

Session # 12-5

Presenter Andreas T. Lechner

Title of Presentation Is Emotional Authenticity in Service Delivery Always Key to Customer Satisfaction? An Empirical Investigation of Boundary Conditions

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Abstract In service delivery, frontline employees are of utmost importance as they often are the only contact point between organization and customers. Many service companies therefore formally or informally prescribe employees to display positive emotions in service delivery which positively affect customer outcomes (e.g., Hennig-Thurau et al. 2006). Previous research indicates that authentic (i.e., genuine) emotional displays in particular have an edge over inauthentic (i.e., faked) displays in that they result in higher customer satisfaction (Hülshager and Schewe 2011), which is pivotal for company performance (Gupta and Zeithaml 2006). Yet the production of authentic emotional displays is heavily dependent on the employee's ability to successfully regulate their emotions which, given the busyness and complexity of many service encounters, is often not possible. Given this apparent dilemma, a better understanding of boundary conditions which attenuate the authenticity-satisfaction relationship is of great interest for both practitioners and theorists. This study identifies four factors which are hypothesized to mitigate the positive effect of authentic emotional displays on customer satisfaction at two different stages of the customers' perceptual process: the perception stage (customer affect, compensation between display facets) and the interpretation stage (employee physical attractiveness, social consumption). First, as to factors influencing perception, it is hypothesized that positive customer affect will heighten customer perceptions of employee positive emotional displays as authentic. Positive mood leads to less attentive and heuristic, and thus selective information processing which compared to neutral or negative mood increases the likelihood of judgmental errors originating from selective attention towards emotional display authenticity (Forgas and East 2008). As a second factor, a compensating effect of different facets of employee displays is hypothesized. It is proposed that inauthenticity in one display facet can be compensated by another facet which the customer notices and appreciates. For example, frequent gaze into the customer's eyes might compensate for a faked smile as it gives the customer the perception of being appreciated and thus results in an overall authentic display perception. Third, as to factors influencing interpretation, this study proposes that employees' physical attractiveness affects the interpretation of authentic displays negatively. Drawing on the meaning-shift effect (Forgas 1987), an verabundance of positive traits may lead to negative

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Abstract perceptions. In this way, attractiveness and authentic emotions might be “too much of a good thing” (Forgas 1987, p. 487). As a fourth factor, this study hypothesizes that the presence of other customers affects the interpretation of inauthentic displays. In a social consumption setting, the exchange of service perceptions between group members is expected to lead to an adjustment of individual evaluations in that inauthenticity perceptions are assimilated towards perceptions of other group members in order to increase group consensus. Overall, our study contributes to the emotional labor literature by investigating boundary conditions of the authenticity-satisfaction relationship which usually is assumed to be positive. Our study is hence of high relevance for service managers as well as recruiters and service designers. In four laboratory experiments using student samples, we investigate the moderating role of the identified factors in authenticity judgments of emotional displays in a full-service restaurant setting. Participants partake in scenario experiments using high quality video-taped stimulus materials. Data will be collected shortly. Results and implications will be presented on the conference.