Do They Always See It, Do They Always Care? Choice and Attentional Resources as Boundary Conditions of Customer Reactions to Frontline Employees' Emotional Authenticity

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research Question

Previous research indicates that employee emotional displays affect pivotal customer outcomes (Hülsheger and Schewe 2011). In particular, authentic displays were shown to outperform inauthentic displays with respect to customer satisfaction. Yet the production of authentic displays is dependent on the employees' ability to regulate their emotions which is often situationally or individually constrained (Liu et al. 2008). Thus, a deepened understanding of boundary conditions which attenuate the authenticity-satisfaction relationship is of great interest for both service managers and theorists.

We investigate three novel boundary conditions of the authenticity-satisfaction relationship. We study the moderating role of choice, that is, the ability to decide the course of action (Skinner 1996). Choice is an important boundary condition as customers' consumption choice is often restricted by, for example, budgets, business hours, or distance to service providers. Furthermore, we investigate attentional resources, in particular attentional focusing, that is, the ability to deliberately hold attention on a specific target (Derryberry and Rothbart 1988), and polychronicity, an individual's preference for multitasking (Poposki and Oswald 2010). Attentional resources are an important individual difference. In our study, we distinguish interactions that occur in customers' perception affecting perceived authenticity, and in customers' interpretation affecting customer satisfaction.

Method and Data

We conducted a 2 (authenticity: high vs. low) by 2 (choice: high vs. low) randomized between-subjects laboratory experiment. Participants were asked to select a local diner from a list of alternatives and subsequently watched a professionally recorded short film depicting a scripted restaurant visit from the customer's point of view. We manipulated authenticity by having a trained waitress either display felt emotions using cognitive change emotion regulation techniques in the high authenticity condition (Gross 1998), or modulating her facial expression without altering her felt emotions in the low authenticity condition (cf. Grandey et al. 2005). We manipulated choice by altering the number of restaurants to choose from. In the high (low) choice condition, participants chose out of a set of four (one) restaurants, which were described in terms of location, average rating, and style of cooking (cf. Botti and McGill 2006). This study uses established reflective seven-point multi-item scales. Two hundred and six students participated in our study. Participants' age ranged from 17 to 30 with a mean of 22.09 years; 34.1% were male. Participants rated the described scenario as highly realistic.

Summary of Findings

All our measures show acceptable levels of reliability. Participants report highly significant differences in authenticity perceptions as well as choice perceptions in the expected directions. Regarding the moderating role of choice, we find

a marginally significant positive interaction of authenticity and choice predicting customer satisfaction. Simple slope analysis indicates that authenticity affects satisfaction when choice is high but not when choice is low. Regarding the moderating role of attentional focusing, we find a significant positive interaction of authenticity and attentional focusing predicting perceived authenticity. Probing this interaction shows that people low in attentional focusing do not perceive authenticity differentially. However, with increasing attentional focusing, the difference in perceived authenticity increases significantly. Finally, regarding the moderating role of polychronicity, we find a significant positive interaction of perceived authenticity and polychronicity predicting customer satisfaction. Probing this interaction shows that for people very low in polychronicity, perceived authenticity does not affect satisfaction differentially. However, with increasing polychronicity, the effect of perceived authenticity on customer satisfaction increases significantly.

Key Contributions

Our study contributes to the emotional labor literature by investigating three novel boundary conditions of the authenticity-satisfaction relationship. In an attempt to separate boundary conditions that occur in customers' perception affecting perceived authenticity from boundary conditions occurring in customers' interpretation affecting satisfaction judgments, we further advance our understanding of the particularities of the authenticity-satisfaction relationship.

Our study identifies attentional resources as a further important customer individual difference and adds to previous research indicating the important role of customers' emotional resources (Groth, Hennig-Thurau, and Walsh 2009). We find the effects of attentional focusing and polychronicity to occur either in perception or interpretation, respectively, highlighting the value of adapting a process perspective in analyzing boundary conditions.

We furthermore provide preliminary evidence for the moderating role of choice. In practice, customers' consumption choice is often restricted, thus, knowledge about the moderating effect of restricted choice is highly relevant. We do, however, acknowledge a limitation in our choice manipulation accounting for the marginal significance of the interaction.

References are available on request.