3.46$, $p = .021$, $\eta^2 = .14$). Planned contrast by (dis)similar EA dyads (figure 3) reveal that the mean customer satisfaction for dissimilar low–high EA dyads ($M = 3.66$, SD $= 1.89$) was significantly lower ($\Delta = -1.44$, $p = .018$) than that for similar low–low EA dyads ($M = 5.09$, SD $= 1.34$) and directionally lower ($\Delta = -0.92$, $p = .103$) than that for similar high–high EA dyads ($M = 4.57$, SD $= 1.53$). Similarly, the mean customer satisfaction for dissimilar high–low EA dyads ($M = 3.47$, SD $= 1.89$) was significantly lower ($\Delta = -1.63$, $p = .008$) than that for similar low–low EA dyads and lower ($\Delta = -1.10$, $p = .051$) than that for similar high–high EA dyads. The difference between low–low and high–high dyads was not significantly ($\Delta = 0.52$, $p = .349$), nor was the difference between low–high and high–low dyads ($\Delta = 0.19$, $p = .752$). This pattern of results held across other relationship outcomes (loyalty, manifest influence, and word of mouth; see web appendix) and provides further evidence that similar EA dyads performed significantly better than dissimilar dyads.

Discussion

The results from this dyadic longitudinal field study of customer–salesperson interactions show that EA similarity

STUDY 1: CUSTOMER SATISFACTION BY (DIS)SIMILAR EA DYADS
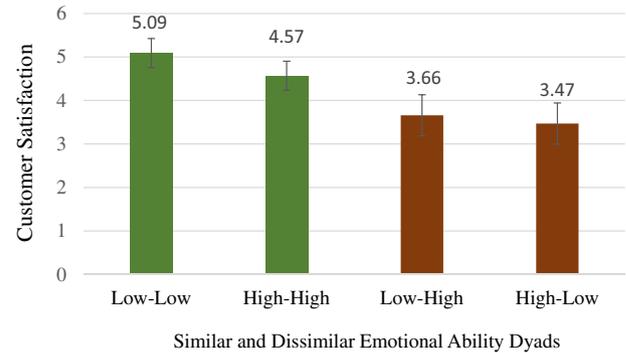
Notes: Low–low and high–high are EA similar dyads. Low–high and high–low are dissimilar EA dyads. $N = 69$ dyads. Error bars indicate ± 1 SE.

among both high–high and low–low dyads promotes interaction success, as evidenced by increased customer satisfaction. These results offer preliminary insights into the influence of EA similarity in interactions, beyond research examining only one side of the dyad and only emphasizing higher EA. As hypothesized, we also demonstrate these effects beyond traditional deep-level similarity (attitudinal similarity), surface-level similarity (physical appearance), and alternative explanations (attractiveness, friendliness, and familiarity). The findings provide initial support for our conceptual model and empirically show how EA similarity can influence customer−salesperson interactions in a naturalistic setting. One limitation of this study is that it is a correlational study that examines only consumer perceptions of the dyadic interaction. In studies 2–4, we use experimental designs to test whether EA similarity influences interaction satisfaction—a measure of relational success.

STUDY 2: WITHIN-SUBJECT CAUSAL DEMONSTRATION

The purpose of study 2 was to isolate the causal role of EA similarity in interaction success. Specifically, we examined the relational outcomes of individuals experiencing both similar and dissimilar EA with dyad partners. Therefore, we conducted a within-subject experiment, in which participants collaborated on a cognitive task with similar and dissimilar partners (counterbalanced) and then rated their level of interaction satisfaction.

Sample, Procedure, and Measures

Seventy-one students from a large US university (53.42% female, $M_{age} = 22.82$, SD $= 4.03$) participated in

a laboratory experiment for partial course credit. Participants were contacted and asked to respond online to the CEIS measure used in study 1 two days before their scheduled laboratory session. Their responses helped calculate participant EA before the laboratory session. We dichotomized each individual participant's EA score ($M = 100$) into high (>100) and low (≤ 99), so that participants could be paired with similar (high–high and low–low) and dissimilar (low–high and high–low) partners during the experiment. We collected data over multiple sessions and counterbalanced the order of similar/dissimilar partners to rule out potential confounds, such as learning effects, depletion, and fatigue.

Upon arrival to the laboratory, participants were paired with a partner with either a similar or a dissimilar CEIS score. Each dyad was asked to complete a cognitive task involving unscrambling words. After seven minutes, dyads were instructed to stop, return to their individual workstations, and respond individually to a postinteraction questionnaire. Participants responded to a six-item scale measuring their perceived EA similarity with their partner (e.g., "My partner and I communicated our emotions in a similar way"; 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; α = .95) as the manipulation check. A five-item scale measuring interaction satisfaction (α = .94) served as the dependent variable (see web appendix). We used control items similar to those in study 1 to measure participants' ratings of their partners' familiarity, attractiveness, friendliness, and perceived similarity (see web appendix). We also measured how stimulating and difficult the interaction task was, on a seven-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

After completing the postinteraction questionnaire, participants were paired with a second partner with either similar or dissimilar EA. Again, the dyads had seven minutes to interact and then returned to their stations to complete a second postinteraction questionnaire using the same measures. Finally, participants were thanked for their participation and dismissed.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Check. Participants in the similar EA condition ($M = 4.81$, SD = 1.02) reported greater perceptions of EA similarity than those in the dissimilar condition ($M = 4.36$, SD = 1.23; $t(70) = 2.69$, $p = .009$, $d = 0.40$). Both conditions reported equal ratings of how stimulating and difficult the interaction was (both ps > .10), ruling out alternative explanations.

Main Effect. To further test hypothesis 1 by demonstrating the causal role of EA similarity on interaction satisfaction, we conducted a within-subject ANCOVA to compare participants' satisfaction with their interaction with similar versus dissimilar partners. Familiarity,

physical attractiveness, friendliness, and surface-level similarity to their partner served as covariates in the analysis. Familiarity with and perceived similarity to (dis)similar EA partners did not significantly influence differences in participants' interaction satisfaction between similar and dissimilar EA partners (all ps > .10). However, the attractiveness of similar ($F(1, 62) = 5.16$, $p = .027$, $\eta^2 = .08$) and dissimilar ($F(1, 62) = 3.90$, $p = .053$, $\eta^2 = .06$) partners, as well as the friendliness of similar ($F(1, 62) = 9.01$, $p = .004$, $\eta^2 = .13$) and dissimilar ($F(1, 62) = 20.23$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .25$) partners, significantly influenced participants' interaction satisfaction between partners with similar and dissimilar EA. Beyond the effects of familiarity, physical attractiveness, friendliness, and surface-level similarity, greater EA similarity significantly affected participants' rating of their interaction satisfaction with partners. Specifically, participants felt greater satisfaction when interacting with similar ($M = 6.00$, SD = 0.89) than dissimilar ($M = 5.53$, SD = 1.19; $F(1, 62) = 4.46$, $p = .039$, $\eta^2 = .07$) partners.

These results provide robust support for hypothesis 1 by showing causal evidence for the influence of EA similarity on interaction satisfaction. By manipulating EA similarity within subject, we demonstrate that when interacting with a similar EA partner (in either high–high or low–low dyads), participants experienced increased satisfaction. By contrast, dissimilar EA partners (low–high/high–low dyads) had less satisfaction. This demonstration of manipulated EA similarity provides further evidence for how EA similarity facilitates interaction success though congruent emotion norms. Studies 3 and 4 use dyadic measures of interaction satisfaction to further test the effects of EA similarity.

STUDY 3: EMOTIONAL INFORMATION EXCHANGE (CHAIR POSITION)

We conceptualize that EA similarity aligns with congruent emotion norms, leading to favorable relational outcomes. For this congruence to occur, in addition to EA similarity, partners must be able to process and exchange emotional information. However, if this exchange of information was constrained, while allowing all other information to vary freely, we could isolate the underlying driver of why EA similarity influences relationships. Thus, the purpose of study 3 was to test how restricting the exchange of emotional information between interaction partners might diminish the effects of EA similarity. We seek to demonstrate that EA similarity only promotes interaction satisfaction when nonverbal emotional information is exchanged.

Sample and Procedure

One hundred fifty-eight students (57% females, $M_{age} =$ 21.30, SD = 3.16) from a large US university participated

in a laboratory experiment for partial course credit. Upon arrival to the laboratory, participants responded to the CEIS measures used in the previous studies. Next, they were randomly paired with another participant—regardless of their CEIS scores (allowing EA similarity to vary freely)—creating 79 dyads, which served as the unit of analysis in this study. Participants were informed that they would work on a negotiation task together and were given time to introduce themselves briefly. Next, dyads were randomly assigned to either the face-to-face (coded as 1) or the back-to-back (coded as 0) interaction condition. In the face-to-face condition, participants sat facing each other during the interaction; in the back-to-back condition, participants sat facing opposite directions. Thus, participants in the back-to-back condition were unable to process their partners' nonverbal cues as they interacted, which is a substantial constraint because nonverbals are a fundamental mode of sharing emotional information (Hareli and Hess 2012). The negotiation task asked participants to review two apartment listings and come to a consensus on which apartment they would choose, which room each partner would live in, and how much each partner would contribute for rent. The task was designed with tradeoffs (e.g., large bedroom with no view vs. smaller bedroom with a lake view) to create some tension (see web appendix for details). After the interaction task, participants returned to their workstations to complete the postinteraction survey, including measures of interaction satisfaction, similarity, attractiveness, familiarity, and friendliness.

Measures

Manipulation Checks. Six items measured how well each partner was able to detect the emotions of the other during the interaction on a seven-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; α = .90). In addition, the items from study 2 measuring how stimulating and difficult the interaction was were collected.

Controls and Dependent Measure. Control items similar to those from studies 1 and 2 helped measure participants' familiarity, physical attractiveness, friendliness, and perceived similarity to their partner (see web appendix). Finally, participants responded to the measures of interaction satisfaction used in study 2, a key determinant of relational success. We averaged both partners' responses to all measures to create the control and dependent variables used in our analyses. We took the absolute value of the difference between partners' CEIS scores to form EA similarity scores, which were the independent variable in our analysis. As in study 1, smaller EA similarity values represent similar EA dyads and larger values represent dissimilar EA dyads.

Results

Manipulation Checks. Dyads in the face-to-face condition ($M = 4.20$, SD = 0.67) reported higher detection of emotions in the interaction than those in the back-to-back condition ($M = 2.83$, SD = 0.68; $t(77) = 9.00$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.03$). In addition, dyads in both conditions reported equal ratings of how stimulating and difficult the interaction was (both $ps > .10$), ruling out these alternative explanations.

Moderation of Condition. To test whether removing participants' ability to exchange emotional information eliminates the effect of EA similarity on satisfaction, as predicted in hypothesis 2, we used a moderation analysis with model 1 of the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes 2013). Measures of each partner's individual EA, as well as dyadic measures of familiarity, attractiveness, friendliness, and surface-level similarity, served as covariates. The model was significant ($R^2 = .49$, $F(9, 69) = 7.27$, $p < .001$), though each member's individual EA, dyadic familiarity, attractiveness, and perceived similarity were not significantly related to interaction satisfaction (all $ps > .08$); however, friendliness was significant ($b = .71$, $t(69) = 4.10$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.364, 1.051]). Beyond the effects of the controls, the chair condition had a significant main effect ($b = .78$, $t(69) = 2.05$, $p = .044$, 95% CI [0.022, 1.530]), such that those in the face-to-face condition experienced significantly greater satisfaction than those in the back-to-back condition. While there was no main effect of EA similarity ($p = .657$), the EA similarity × chair interaction was significant onto dyadic interaction satisfaction ($\Delta R^2 = .06$, $F(1, 69) = 8.65$, $p = .004$; $b = -.05$, $t(69) = -2.94$, $p = .004$, 95% CI [−0.091, −0.017]; see figure 4).

Simple Effects. A simple effects analysis showed no significant effect in the back-to-back chair condition (CI crosses zero). However, there was a significant, negative effect in the face-to-face condition (−.06; $t(69) = -4.05$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−0.089, −0.030]). Thus, in support of our hypotheses, the greater the EA similarity (i.e., a smaller EA difference value), the greater was the satisfaction (hypothesis 1), but only when partners were able to exchange emotional information (hypothesis 2). When unable to exchange emotional information (back to back), the effects were attenuated.

Floodlight Analysis. Next, we ran a floodlight analysis using the Johnson–Neyman technique (Spiller et al. 2013) and found regions of significance for dyads similar in EA (i.e., those with smaller EA difference values, less than 0.87: $effect = 0.73$, $t(69) = 2.00$, $p = .050$, 95% CI [0.000, 1.457]) and for dyads dissimilar in EA (i.e., those with larger EA difference values, greater than 24.20: $effect = -.53$, $t(69) = -2.00$, $p = .050$, 95% CI [−1.061, 0.000]). Thus, compared with dyads in the back-to-back condition, dyads in the face-to-face condition that were (dis)similar

FIGURE 4.

EFFECT OF EA SIMILARITY AND CHAIR POSITION ON INTERACTION SATISFACTION
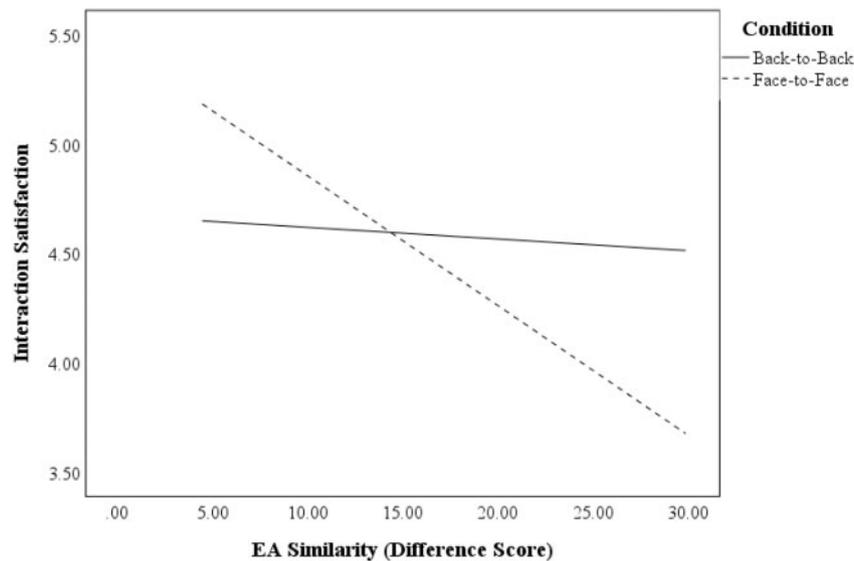
were significantly more (less) satisfied with their interaction with their partner.

Planned Contrasts for Similar and Dissimilar EA Dyads. To examine the impact of dyad type on our outcomes for the chair face-to-face condition, in which we expected a significant EA similarity effect, we dichotomized each person's EA score ($M = 100$) into high (>100) and low (≤ 99), to compare how similar EA dyads (high–high and low–low) and dissimilar dyads (low–high and high–low) influence satisfaction. We combined dissimilar dyads into a single group, as there is no meaningful difference between low–high and high–low dyads. The only difference is the dyad member who was inputted in the data set first.

We assessed unique levels of EA for each dyad member onto interaction satisfaction using univariate ANOVA. The results indicate a significant difference between groups ($F(2, 33) = 11.39$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .41$). We then ran planned contrast by (dis)similar EA dyads (figure 5). The mean interaction satisfaction for dissimilar EA dyads (low–high/high–low; $M = 3.61$, SD $= 0.79$) was significantly lower ($\Delta = -1.72$, $p = .001$) than that for similar low–low EA dyads ($M = 5.33$, SD $= 1.11$) and significantly lower ($\Delta = -1.62$, $p < .001$) than that for similar high–high EA dyads ($M = 5.23$, SD $= 1.31$). The difference between low–low and high–high dyads was not significantly different ($\Delta = 0.10$, $p = .842$). This pattern is similar to that in study 1.

We also conducted APIM (actor–partner interdependence model) analyses to test how the actors' EA influences both their own and their partner's satisfaction. APIM

FIGURE 5.

STUDY 3: INTERACTION SATISFACTION BY (DIS)SIMILAR EA DYADS
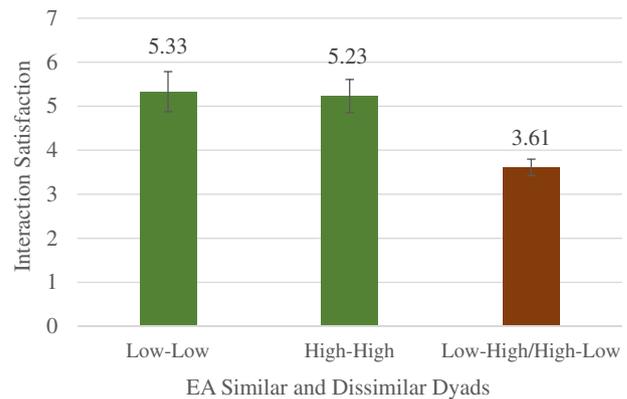
Notes: Low–low and high–high are EA similar dyads. Low–high and high–low are dissimilar EA dyads. $N = 36$ dyads. Error bars indicate ± 1 SE.

provides a simultaneous test of our findings to add rigor and rule out concerns about statistical independence. These analyses are available in the web appendix.

Discussion

In study 3, we demonstrate that the exchange of emotional information between partners is fundamental to EA

similarity. When the ability to exchange nonverbal information was restricted, the effects of EA similarity disappeared, showing no difference in interaction satisfaction regardless of how (dis)similar the partners were in EA. In addition, planned contrasts again showed that similar EA dyads (high–high and low–low) had greater satisfaction than dissimilar dyad types (low–high and high–low). Whereas this study provides additional evidence for the effect of EA similarity and initial evidence for the underlying process of emotional information exchange, one drawback is the low ecological validity of back-to-back conversations, prompting our fourth study.

STUDY 4: FACE-TO-FACE VERSUS PHONE INTERACTIONS

We suggest that EA similarity expressed through congruent emotion norms promotes interaction satisfaction, except when the exchange of nonverbal emotional information is restricted. To further examine this process in a larger sample ($N = 420$) and more realistic setting, study 4 uses an ecologically valid design in the context of a common consumer interaction occurring by phone (vs. face to face). We suggest that when talking on the phone about which apartments to rent, consumers are not able to determine the emotion norms of their partners and, thus, satisfaction is not changed. However, in face-to-face interactions, the exchange of nonverbal emotional information enables individuals with similar EA to experience congruent emotions, generating positive affect (feeling comfortable, understood, and validated) and ultimately leading to satisfied interactions. Thus, study 4 further tests the underlying moderated mechanism of how exchanging nonverbal emotional information allows EA similarity to significantly influence interaction satisfaction.

Sample and Procedure

Four hundred twenty students (44.16% females, $M_{age} = 21.91$, SD = 3.40) from two large US universities participated in a laboratory experiment for partial course credit. Similar to study 3, study 4 used a single-factor design, with two experimental conditions: face-to-face interaction (coded as 1) and phone interaction (coded as 0). Again, dyads were the unit of analysis in this study; thus, our 420 participants formed 210 dyads.

Upon arrival to the laboratory, participants were randomly assigned to numbered computer stations. After a brief introduction to the study, participants were paired with a partner seated at a computer station on the opposite end of the laboratory and asked to work with him or her to resolve a short, five-minute negotiation task. Partners were assigned using a predetermined pairing of each computer station number to ensure that no partners were seated near each other before or after their interaction. This also

ensured that participants who entered the laboratory at the same time (and who might know each other) would not be paired together for the interaction task.

In the face-to-face condition, participants were asked to leave their computer stations and find a spot in the laboratory to sit together for the negotiation task. In the phone condition, participants stayed at their assigned computer station and spoke to their partners via Zoom video conferencing software. This software allowed us to establish an audio call between predetermined pairs of computers. Before each laboratory session, each predetermined pair was set up on their own individual call, so that they could only hear each other through headphone sets that included a microphone mouthpiece. We were able to deactivate the video and chat functions and control the duration of each individual audio conversation. This procedure and the audio quality of the software and headsets resemble that of a typical phone call. Thus, participants in the phone condition were unable to view their partners' nonverbal cues as they interacted, even though they could verbally communicate easily.

The task consisted of a negotiation similar to that used in study 3. After taking a brief moment to introduce themselves, participants were asked to review two apartment listings and come to a consensus on which apartment they would choose, which bedroom each partner would choose, and how much each partner would contribute for rent. The task was designed to create some tension between participants, with tradeoffs (e.g., large bedroom with no view vs. smaller bedroom with a lake view; see web appendix for details).

After negotiating the terms of their rental agreement for five minutes, participants were asked to return to their assigned computer stations in the face-to-face condition. In the phone condition, participants were asked to remove their headsets and we ended all individual calls. After participants were seated at their computers, they opened a web browser and accessed a link to the complete postinteraction survey online.

Measures

EA Similarity. Participants responded to the CEIS measures used in the previous studies. We computed the absolute value of the difference between partners' CEIS scores to form the EA similarity measure used as the independent variable in our analysis. As in the other studies, smaller EA similarity values represent dyads with similar EA and larger values represent dyads who are dissimilar.

Manipulation Check and Controls. Six items from study 3 measured how well each partner was able to detect the emotions of the other partner during the interaction. Items from studies 2 and 3 measuring how stimulating and difficult the interaction was were also collected. As in the

other studies, each participant responded to control measures of familiarity with their partner, physical attractiveness of their partner, friendliness of their partner, and perceived similarity. Participants also rated the ease with which they could communicate with their partner (1 = very difficult, 7 = very easy) and the sound quality of their communication (1 = very poor, 7 = very good) as additional controls relevant to the use of telephone communication in this experiment; they account for differences in audio quality between the phone and face-to-face interaction conditions. We averaged both partners' responses to all measures to create dyadic values for our analyses.

Dependent Measure. Finally, participants responded to the measures of interaction satisfaction used in studies 2–4 (see web appendix), a key determinant of relational success. This served as the dependent variable in our analysis.

Results

Manipulation Checks. Participants in the face-to-face condition felt better able to detect their partners' emotional cues ($M = 4.89$, SD = 0.92) than those in the phone condition ($M = 4.47$, SD = 0.98; $t(208) = 3.19$, $p = .002$, $d = 0.44$). In addition, both conditions reported equal ratings of how stimulating and difficult the interaction was (both $ps > .20$), ruling out these alternative explanations.

Moderation of Condition. To test whether removing participants' ability to perceive emotional cues would eliminate the effect of EA similarity on satisfaction, as predicted in hypothesis 2, we used a moderation analysis with model 1 of the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes 2013). We included measures of each partners' EA at the individual level in the analysis as covariates and included the control measures at the dyadic level: dyadic familiarity, attractiveness, friendliness, perceived similarity, ease of communication, and sound quality. Overall, the model was a significant predictor of interaction satisfaction ($R^2 = .33$, $F(11, 198) = 8.78$, $p = .001$). Individual-level EA, partner friendliness, and sound quality did not have a significant effect on interaction satisfaction (all $ps > .05$). However, familiarity with partner ($b = .16$, SE = .06, $t(198) = 2.77$, $p = .006$, 95% CI [0.046, 0.275]), partner attractiveness ($b = .01$, SE = .004, $t(198) = 2.27$, $p = .024$, 95% CI [0.001, 0.016]), partner similarity ($b = .35$, SE = .08, $t(198) = 4.36$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.192, 0.509]), and ease of communication ($b = .18$, SE = .08, $t(198) = 2.37$, $p = .019$, 95% CI [0.031, 0.336]) were significant predictors of satisfaction.

More importantly, the variables of interest included in the model were the negotiation task condition (i.e., face-to-face vs. phone), EA similarity (difference score), and their interaction. EA similarity did not have a significant effect on satisfaction ($p = .675$). However, beyond the effects of all control variables included, the negotiation task condition ($b = .37$, SE = .19, $t(198) = 1.95$, $p = .052$, 95% CI [−0.003, 0.743]) and the interaction of EA similarity with the experimental condition were significant predictors of dyadic satisfaction ($\Delta R^2 = .02$, $F(1, 198) = 5.75$, $p = .017$; $b = −.02$, SE = .01, $t(198) = −2.40$, $p = .017$, 95% CI [−0.040, −0.004]).

Simple Effects. A simple effects analysis showed no significant effect in the phone condition (CI crosses zero); however, our hypothesized effects received support by a significant negative effect in the face-to face condition (*effect* = −.02, $t(198) = −3.65$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−0.038, −0.011]). Specifically, EA dyads with increasing levels of similarity reported greater satisfaction with their partners. However, as predicted in hypothesis 2, this effect only appeared when partners were able to exchange emotional information in the face-to-face condition. When unable to exchange emotional information in the phone condition, the effect of EA similarity was attenuated.

Floodlight Analysis. We ran a floodlight analysis using the Johnson–Neyman technique (Spiller et al. 2013) and found regions of significance for dyads with similar EA (i.e., dyads with smaller EA difference values, less than .17: *effect* = .37, $t(198) = 1.95$, $p = .053$, 95% CI [−0.005, 0.736]) and for dyads with dissimilar EA (i.e., those with larger EA difference values, greater than 37.14: *effect* = −.44, $t(198) = −1.97$, $p = .050$, 95% CI [−0.890, 0.000]). These results show that, compared with dyads in the phone condition, dyads in the face-to-face condition who were (dis)similar in EA were significantly more (less) satisfied with their partner interaction.

Planned Contrasts for Similar and Dissimilar EA Dyads. To examine the impact of dyad type on our outcomes for the face-to-face interaction condition, in which we expected EA similarity to have a significant effect, we dichotomized each person's EA score ($M = 100$) into high (>100) and low (≤99), to compare how similar EA dyads (high–high and low–low) and dissimilar dyads (low–high and high–low) influence satisfaction. We combined dissimilar dyads into a single group, as there is no meaningful difference between low–high and high–low dyads. The only difference is the dyad member who was inputted in the data set first.

In the face-to-face condition, we assessed unique levels of EA for each dyad member onto satisfaction using univariate ANOVA (figure 6). The results indicate a significant difference between groups ($F(2, 94) = 6.68$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .12$). We then ran planned contrast by (dis)similar EA dyads (figure 7). The mean interaction satisfaction for dissimilar EA dyads (low–high/high–low; $M = 3.77$, SD = 1.15) was significantly lower ($\Delta = −0.69$, $p = .007$) than that for similar low–low EA dyads ($M = 4.46$, SD = 0.71).

FIGURE 6.

EFFECT OF EA SIMILARITY AND INTERACTION CONDITION (FACE TO FACE VS. PHONE) ON INTERACTION SATISFACTION
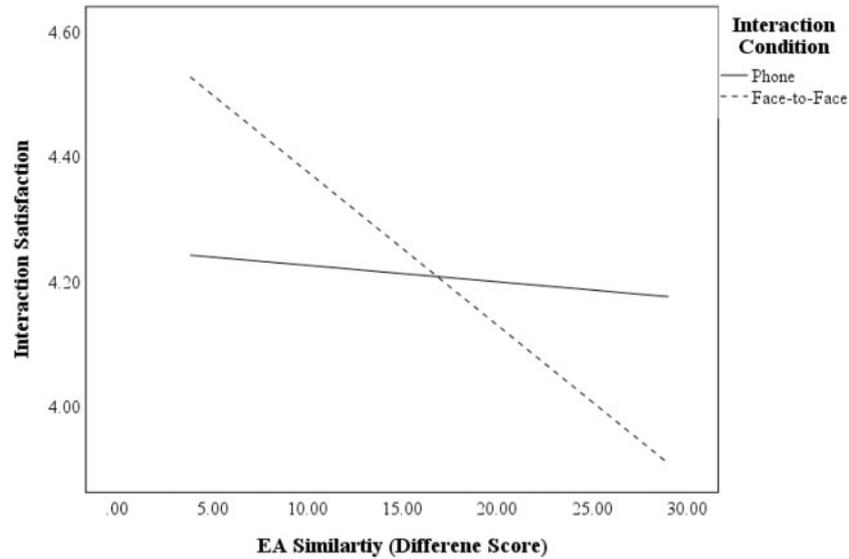
FIGURE 7.

STUDY 4: INTERACTION SATISFACTION BY SIMILAR AND
DISSIMILAR EA DYADS IN THE FACE-TO-FACE CONDITION
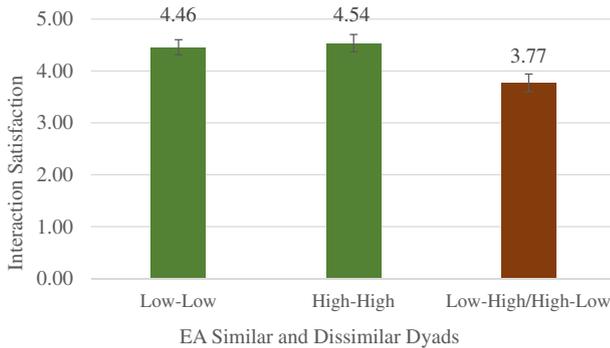
Notes: Low–low and high–high are EA similar dyads. Low–high and high–low
are dissimilar EA dyads. $N = 97$ dyads. Error bars indicate ±1 SE.

Mean satisfaction for dissimilar dyads was also significantly lower ($\Delta = -0.77$, $p = .002$) than that for similar high–high EA dyads ($M = 4.54$, SD $= 0.87$). The difference between low–low and high–high dyads was not significantly different ($\Delta = -0.08$, $p = .776$). This pattern of results is similar to the previous studies and provides further support for the simple effects found for EA similarity when partners were able to complete their interaction face-to-face.

Discussion

Study 4 demonstrates that the exchange of emotional information between partners is important for understanding the influence of EA similarity. Again, we show that the ability to exchange nonverbal information is critical for observing positive effects of EA similarity on interaction satisfaction, but with a larger sample and in a more realistic setting. By restricting participants' ability to communicate emotions nonverbally, we show that the effects of EA similarity are attenuated. Thus, in the phone condition, no difference in satisfaction emerged regardless of how (dis)similar the partners were in EA, providing a more robust and ecologically valid demonstration of our proposed underlying process of exchanging emotional information.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The axiom that similarity breeds attraction in relationships has a well-established tradition of research. However, scholars now question the underlying forms of similarity that facilitate these effects as well as their endurance over time (Montoya et al. 2008; Tidwell et al. 2013). We advance this important domain by developing EA similarity as a new form of deep-level similarity beyond existing types of similarity previously examined in marketing, social psychology, and other literature. We hypothesized that greater EA similarity will increase interaction satisfaction beyond the effects of surface-level similarities (hypothesis 1), but only under conditions where the interacting partners

are able to exchange emotional information (hypothesis 2). The results from four studies show that when nonverbal emotional information is exchanged, EA similarity enables individuals to share congruent emotion norms that facilitate comfort, understanding, and validation in their interactions and, ultimately, fosters greater satisfaction with the interaction.

In particular, we find that EA similarity exerts positive longitudinal effects on relational success in consumer–salesperson interactions beyond the effects of traditional deep-level similarity and surface-level similarity (study 1). This effect also emerges when we isolate its causal role in a within-subject experimental design to manipulate and counterbalance dyad type (study 2). By experimentally manipulating the (dis)similarity of individuals' interactions in study 2, we show how satisfaction significantly increases in the similar EA condition and decreases in the dissimilar EA condition. Subsequently, we find that the effects of EA similarity are subject to the underlying mechanism of emotional information exchange by reducing participants' ability to express emotion with their partners (study 3). When speaking back to back, participants were unable to fully exchange emotional information and were significantly less satisfied, despite equivalent levels of enjoyment, interest, and difficulty. We also find further evidence of the effects of EA similarity and the underlying process of emotional exchange using a more ecologically valid design with consumer phone conversations (study 4). This further strengthens the overall evidence for EA similarity by showing how the effect can be turned on and off when constraining the exchange of emotional information.

Overall, our findings challenge the common assumption in EA research that higher EA has a uniformly positive effect on creating ideal outcomes for interacting with others and that individuals with low EA are necessarily at a disadvantage. Rather, the results indicate that people with similar EA—when able to exchange emotional information—experience congruent emotion norms and greater interaction satisfaction. Notably, we find that EA similarity accounts for outcomes beyond commonly measured forms of interpersonal similarity. EA similarity emerged as a stronger driver of interaction satisfaction than other forms of similarity. While these other surface-level similarities play a role in sustaining lasting relationships, our findings suggest that they play a lesser role than EA similarity. Collectively, our four studies provide evidence that what drives exchange relationship formation and longevity is not merely how similar individuals are in appearance or shared attitudes, values, and opinions; rather, their congruent emotion norms based on similar EA facilitate greater comfort, understanding, and validation. Thus, while birds of a feather may *flock* together, how they *feel* together significantly influences satisfying interactions. As such, we must consider, at least in part, the role of EA similarity in consumer relationships.

Implications for Theory and Practice

Similarity–Attraction Paradigm. Our findings offer important contributions to the similarity–attraction paradigm. An abundance of research reveals how various forms of similarity, including surface-level similarity (e.g., physical appearance), deep-level similarity (e.g., values, lifestyle, attitudes), incidental similarity (e.g., shared birthday), and attractiveness, create a common ground between people and bring them into closer proximity (Jiang et al. 2010; Mackinnon et al. 2011; Netemeyer et al. 2012). Yet our findings suggest that EA similarity allows these interactions to take root and flourish by fostering satisfying interactions. As such, our study responds to calls for further exploration into stable interaction patterns based on better communication (Montoya et al. 2008).

In recent years, scholars have debated the importance of actual versus perceived similarity between people and ironically found that perceived similarity becomes more robust over time (Tidwell et al. 2013). In our research, EA similarity transcends the actual–perceived dichotomy, as it reflects actual similarity of EA that simultaneously shapes perceived similarity through interactions with congruent emotion norms. Our findings indicate that the enduring effects of interpersonal similarity may have less to do with the traits people share (e.g., age, ethnicity, attitudes, beliefs), whether actual or perceived, and more to do with similar processing of emotional information shared through congruent norms, which shapes the experience of interactions.

Emotion in Exchange Relationships. Our findings also advance a relatively nascent area in marketing that investigates the intersection of dyadic emotion in exchange relationships. Studies on consumer emotion have explored the dyadic transmission of particular emotions (e.g., cheerfulness, anger) as affective reactions to others (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2006). Other research has examined the emotion underlying product experiences and customer satisfaction (Mano and Oliver 1993; Oliver 1993; Westbrook and Oliver 1991). This consumer emotion literature has provided the basis that interaction experiences between consumers generate positive and negative affect (feeling comfortable, understood, and validated) that ultimately lead to satisfying interactions. However, beyond the emotions elicited from evaluations of tangible product attributes (Mano and Oliver 1993; Oliver 1993; Westbrook and Oliver 1991), we examine the complex exchange of emotional information that underlies interaction experiences between consumers. We show that in complex socially mediated interactions, the exchange of emotional information allows individuals with similar EA to align their expectations of how emotion should be used in interactions, leading to highly satisfying interactions. Exchanging emotional information with dissimilar EA leads to highly unsatisfying interactions. Previous research does not explain the

multifaceted outcomes arising from the dyadic processing of emotional information through inferential pathways (Van Kleef et al. 2012). Thus, insights into satisfaction and overall relational success may be informative for a host of exchange relationships for both economic and social/transformative outcomes (Rosenbaum et al. 2007). These include the relationships we examined (consumer–salesperson and consumer–consumer exchange relationships) as well as others, such as consumer–service employee relationships (Jones, Taylor, and Bansal 2008), network marketing relationships (Grayson 2007), and business buyer–seller relationships (Blocker, Houston, and Flint 2012; Palmatier, Scheer, and Steenkamp 2007).

Understanding how to match frontline sales and service personnel with customers using EA may be an important source for enhancing customer experience and profitability. While implementing this strategy may sound unrealistic, one example in practice is McKinsey & Company's application of artificial intelligence algorithms based on personality to match consumers and call center agents to enhance their interactions (www.mckinsey.com/solutions/afiniti).

Bidirectional EA beyond Unidirectional EA. Another theoretical advancement is the broadening of research suggesting that the EA of one member of a dyad can facilitate improved interactions (Lopes et al. 2004). Our findings indicate that assessing only one side of the dyad provides an incomplete understanding of the influence of EA on relational outcomes. By examining both sides of the dyad, configurations of (dis)similarity can be identified and relational outcomes within consumer interactions can be predicted more precisely. For example, knowing whether a customer with high EA will successfully interact with a salesperson may require identifying the EA of the salesperson. Beyond the effects of individual EA and conventionally measured similarity, our findings indicate that EA similarity can significantly influence the purchasing process in the short run as well as increase loyalty, satisfaction, receptivity to advice from others, and positive word of mouth in the long run.

Future Research Directions

Our research provides opportunities to further investigate EA similarity and its role in dyadic exchange relationships. Although we use robust measures and methods across our studies, future research might capture EA similarity using approaches such as dyadic facial expression analysis, neurocognitive and biometric feedback, or cultural meaning-based accounts. Research along these lines could uncover new insights into the conscious (system 2) and nonconscious (system 1) aspects of what it means to exchange emotional information between similar and dissimilar EA individuals. For example, could EA similarity help people make better processing decisions with greater involvement, such as in competitive negotiations? Investigating different contexts might illuminate how particular consumption domains that vary in cognitive processing influence those interactions.

We find that similar EA dyads (low–low and high–high) are significantly more satisfied across multiple studies. However, future research could also explore nuanced outcomes for these forms of similarity. For example, high–high EA pairs may develop strong relationships that are characterized more by closeness and intimacy based on their EA and preference for using emotion. Low–low EA pairs may develop strong relationships that are characterized more by a shared sense of pragmatism and uncomplicated interactions.

In the marketplace, EA similarity may facilitate interpersonal trust in risky purchase scenarios, such as choosing a surgeon or picking a childcare provider; it might also promote meaningful social support in service settings that aim to foster a relational atmosphere. In short, there is much to learn about how people jointly use EA to communicate and construct meaning from consumption experiences. By contrast, dissimilar EA in a service context can lead to acrimonious service failures and lost customers. When interactions are characterized by negative affect (discomfort, misunderstanding, and invalidation), consumers may be less likely to make high-quality decisions. This is detrimental for the firm and for the consumers who may leave frustrated without purchasing a desired product.

Research could also explore the conditions that cultivate EA similarity. Hindrances to emotional perception and expression such as deprivations to health, cognitive functioning, or other deficits may adversely affect EA similarity. Considerable research explores communication by examining facial expressions. In line with study 4's findings, a potentially fruitful area of research is the impact of technology and communication mediums on EA similarity when visual or auditory information is constrained. Furthermore, in cases where dissimilar EA is expected—for example, counselor–patient relationships or across cultural contexts that tend to be more or less attuned to EA—can interventions be designed to mitigate the consequences of these gaps?

In addition, the emotional contagion literature could be extended by examining whether (dis)similarity in EA amplifies or attenuates the transmission of implicit emotions between individuals. For example, when a consumer smiles at another consumer, if the parties have incongruent emotion norms, the type, duration, and emotive nature of the smile may have a significant influence on how the recipient interprets the smile and whether he or she returns it. With different expectations of how emotions should be used, the contagion of emotions may be attenuated. By contrast, the congruent expectations of high EA similarity

likely amplify contagion effects, allowing both consumers to experience a warm, heartfelt smile between them.

An examination of the underlying dimensions of EA could provide a finer-grained understanding of how specific abilities to use emotions—perceiving, facilitating, understanding, and managing—might boost the effects of EA similarity on relational outcomes. Possibly having similar levels of understanding could provide even greater EA similarity beyond more generally congruent levels of EA. However, this becomes more complicated if there is similarity in one ability but dissimilarities in other abilities, such as managing emotions, which can offset EA similarity and create discrepancies. A potentially fruitful area of research is the impact of ability dimensions on EA similarity when there is more or less convergence across dimensions.

Last, another area of research is the examination of individual differences within dyads, including people's ability to detect the EA of their partner. For example, might a salesperson who detects low EA in a customer be able to act the part of a low EA partner to elicit congruent emotion norms and thus generate positive affect and ultimately interaction satisfaction? Would this be more likely for a high or low EA salesperson? The detection of EA in others could have far-reaching benefits, or it could be that mimicking EA is deemed inauthentic and backfires, creating negative interactions. Furthermore, might some people experience greater emotional labor during interactions or engage in surface-acting (e.g., crude humor) to enhance the interaction? Personal characteristics of group members may have an important role in determining the strength and duration of felt satisfaction.

In summary, we provide a new approach for understanding how exchange relationships are facilitated. We show that the exchange of nonverbal emotional information underlies these relationships, delineating why similar EA of individuals leads to successful interactions. We hope that these insights into how people interactively use and experience EA are further explored by others to understand their full ramifications for marketplace interactions.

DATA COLLECTION INFORMATION

The third author collected study 1 data at Baylor University in the fall of 2012 and follow-up data in the fall of 2013. The third author also collected study 3 data at Colorado State University in the spring of 2017 and study 4 data at Colorado State University in the fall of 2018. The first author analyzed the longitudinal field data in study 1 at the Ohio State University in the summer of 2014. The fourth author analyzed the data for study 3 and collected and analyzed data for studies 2 and 4 at the University of North Texas in the fall of 2018. The second author analyzed the APIM analysis at the University of North Texas in the fall of 2017.

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