

Standardizing Frontline Employee Behavior: The Impact of Aesthetic, Emotional, and Verbal Rules on Service Customers

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Abstract: This study tests the impact that standardization of frontline employee behavior through aesthetic, emotional, and verbal service rules has on service customers. Using an experimental design and a sample of 281 consumers, we find that standardization influences customers' service quality perceptions and trust in the service firm. The employees' organizational identification is found to serve as a moderator of the effects rules have on customers. Implications for service research and the management of frontline service employees are discussed.

Keywords: rules, standardization, quality, trust

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Work standardization, which implies the division of labor into simple routine tasks and limiting discretion of the personnel by imposing formal rules how tasks should be performed, is a long established concept in management (Pugh et al., 1963; Taylor, 1911). Organizations employ this approach to increase their efficiency, ensure consistent quality, and reduce labor costs since routine tasks are easy to control and require less specialized personnel (Olson, Slater, & Hult, 2005; Walker & Ruekert, 1987).

While work standardization has originally been developed in the context of manifest products, several service companies have adopted this approach. For example, McDonalds standardizes frontline employees' emotional display, offering their customers a "smile guarantee" which promises them a "free small French Fries or Hash Brown" if the employee does not smile "before payment". At Shula's Steak House, waitresses perform fully scripted "menu presentation shows" to customers. Also, many service companies standardize their frontline employees' appearance by requiring them to wear uniforms, to hide tattoos, or to put on an "appropriate" make up.

Despite this wide-spread use of the standardization concept, very little is known about work standardization in a service context, with important issues remaining unresolved. Most important, the effects that work standardization of services has on customers are largely unclear. To narrow this gap, we test whether three formal rules for frontline service employee behavior, namely emotional, aesthetic, and verbal rules, affect customers' assessment of the provided service.

In what follows, we introduce emotional, aesthetic, and verbal rules as means for service standardization. We then offer hypotheses of how these rules influence service customers and present the results of a role-playing experiment in which we employ filmed stimuli. We end the paper with implications for service researchers and managers.

Standardization through Emotional, Aesthetic, and Verbal Service Rules

Key to the concept of service standardization is the use of formal rules as a mechanism to control frontline employee behavior (Jaworski 1988; Levitt 1972). This paper introduces emotional, aesthetic, and verbal service rules as potential control mechanisms to standardize frontline employee behavior. We define service rules as formal instructions given to frontline employees that refer to routine elements of the employees' performance when dealing with customers. Our three service rules are grounded on existent research and exploratory interviews with 75 frontline employees and top level managers of five service companies (hotel chain, perfume store chain, fast food chain, full-service restaurant, telecom company) and an analysis of "employee rule books" of these companies.

We define *emotional rules* as those rules which require the frontline employee to display certain emotions. Emotional rules refer to the concept of emotional labor which implies that service companies issue rules requiring service employees to display specific emotions when interacting with customers (Grandey, 2003; Hochschild, 1983). *Aesthetic rules* are those rules which require the frontline employee to have a certain appearance. Aesthetic rules can be linked to research about "aesthetic labor" which states that companies use rules to standardize employees' dress codes and "other aspects of employees' appearance" (Nickson, Warhurst, & Dutton, 2005, p. 201, see also Frenkel, 2005; Witz, Warhurst, & Nickson, 2003). Finally, *verbal rules* are those which require the frontline employee to use certain vocabulary or phrases. Verbal rules are conceptually related to cognitive employee service scripts which consist of "speech acts" (utterances of meaningful expressions in a given context; Gioia, Donnellon, & Sims, 1989) that guide the behavior of frontline employees in service transactions (Humphrey & Ashforth, 1994).

The Impact of Service Rules on Customer Assessments of the Service

We propose that the standardization of frontline employee behavior through emotional, aesthetic, and verbal service rules influences the customers' perceived service quality and their trust in the service firm. We argue that the employee's identification with the service organization, as the employee's perception of being oneness with or belonging to the organization he or she is working for (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), determines how rules are put

into action by the employee and, subsequently, the customer's reaction to such rules. We first discuss our hypothesis for the context of low identification, and then for a high-identification context.

The Effect of Service Rules in a Low-Identification Context

Frontline employees with low organizational identification reduce their display of positive emotions to customers when no emotional rules exist. In contrast, the existence of emotional rules leads to more positive emotional display and, consequently, increases service quality, as the display of positive emotions is valued by customers (Mattila & Enz, 2002). This positive effect exists even when the positive emotions displayed lack authenticity as a result of the employee's emotional display being imposed by the service firm instead of authentically felt; a constellation referred to as "surface acting" (Grandey, 2003; Hochschild, 1983). However, as perceived authenticity is a key element of customers' trust in a service firm (Ganesan, 1994; Ganesan & Hess, 1997), we expect emotional rules to reduce trust as a result of surface acting.

Regarding aesthetic rules, we argue that frontline employees with low identification might dress inconsistent with the organization's aesthetical positioning. Accordingly, aesthetic rules requiring frontline employees to wear a uniform should increase service quality (Brady & Cronin, 2001). Trust will also increase through aesthetic rules, as a standardized look of the employees "implies consistency of service usage across occasions" (Solomon, 1998, p. 90), signaling continuity and reliability.

Verbal rules ensure politeness, where frontline employees would otherwise utter only minimal information in a listless manner. Even when customers notice the repetitive character of verbal rules in a low-identification context, verbal rules should increase service quality since competent communication is a requirement for providing good service (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985). As verbal rules provide customers with an outlook on future service interactions and suggest continuity and reliability, we also expect a positive impact on trust. We offer the following hypothesis for a low-identification context:

H1: When frontline employees do not identify with their organization,

- (a) emotional service rules lead to higher service quality perception, and lower customer trust;*
- (b) aesthetic service rules lead to higher service quality perceptions and higher customer trust; and*
- (c) verbal service rules lead to higher service quality perceptions and higher customer trust.*

The Effect of Service Rules in a High-Identification Context

When frontline employees have high organizational identification, the impact of service rules on service quality and trust differs partially from a low-identification context. With regard to emotional rules, frontline employees will strive to display authentic positive emotions to customers even when no rules exist, a behavior which has been referred to as "deep acting" (Grandey, 2003; Hochschild, 1983). Therefore, emotional rules will be of limited visibility and have no effect on service quality and trust.

Aesthetic rules increase the consistency and coherence of the company's aesthetic appearance as part of its physical environment quality (Brady & Cronin, 2001), which should result in higher service quality and trust. However, as frontline employees with high identification will attempt to be consistent with the firm's aesthetical positioning, the impact of aesthetic rules will be smaller in a high-identification context than in a low-identification context.

Regarding verbal rules, research on cognitive scripts suggests that employees might engage in mindless behavior when applying verbal rules, which can lead customers to "attribute mindless behaviors to the laziness and bad attitudes of the employees" and "this attribution may in turn create strong resentment and dissatisfaction with the service encounter" (Humphrey & Ashforth, 1994, p. 193). Accordingly, we expect that verbal rules reduce

service quality. With regard to trust, we argue that verbal rules “harmonize” service encounters and allow customers to better anticipate what will happen on their next visits, leading to increased reliability and, therefore, higher trust. We offer the following hypothesis for a high-identification context:

H2: When frontline employees do identify strongly with their organization,

(a) emotional service rules have no impact on service quality perception and customer trust;

(b) aesthetic service rules lead to higher service quality perceptions and higher customer trust, with these influences being less strong than when the employees’ identification is low; and

(c) verbal service rules lead to lower service quality perceptions and higher customer trust.

Empirical study

Method and Sample

A 2*2*2 experimental design was used to test our hypotheses. For each of the two identification contexts, eight filmed role-playing stimuli were created, with the stimuli showing a waitress welcoming a guest in a restaurant. Each stimulus consisted of a sequence of four short encounters which simulated a customer’s repeat visits of the restaurant. The stimuli exclusively differed with regard to the emotional, aesthetic, and verbal appearance of the frontline employee. 281 students participated in the experiment, with 146 of them being assigned to the high-identification context and 135 to the low-identification context. Each participant was exposed to one stimulus only.

The frontline employee smiled throughout all four encounters in the emotional rules condition, with smiles being authentic (as the result of deep acting) in the case of high identification but lacking authenticity (as the result of surface acting) in a low-identification context. Without emotional rules, authentic smiles were shown when the frontline employee identified strongly with the organization, while she showed no smiles in the low-identification context. When aesthetic rules were at place, the waitress wore the same uniform in all four encounters, while without aesthetic rules she wore different private clothes in each of the four encounters. The waitress’ private clothes were consistent with the service ambience in the high-identification context, while this was not the case for low identification. Finally, verbal rules were operationalized by the waitress’ use of the same welcome phrase in each of the four encounters, while without verbal rules, her phrases differed. In the high-identification context, the waitress’ phrases were longer and signaled a stronger motivation than in the low-identification context.

Measures and Validity Assessment

Service quality and trust were measured with established multi-item scales. We also included a measure of customers’ loyalty intentions (see Appendix for a list of all items). α -scores of all scales clearly exceeded .70. The lowest item loading was .79 and the composite reliability was above .90 for all three constructs. Finally, discriminant validity was also established, with average variances extracted (AVE) of .91 (service quality), .83 (trust), and .76 (loyalty intentions) being clearly higher than correlations among latent variables.

To ensure the effectiveness of our manipulations, participants rated the degree of aesthetic, emotional, and verbal standardization. Results show that all three rules were effectively manipulated ($\bar{x}_{AR} = 5.55$ and $\bar{x}_{NAR} = 1.85$; $F = 367.59$; $p < .001$; $\bar{x}_{ER} = 5.30$ and $\bar{x}_{NER} = 4.36$; $F = 14.59$; $p < .001$; $\bar{x}_{VR} = 6.35$ and $\bar{x}_{NVR} = 3.00$; $F = 248.04$; $p < .001$). Participants also rated employee identification (see Appendix for items; $\alpha = .94$), which was higher in the high-identification context than in the low-identification context ($\bar{x}_{ID} = 4.41$ and $\bar{x}_{NID} = 1.79$; $F = 366.88$; $p < .001$).

Results

Data was analyzed with partial least squares (PLS; Fornell & Cha, 1994). In addition to the paths from the three service rules to service quality and trust, respectively, we included three interaction terms (emotional/verbal, emotional/aesthetic, and verbal/aesthetic) and linked them with service quality and trust. The model also contained paths from service quality and trust to loyalty intentions and from service quality to trust (e.g., Sirdeshmukh, Singh, & Sabol, 2002; Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996). We ran a model for each identification context (see Figure 1 for models and path coefficients).

In the high-identification context, we find that service quality is only affected by the interaction of verbal and aesthetic rules. For trust, negative effects are found from verbal rules, aesthetic rules, and the interaction of verbal and aesthetic rules. In the low-identification context, aesthetic rules, emotional rules and the interaction of emotional and verbal rules have strong positive effects on service quality, while the interaction of verbal and aesthetic rules has a negative effect. Regarding trust, we find negative effects of emotional rules and aesthetic rules. In both sub-samples, service quality is found to influence both trust and loyalty intentions, and trust has a positive effect on loyalty intentions.

-- Figure 1 about here --

Discussion

H1: Low-identification context. As argued, emotional rules exert a positive impact on service quality when identification is low. However, and again as predicted, emotional rules are not a “foolproof” instrument, as they negatively influence trust. While the positive effect of aesthetic rules on service quality was as proposed, their negative influence on trust was not expected. We suspect that customers who otherwise would have interpreted the private clothes of the employee as a signal of authenticity (a proxy for trustworthiness) now lack this personal information and, consequently, perceive less trust. However, the negative effect of aesthetic rules on trust vanishes when indirect effects are considered, as the total effect of aesthetic rules on trust is non-significant. While we expected verbal rules to positively affect both service quality and trust in a low-identification context, the results do not support this. Interestingly, the negative effect of the interaction of verbal and aesthetic rules on service quality might be an indicator of a “too-much-of-a-good-thing” effect.

H2: High-identification context. While the lack of impact of emotional rules on customer outcomes is as expected, we do not find empirical support for the proposed effects of aesthetic and verbal rules on service quality and trust. From this we learn that, in general, service rules make no difference with regard to service quality when identification is high. Regarding trust, verbal rules and aesthetic rules both exert an unexpected negative impact, which might be explained in the same way as in the low-identification context (i.e., reduced trustworthiness). Finally, as predicted, we find the impact of aesthetic rules on service quality and trust to be stronger in the low-identification context.

Implications

Service companies can learn several lessons from our study. First, our findings show that service rules can be quite powerful with regard to retaining existing customers. As customers' repeat purchase of a service firm is strongly affected by their perception of service quality offered by a firm and their level of trust in that firm, service rules can contribute to the creation of a loyal customer base.

Second, the decision whether rules are set should be made on the level of individual rules, not for (or against) service rules per se. The effects rules have on customers differ in strength and in a number of cases even in direction between the rules. Obviously, the question is not “to

standardize or not to standardize” a service, but which parts of the service should be standardized by service rules.

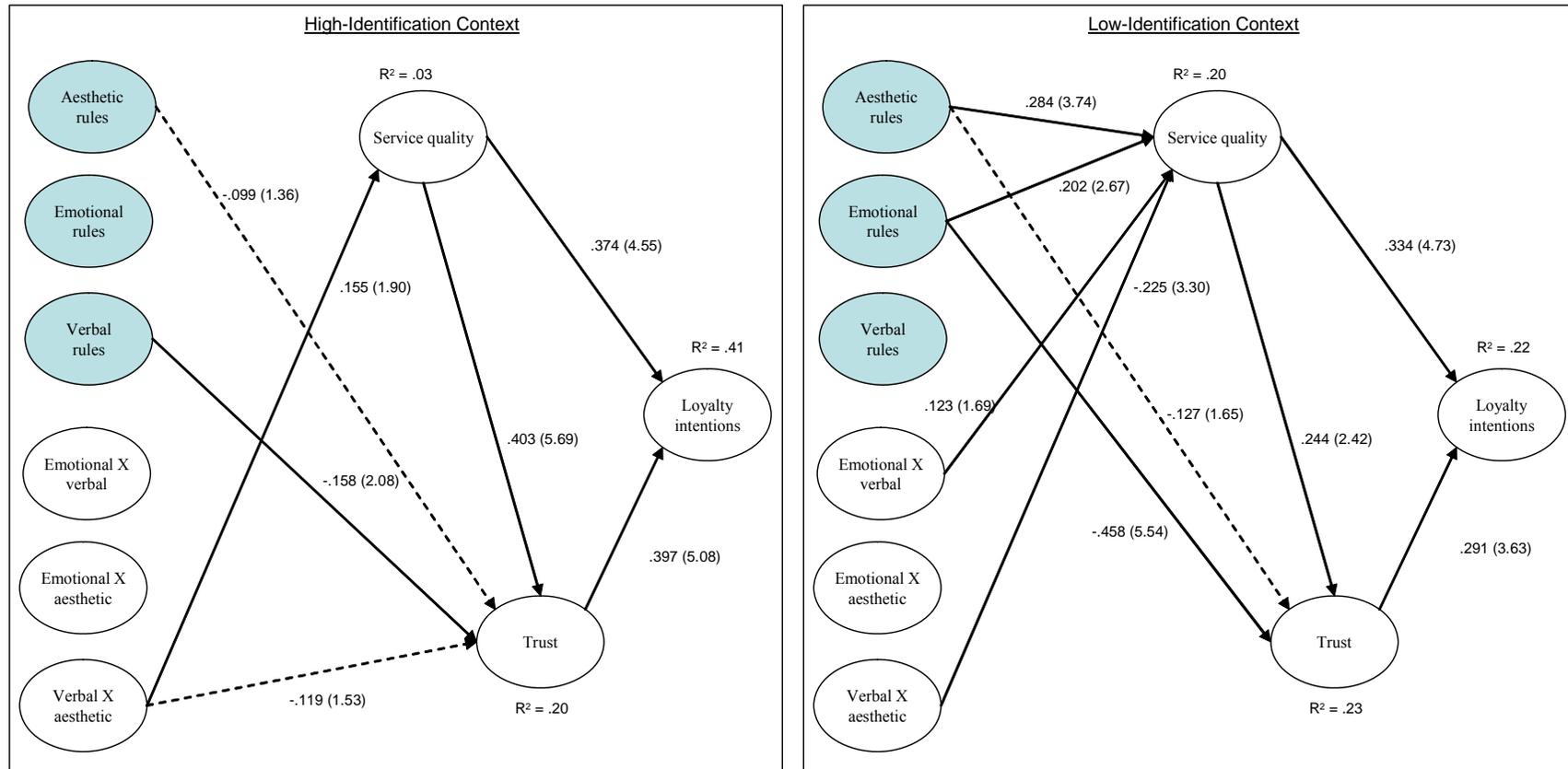
Finally, our findings point at the conditions under which service rules have an impact on customers and particularly on the crucial role of organizational identification. Overall, rules seem to be more effective when identification is low. In several service companies, low identification might be the result of a cost-reduction strategy which usually includes low payments for frontline employees. It seems that service rules can at least partially compensate for the lack of employee motivation and skills which are usually associated with such a strategy.

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FIGURE 1
Results of PLS Modeling for High-Identification and Low-Identification Contexts



NOTE: Numbers are PLS path coefficients, numbers in brackets are t-values generated through bootstrapping with 500 resamples. Straight lines indicate that a path is significant at $p < .05$ (one-sided), dotted lines indicate that a path is significant at $p < .10$ (one-sided). Non-significant paths are suppressed.

APPENDIX Items Used

Construct	Adapted from
Service quality	
I would say that the restaurant provides superior service.	Brady and Cronin (2001)
I believe the restaurant provides excellent service.	Brady and Cronin (2001)
Trust	
The waitress is perfectly honest and truthful.	Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, and Gremler (2002)
The waitress can be trusted completely.	Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, and Gremler (2002)
The waitress has high integrity.	Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, and Gremler (2002)
Loyalty intentions	
The next time I need the services of a restaurant, I will choose this restaurant.	Taylor & Baker (1994)
I will do more business with this restaurant in the next few years.	Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman (1996)
I consider this restaurant my first choice.	Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman (1996)
I recommend this restaurant to someone who seeks my advice.	Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman (1996)
I say positive things about this restaurant to other people.	Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman (1996)
Employee identification	
I believe the waitress feels strong ties with this restaurant.	Smidts, Pruyn, and van Riel (2001)
I believe the waitress experiences a strong sense of belonging to this restaurant.	Smidts, Pruyn, and van Riel (2001)
I believe the waitress feels proud to work for this restaurant.	Smidts, Pruyn, and van Riel (2001)
I believe the waitress is glad to be a member of this restaurant.	Smidts, Pruyn, and van Riel (2001)

NOTE: We used 7-point scales, with higher numbers indicating greater levels of agreement.