

On Being Happily Mistaken and Sadly Right: Customer Pre-Consumption Affect as a Moderator of Emotional Labor Perceptions and Service Evaluations

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In many service industries, the customer-employee interaction is the core of the service. Managers therefore often rely on display control techniques to ensure appropriate employee behavior in the moment of truth. Past research highlights the role of displayed positive emotions in service delivery, which were shown to positively affect various customer outcomes. In particular, authentic compared to inauthentic emotional displays were shown to result in higher customer satisfaction (Groth, Hennig-Thurau, and Wang 2013), which is pivotal for firm performance (Szymanski and Henard 2001). Yet the display of authentic emotions is bound to the employees' ability to successfully regulate their emotions which may be restricted by, for example, service encounter busyness and complexity. Additionally, customers do not necessarily appreciate employees' extra effort (Grandey et al. 2005). Thus, a better understanding of when emotional authenticity affects customer outcomes is warranted.

This study investigates the moderating roles of customer pre-consumption affect, customer thinking style, and importance of authenticity in authenticity perceptions and service evaluations. Whereas past research reported a positive effect of authenticity on customer post-consumption affect (e.g., Hennig-Thurau et al. 2006), the role of customer pre-consumption affect in authenticity perception and service evaluation has not been studied to date. Yet, pre-consumption affect has been repeatedly shown to directly affect service evaluations (e.g., Mattila and Wirtz 2000), making it a potentially relevant customer-sided boundary condition of authenticity effects. Drawing on affect infusion theories (Forgas 1995), we posit that positive pre-consumption affect will upwardly bias authenticity perceptions as processing becomes more holistic and heuristic, whereas negative pre-consumption affect will yield more conservative and accurate authenticity judgments. These perceptions are expected to yield better service evaluations for authentic compared to inauthentic displays. Yet, the difference in service evaluations for authentic and inauthentic displays will be smaller with positive compared to negative pre-consumption affect. Overall, service evaluations are expected to be better with positive compared to negative customer pre-consumption affect. While the focus is on pre-consumption affect, this study also investigates the moderating role of customer thinking style and importance of authenticity. Thinking styles are either rational or experiential in nature (Epstein et al. 1999). We propose that authenticity will exert a stronger influence in service evaluations for individuals high in experiential thinking, as their processing tends to be more holistic, automatic, and less analytical compared to individuals high in rational thinking. Regarding the importance of authenticity, we expect authenticity to exhibit a stronger effect on service evaluations when customers deem authenticity important.

We investigate our hypothesis using a 2 (authenticity: high vs. low) by 2 (customer pre-consumption affect: positive vs. negative) between-subjects scenario experiment. We created a photo spread displaying a restaurant visit from the customer's point of view, altering the emotional display of the waitress. We use validated short films to manipulate pre-consumption affect. All constructs are measured using established multi-item scales. We will conduct our study using a representative online sample of the German population shortly. Empirical results will be presented at the conference. Overall, our study adds to the emotional labor literature by investigating three novel boundary conditions of the authenticity-service evaluation relationship and thereby contributing to a deeper understanding thereof.