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# When and how frontline service employee authenticity influences purchase intentions

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## Abstract

In this manuscript, we investigate the central role of perceived front-line service employee (FSE) authenticity and the process by which it impacts purchase intentions, taking into account the represented brand's authenticity. While brand authenticity has previously been shown to enhance consumer outcomes, we find that FSE authenticity is a separate significant predictor of purchase intentions. Further, we find that FSE authenticity enhances purchase intentions by increasing perceived trust and perceived quality. However, this finding only holds for brands that do not emphasize their authenticity, indicating that brand managers should differentially emphasize FSE authenticity based on their brand's positioning. Furthermore, we investigate the robustness of these effects across both experience and credence services, and find that FSE authenticity is especially important in credence service contexts.

**Keywords:** Authenticity, Frontline service employee Marketing, Branding, Services

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## 1. Introduction

“Trust your gut. Finding a new stylist isn’t just about their talent, it’s about how the two of you vibe together” (Edwards, 2018). As services are intangible and co-created with the consumer, determining the extent to which a consumer “vibes” with the service provider and the brand they represent is based on facets of the service experience beyond the service provided. One of the important facets driving provider choice is the extent to which the provider is perceived as being genuine, or authentic, in the marketplace (Rozen, 2016). Younger generations in particular are interested in brands, goods, and services that are authentic, meaning that they are being perceived as being real, genuine, and true to themselves (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Kernis & Goldman, 2006). In services, frontline service employees (FSEs) are a key touchpoint with the company and the brand and are thus in a unique and central position to provide authenticity cues to consumers. Even though consumers’ desire for authenticity is a prominent driver of modern consumer behavior (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010), little is known about the impact of perceived FSE personal authenticity on purchase intentions, and how the importance of FSE personal authenticity to consumers is offset or enhanced by the authenticity offered by the brand itself.

Authenticity, as noted by Lehman, O’Connor, Kovács, and Newman (2019), is a multidimensional construct variously consisting of claims that an entity is *consistent* in its internal values and external behaviors, that it *conforms* to relevant social norms, and that it has a *connection* to a claimed person, time, or place. Both brand authenticity and personal authenticity can be conceptualized using these three dimensions, though the specifics of how perceived authenticity is operationalized in the literature differs for brands (e.g. Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin, & Grohmann, 2015; Moulard, Raggio, & Folse, 2016; Napoli, Dickinson, Beverland, & Farrelly, 2014) and individuals (e.g. Arnould & Price, 1993; Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Deci & Ryan, 1991; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliouisis, & Joseph, 2008). Marketing literature has tended to focus on brand authenticity (e.g. Fritz, Schoenmueller, & Bruhn, 2017; Guèvremont & Grohmann, 2016; Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin, & Grohmann, 2015), but FSE behavior

and attributes – including their perceived authenticity – also help create the customer service experience and build perceptions of the service brand in question (Keller, 1993; Sirianni, Bitner, Brown, & Mandel, 2013). The role of perceived FSE authenticity is especially of interest given the variability of authenticity that is displayed by FSEs due to the profit motivations inherent in-service experiences that require FSEs to behave in a professional (and potentially inauthentic) manner (e.g. Gammoh, Mallin, & Pullins, 2014; Sirianni et al., 2013). In service contexts, therefore, it is important to understand the role of FSE personal authenticity on consumer outcomes.

Past empirical research has investigated separately the role of brand authenticity perceptions and FSE authenticity perceptions on consumer attitudes and behaviors, as shown in the summary **Table 1**. However, to the best of the authors' knowledge, this paper is the first to take into account both the authenticity of a service provider as well as that of a brand in investigating the impact of authenticity on consumer outcomes. By manipulating both FSE and brand authenticity perceptions, we identify when and how FSE authenticity most impacts consumer perceptions, resulting in practical implications for brand managers.

Specifically, we draw on persuasion knowledge theory (Friestad & Wright, 1994) to examine how FSE authenticity impacts perceived trust, quality, and liking of the provider, and ultimately impacts purchase intentions, when brand authenticity is more and less emphasized. In a series of four experiments, we investigate these processes across both experience and credence service settings, and further test whether the effect is robust to the type of relationship (e.g., transactional vs. communal) sought by the consumer. As a preview, we consistently find that FSE authenticity complements service brands that do not highlight their authenticity, by enhancing trust and perceived quality of the brand. The impact of FSE authenticity on purchase intentions for authentic service brands, however, is more complex. Depending on the experience or credence context, FSE authenticity either has no impact on or can enhance purchase intentions.

The contributions of this manuscript are threefold. First, we contribute to theory in authenticity and in marketing by conceptually distinguishing FSE authenticity from brand authenticity and testing their relative and interactive effect on consumer behavior. Second, we explore the role of FSE authenticity and its interaction with brand

**Table 1** Empirical literature examining the authenticity consumer outcomes relationship.

Study	Brand authenticity	Personal authenticity	Mediating process	Key findings
Fritz et al. (2017)	✓		✓	Brand authenticity increases purchase intentions by increasing relationship quality; it is predicted by a brand's past, virtuousness, employee representation, and consumer self-identification.
Ilicic and Webster (2014)	✓			Perceived relational authenticity between consumers and companies predicts brand attitudes and purchase intentions.
Morhart et al. (2015)	✓			Perceived brand authenticity consists of continuity, integrity, credibility, and symbolism; it enhances consumer emotional brand attachment and positive word of mouth. Antecedents include indexical, iconic, and existential cues.
Moulard et al. (2016)	✓		✓	Brand authenticity increases quality and trust perceptions; it is predicted by a brand's perceived stability and rarity.
Napoli et al. (2014)	✓			Brand authenticity consists of quality commitment, heritage, and sincerity fac ncreases brand trust, brand credibility, and purchase intentions.
Ilicic and Webster (2016)		✓		Perceived celebrity authenticity predicts purchase intentions for endorsed goods.
Moulard et al. (2014)		✓	✓	Perceived artist authenticity increases purchase intentions by enhancing consumer attitudes towards the artist and toward his/her art.
Sirianni et al. (2013)		✓		Perceived FSE authenticity in branded service encounters increases consumer brand evaluations for unfamiliar brands.
Beverland and Farrelly (2010)	✓	✓*		Consumers authenticate objects and experiences in different ways to fulfill their personal goals of control, connection, and virtue.
Guèvremont and Grohmann (2016)	✓	✓*		Consumers have higher passion for and connection with authentic brands in conditions of social exclusion and inauthenticity, moderated by individual differences.
This study	✓	✓	✓	Perceived FSE authenticity enhances purchase intentions by enhancing trust and quality; this effect is moderated by brand authenticity perceptions.

authenticity across both experience and credence service contexts, as these contexts differ in the difficulty that consumers may experience when evaluating the quality of the service. Prior research, for instance, has shown that interactions with an FSE can create selective halo effects for credence attributes of a specific service (Dagger, Danaher, Sweeney, & McColl-Kennedy, 2013). It is as yet unknown, however, whether FSE authenticity plays a different role in services that are more experience or credence-oriented.

Third, we contribute to business practice by advancing our understanding of how FSE authenticity helps different types of brands. We find strong positive effects of FSE authenticity on purchase intentions across contexts and brand authenticity perceptions in four experiments. Further, for lower-authenticity brands, we find that FSE authenticity additionally enhances trust, showing that managers can supplement their brand's desirability by allowing FSEs to be authentic. Taken together, this present research can help guide practitioners in the hiring and training of FSEs based on the extent to which their corporate brand also emphasizes authenticity.

The rest of the paper is laid out as follows. We first review prior literature on how FSE motivational cues impact service experiences, and we lay out our hypotheses regarding the impact of FSE authenticity on consumer purchase intentions. Next, we test our predictions across four studies. The first two studies focus on an experience service setting (Study 1: Personal trainer, Study 2: Hair dresser) and test the robustness of the impact of FSE authenticity in different brand authenticity conditions, as well as across different types of relationships that the consumer may seek in the marketplace (Study 2). We then expand our tests to credence services in a setting that is more familiar (Study 3: Doctor) and less familiar (Study 4: Financial planner) to respondents. Finally, we give theoretical and managerial conclusions based on our findings.

## **2. FSE motivational cues in services**

Persuasion knowledge (Friestad & Wright, 1994) focuses on the inferences that consumers make using cues they receive about the motivation of a persuader, such as an FSE in a service context. In this

case, consumers tend to attribute an FSE's behavior either to intrinsic motivations (e.g., helping consumers) or extrinsic motivations (e.g., meeting sales targets). Extrinsic motivations tend to be associated with lower customer evaluations (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; De-Carlo, 2005).

In contrast, FSE behavior that signals to consumers that the employee wants to provide consumer benefits rather than merely being profit oriented has a positive impact on consumer evaluations of the service. For instance, customer orientation (Homburg, Wieseke, & Hoyer, 2009) and effort (Mohr & Bitner, 1995) result in greater customer satisfaction. Further, relationship-related qualities such as interpersonal skills (Dagger et al., 2013) and deep acting (Hennig-Thurau, Groth, Paul, & Gremler, 2006; Sirianni et al., 2013) have been found to help shape service experiences.

FSE authenticity should be a similar positive motivational cue. The consistency portion of individual authenticity (Lehman et al., 2019) involves being intrinsically motivated (Deci & Ryan, 1991; Kernis & Goldman, 2006) and sincere (Arnould & Price, 1993), so one's behaviors match with one's values system. Since consumers respond badly to employees when they believe them to be inauthentic and simply acting in a way prescribed for them by a company (Sirianni et al., 2013), emphasizing authenticity in a service role may be a way for companies to encourage consumers to connect with their brand through connecting with a given individual.

That said, companies may be skittish of allowing FSEs to behave in any way that is true to themselves. In many firms, employees are trained to represent the brand in a consistent manner in line with a firm's brand image (Baker, Rapp, Meyer, & Mullins, 2014; Henkel, Tomczak, Heitmann, & Herrmann, 2007). In such cases, employees may be expected to engage in emotional labor to present an image that accurately represents the brand at all times (Diefendorff & Greguras, 2008; Sirianni et al., 2013). As such, employees may feel compelled in such cases to not reveal their true selves to consumers if it would conflict with the professional role they are assigned to play. It is therefore important to investigate the extent to which FSE authenticity does, in fact, result in positive outcomes for consumers, and the extent to which this effect differs for brands that more or less positioned around authenticity.

### *2.1. Impact of FSE authenticity on trust, quality, liking, and purchase intent*

Services are by nature intangible, variable across purchases, simultaneously produced and consumed, and perishable (Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2009). Because of these features, purchase of services is riskier than purchase of goods, and consumers may rely heavily on external cues coming from the FSE and the service brand to evaluate the service. FSE authenticity is hypothesized to provide such a cue, and thereby, to increase trust in, liking of, and perceived quality of the provider, which should result in increased purchase intentions.

Brand trust, perceived quality, and positive attitudes are known outcomes of perceived authenticity (Moulard et al., 2016; Moulard, Rice, Garrity, & Mangus, 2014). In a services setting, FSE authenticity should similarly lead to these attitudinal factors. Personal authenticity, at its core, involves alignment of an individual's beliefs and actions that leads to consistent, reliable behavior (Deci & Ryan, 1991; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Wood et al., 2008), as well as moral behavior in line with social norms (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Kernis & Goldman, 2006). It should thereby increase *trust* in a provider, as exhibition of FSE value consistency and moral conformity gives consumers a stronger basis for making judgments about the employee's ability and desire to accomplish what they say they will. Further, authentic disclosure about oneself can help build rapport with consumers by identifying shared human experiences (Gremler & Gwinner, 2008).

Displaying an authentic FSE role may also signal enhanced service *quality* to consumers. Often, consumers associate working "hard" with working "well," conflating effort, intrinsic motivation, and passion with quality (Kirmani & Rao, 2000; Kruger, Wirtz, Van Boven, & Altermatt, 2004). Further, past research has found that employees who aligned with their brand's personality (and therefore had higher levels of intrinsic motivation) performed at higher levels than those who did not (Gammoh et al., 2014). When employees show that their beliefs match their behaviors and they are passionate about their work, it should thus also increase consumer perceived quality of their work.

Finally, authenticity has long been seen as a positive trait for brands and individuals to possess and express (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Morhart et al., 2015). Authentic individuals tend to be liked more than



inauthentic individuals in a variety of contexts (Gardner, Coglisser, Davis, & Dickens, 2011; Moulard et al., 2014; Wickham, 2013), and consumers have more positive attitudes toward authentic brands than inauthentic brands (Guèvremont & Grohmann, 2016; Ilicic & Webster, 2014). As such, we anticipate that perceived FSE authenticity increases consumer *liking* for the provider, which should then enhance purchase intentions.

Taken together, we expect that FSE authenticity provides important cues to the consumer about FSEs' ability and willingness to provide a high quality and trustworthy service experience to the consumer, and enhance their liking of the individual overall. In turn, trust, quality, and liking are known strong predictors of purchase intentions (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Moulard et al., 2014; Szymanski & Henard, 2001). Therefore, we predict that:

- H1: FSE authenticity increases purchase intent.
- H2: Perceived quality of a service provider mediates the relationship between FSE authenticity and purchase intent.
- H3: Trust in a service provider mediates the relationship between FSE authenticity and purchase intent.
- H4: Liking of a service provider mediates the relationship between FSE authenticity and purchase intent.<sup>1</sup>

## 2.2. *FSE authenticity across different levels of brand authenticity*

Apart from an FSE's behavior, a brand can also display more or less authenticity (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Authentic brands by nature are perceived as being of high quality, sincere in their morals, and having a strong heritage (Napoli et al., 2014). As such, brand authenticity tends to increase consumer brand perceptions and purchase intentions (Ilicic & Webster, 2014; Morhart et al., 2015; Moulard et al., 2016). Since brands and FSEs can independently portray their own authenticity to consumers, these actions might have independent positive effects.

1. We thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this mediation.

However, for two reasons, we anticipate that the positive effect of FSE authenticity will be stronger when the corporate brand is *not* seen as highly authentic. First, a substitutionary effect may occur if FSE authenticity provides redundant information in contexts when a brand's positioning already emphasizes authenticity. That is, even though an FSE's authentic behavior may confirm consumer expectation of a service experience for a brand that is genuine, trustworthy, and of high quality, the consumer will not obtain new information about the brand from interacting with the FSE. Second, consumers may expect that an FSE acts authentically because he or she is employed by an authentic brand, and thus is acting in a way directed by the brand rather than due to their own intrinsic motivation (Moulard et al., 2016). In conditions when a brand is seen as less authentic, however, FSE authenticity should contribute new information to consumers and result in higher purchase intentions.

Taken together, we predict the following:

H5a: For low authenticity focused brands, high FSE authenticity increases purchase intention compared to low FSE authenticity.

H5b: For high authenticity focused brands, there is no difference in cross FSEs displaying high or low levels of authenticity.

We next test our hypotheses in different contexts through a series of four studies.

### **3. Study 1**

We used the context of professional service providers to test our hypotheses regarding whether FSE authenticity and brand authenticity separately and/or jointly affect purchase intentions, as well as the process through which this occurs. Professional service providers such as personal trainers, hairdressers, and so forth are not just representatives of a larger brand, but are individuals who can legitimately offer a personalized image and unique value to their clients. Many of these individuals may work in or run small businesses — a context that is highly relevant, as the U.S. Census reported that over

3.4 million service firms with fewer than 10 employees operated in the United States in 2013 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).

We first tested the main and mediating effects of FSE authenticity, in the context of brand high or low focus on authenticity, on consumer intentions to purchase from a personal trainer. Personal trainers are professional service providers with whom customers can form a relationship, but they also work for and represent the brand of a larger firm (e.g. a gym). They are a service with which a broad consumer base is well acquainted. As such, personal trainers provide an ideal context for testing the above hypotheses.

### *3.2 Participants and design*

We recruited 222 respondents to participate in this study using Amazon's Mechanical Turk platform (MTurk) in exchange for monetary compensation. Eleven respondents failed attention checks, resulting in a final sample of 211 observations (43.1% female, median age = 34 years). This study followed a 2 (FSE authenticity: high vs. low)  $\times$  2 (brand authenticity: high vs. low) between-subjects factorial design.

### *3.1 Procedure*

This study manipulated perceptions of an individual's and a brand's authenticity through a written scenario about a personal trainer. Specifically, participants were asked to imagine that they had moved to a new city and wanted to find a local personal fitness trainer. A coworker, they were told, recommended Matthew Jones, a licensed personal trainer, who helped run a small business in the area named Mountainview Fitness Center. Respondents then read two consumer reviews, one about the individual service provider (Matthew Jones) that manipulated personal authenticity, and one about the brand (Mountainview Fitness Center) that manipulated brand authenticity.

Scenarios were written based on a qualitative pretest of 35 professional service providers and customers thereof that identified ways in which professional service providers and brands display authenticity. We therefore contrasted a high-authenticity brand with a brand that displays less internal consistency and does not conform as well to relevant social norms. Following past experimental manipulations of brand authenticity focus (Guèvremont & Grohmann, 2016; Morhart et

al., 2015), we held brand quality constant across manipulations. Complete manipulations for this study are found in Appendix A.

In the FSE high authenticity condition, respondents read that their coworker thought that Matthew Jones was a genuine person, that he talked about his family and hobbies, and that he was passionate about fitness. In the FSE low authenticity condition, respondents read that their coworker thought that Matthew Jones was very competent, tried to keep his professional and personal life separate, and was in his job to maximize his pension benefits rather than because of internal desires. All parts of the manipulation were created based on real examples and scenarios drawn from pretest interviews regarding consumers' experiences with high-authenticity and low-authenticity FSEs.

The brand high authenticity condition presented the fitness center as caring, generous, and passionate, whereas in the low authenticity condition, the fitness center was presented as having recent changes in directions and being profit-focused, but of high quality. Both manipulations were pretested using a sample of 88 participants from MTurk, which revealed greater perceived authenticity in the high authenticity than in the low authenticity condition for both the individual ( $\text{mean}_{\text{high}} = 5.86/7$ ,  $\text{mean}_{\text{low}} = 4.80/7$ ,  $F(1,86) = 23.005$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and brand ( $\text{mean}_{\text{high}} = 5.53/7$ ,  $\text{mean}_{\text{low}} = 4.35/7$ ,  $F(1,86) = 27.88$ ,  $p < .01$ ). It is worth noting that even in the low-authenticity condition, ratings of both the individual and company's authenticity were above the midpoint of a 7-point scale. This likely corresponds to consumers' expectations that people and companies are going to meet a minimum threshold of authenticity and trustworthiness.

After reading the descriptive text, participants were asked how likely they would be to use Matthew Jones' services (1 = Definitely would not use, 7 = Definitely would use). Respondents further answered questions about the perceived overlap between their perceptions of Matthew Jones and the company Mountainview Fitness Center using an established measure (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000). Since frontline employees are often seen as the face of their company and influence consumer perceptions of brands (Sirianni et al., 2013), it was important to identify this perceived degree of overlap. We measured perceived quality and trust through established scales previously used in authenticity research (Moulard et al., 2016). We measured liking of the provider through a 5-point semantic differential item from "like a lot" to "dislike a lot" (Bergkvist & Rossiter, 2007; Mitchell & Olson,

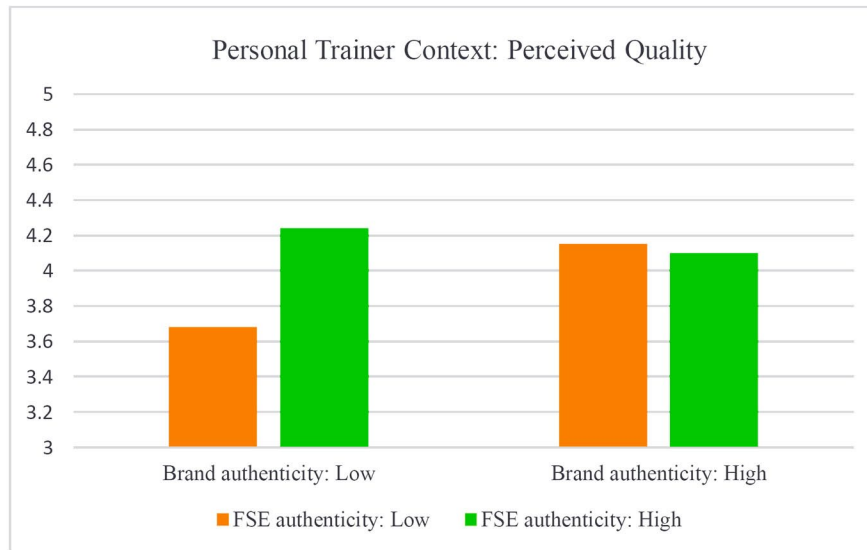
1981). Finally, we collected information about the respondent's gender and age. All multi-item scales were found to have alphas greater than 0.7. All items can be found in Appendix B.

### 3.3. Results and discussion

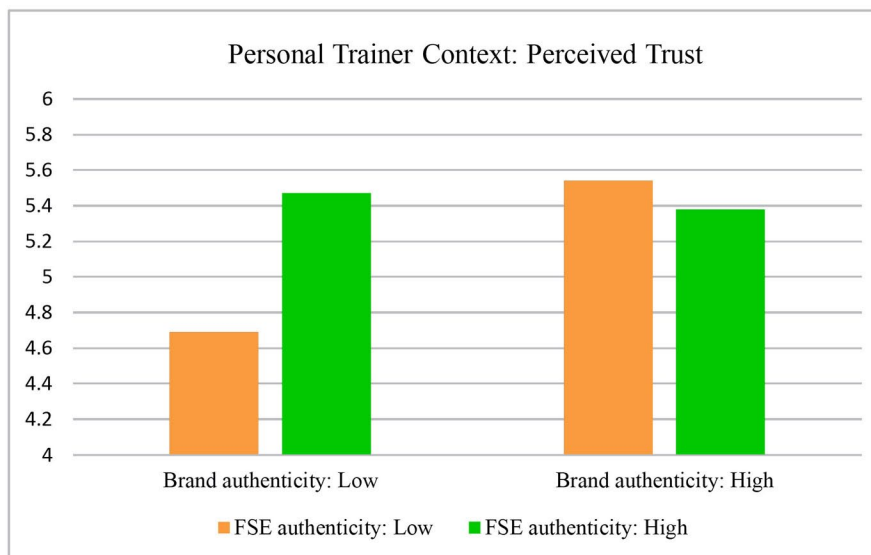
We analyzed this study using PROCESS Model 8 (Hayes, 2013). The model predicting purchase intentions is significant ( $F(9,201) = 15.25$ ,  $p < .01$ ). FSE authenticity has a positive direct effect on purchase intentions (Beta = 0.66, S.E. = 0.25,  $p < .01$ ), but its interaction with brand authenticity in this model is not significant ( $p > .10$ ). In contrast to past literature on authenticity, there is no evidence of a main effect of brand authenticity ( $p > .10$ ). The main effects of perceived quality (Beta = 0.39, S.E. = 0.15,  $p < .01$ ) and perceived trust (Beta = 0.45, S.E. = 0.10,  $p < .01$ ) on purchase intentions are positive and significant. However, liking of the provider did not separately affect purchase intentions ( $p > .10$ ), ruling it out as a possible mediator and failing to support hypothesis 4. We describe our examination of the possibility of mediation of quality and trust in the next paragraphs.

The model with perceived quality as the dependent variable is significant ( $F(6,204) = 4.10$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In this model, FSE authenticity has a positive main effect on perceived quality (Beta = 0.57, S.E. = 0.15,  $p < .01$ ). In addition, this effect is negatively moderated by a focus on brand authenticity (Beta = -0.62, S.E. = 0.21,  $p < .01$ ), shown in **Fig. 1**. In turn, perceived quality significantly mediates between FSE authenticity and purchase intentions when a brand has a low focus on authenticity (Effect = 0.23, Bootstrapped S.E. = 0.11, CI[0.06, 0.49]), but not when the brand has a high authenticity focus. Hypothesis 1 is thus fully supported, as FSE authenticity has a main effect and a mediated effect on purchase intent. The findings also support hypothesis 2, regarding the mediating role of quality perceptions, and hypotheses 5a and 5b, regarding the increased effect of FSE authenticity on purchase intentions for lower authenticity brands, but no effect when the brand has an authenticity focus.

We similarly examined the mediating role of perceived trust. The model with perceived trust as the dependent variable is statistically significant ( $F(6,204) = 4.28$ ,  $p < .01$ ). As expected, FSE authenticity has a positive main effect on perceived trust (Beta = 0.79, S.E. = 0.22,  $p < .01$ ). This interaction effect is negatively moderated by brand



**Fig. 1.** Perceived quality of personal trainer, across conditions of high/low FSE and brand authenticity.



**Fig. 2.** Trust in personal trainer, across conditions of high/low FSE and brand authenticity.

authenticity, as shown in **Fig. 2** (Beta =  $-0.97$ , S.E. =  $.31$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In turn, the mediating effect for FSE authenticity on purchase intentions through trust is positive and significant for a low-authenticity brand (Effect =  $0.36$ , Bootstrapped S.E. =  $0.14$ , CI[ $0.14$ ,  $0.70$ ]) but not when

the brand emphasizes authenticity, further supporting hypotheses 1, 5a, and 5b, and also supporting hypothesis 3 regarding the role of trust as a mediator.

Overall, these findings provide support for the substitutionary hypothesis regarding the interaction of brand and FSE authenticity put forward earlier in this paper. The fact that FSE authenticity rather than brand authenticity was a strong predictor of purchase intentions is especially of note given the literature's historical emphasis on brand authenticity (Napoli et al., 2014). It is therefore important to verify that these same patterns of effects occur in other contexts, and under different styles of desired consumer relationships. We thus next tested the same model in a new context: hair salons.

#### **4. Study 2**

It is important to extend our understanding of the importance of personal authenticity by testing it across contexts of relationship styles that consumers have with providers as well as across industries. While some consumers desire to have a purely professional, transaction-based working relationship with a service provider (exchange relationship style), other consumers desire to build personal friendships with their providers (communal relationship style) (Aggarwal, 2004; Clark & Mills, 1979, 1993). One might expect that individuals who desire a friendship-based type of relationship would more greatly value FSE authenticity, whereas individuals who desire a more transactional approach would place less importance on authenticity. It is therefore important to test whether the effects of FSE authenticity occur in both exchange and communal type relationships, and whether these effects are different.

This study thus manipulates FSE authenticity, brand authenticity, and the type of relationship desired by the consumer (communal or exchange). We use the context of hair salons and barbershops for this study, as some consumers prefer to build long-term relationships with their hairdresser or barber, while others simply want to relax and not engage with the provider more than necessary (McCloskey, 2014). This study therefore serves as both an extension to another experiential service context, and also assesses the importance of FSE authenticity across multiple types of relationships.

#### 4.1 *Participants and design*

Two hundred forty-five respondents were recruited to participate in this study using MTurk in exchange for monetary compensation. Eighteen respondents failed attention checks, resulting in a final sample of 227 observations (44% female, median age = 34 years). This study followed a 2 (FSE authenticity: high vs. low)  $\times$  2 (brand authenticity: high vs. low)  $\times$  2 (type of relationship: exchange vs. communal) between-subjects factorial design.

#### 4.2 *Procedure*

Similar to the previous study, respondents were told that they were moving to a new city and were looking for a new hairdresser or barber. The respondents then received information manipulating whether they were seeking an exchange or communal relationship with the provider. Specifically, respondents were asked to imagine that their previous hairdresser/barber had maintained a very businesslike relationship with them (exchange), or was someone they had a good personal friendship with (communal), and that they wanted to find a new service provider who would also relate to them in this manner. The rest of the manipulations for the study were adapted to be as similar to the previous study as possible. As in study 1, respondents then indicated how likely they were to use the hairdresser's service. Perceived overlap, perceived quality, perceived trust, and liking were also measured using the same items from the previous studies, and all alphas were greater than 0.7. Finally, we collected information about the respondent's gender and age.

#### 4.3 *Results and discussion*

We first tested for a three-way interaction between personal authenticity, brand authenticity, and the type of relationship the consumer was seeking. No main effects of relationship type were identified on purchase intentions, perceived quality, trust, or liking, and no interactions with this variable were significant in any models tested (all  $p > .10$ ). Therefore, we did not find evidence that our effects differ based on the type of relationship the respondent is seeking with the provider, and we can conclude that effects of FSE authenticity on

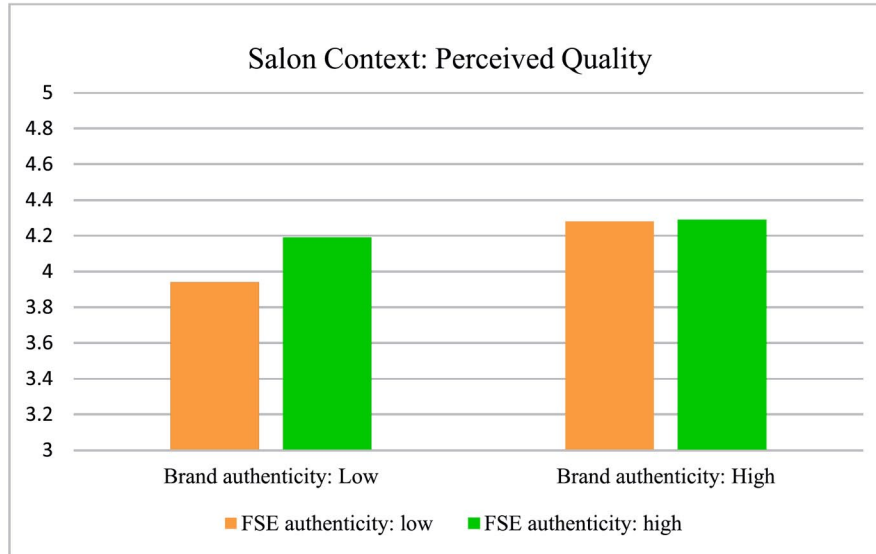


purchase intent likely generalize across both exchange-oriented and friendship-oriented customer relationships with service providers. We can also discount relationship type as a possible alternative explanation for our findings and support our initial hypotheses that FSE authenticity is a key driver of consumer behavior.

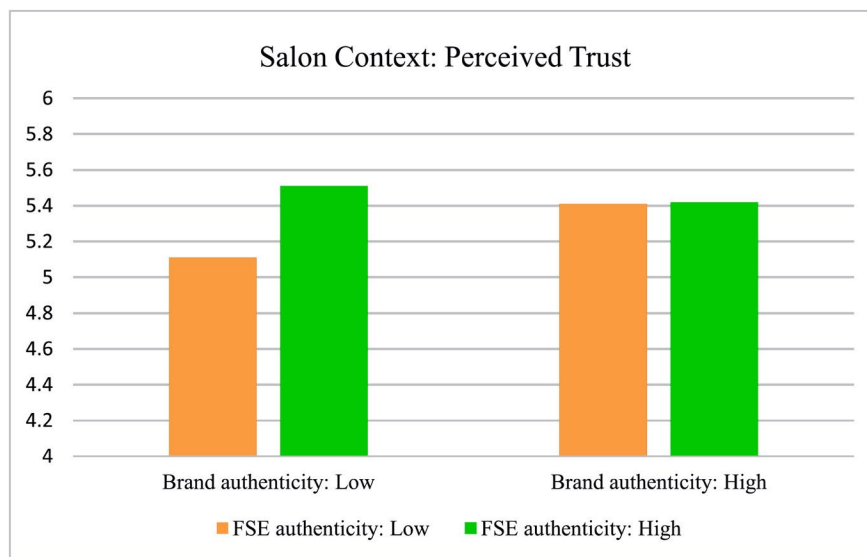
Next, we ran a replication analysis of our original model in this new hairdresser/barber context. Given the nonsignificant differences in effects across relationship norm types, we collapsed the data across the exchange and communal conditions for the rest of the analysis. We analyzed this study using PROCESS Model 8. The model with purchase intentions is significant ( $F(9,217) = 10.62, p < .01$ ). In this model, we did not find evidence for a direct effect of FSE personal authenticity or its interaction with brand authenticity on purchase intent (all  $p > .10$ ). Further, the effect of liking of the provider was nonsignificant ( $p > .10$ ), failing to support hypothesis 4. However, we did find significant main positive effects for both perceived quality (Beta = 0.17, S.E. = 0.05,  $p < .01$ ) and perceived trust (Beta = 0.12, S.E. = 0.03,  $p < .01$ ). We therefore next tested for potential mediation effects of quality and trust.

The model with perceived quality as the dependent variable is significant ( $F(6,220) = 2.43, p < .05$ ): FSE authenticity has a positive main effect on perceived quality (Beta = 0.75, S.E. = 0.38,  $p = .05$ ). Brand authenticity also had a positive, significant impact on quality (Beta = 0.96, S.E. = 0.39,  $p < .05$ ). The interaction of brand and FSE authenticity was not significant ( $p > .10$ ), but we find that the effect of FSE authenticity on purchase intentions is only mediated through perceived quality in the low brand authenticity condition (Effect = 0.12, Bootstrapped S.E. = 0.08, CI[0.00, 0.30]). That is, while the effect of FSE authenticity is not statistically different across the two brand authenticity conditions in the perceived quality model, its effect on purchase intentions is still positive and different from zero in the low brand authenticity condition ( $p = .05$ ) but not in the high brand authenticity condition ( $p > .10$ ). This effect is shown in **Fig. 3**. Hypothesis 1 is thus partially supported, as FSE authenticity conditionally impacts purchase intent. Hypothesis 2 regarding the mediation of quality is also supported, as are hypotheses 5a and 5b, regarding the substitutionary interaction between FSE and brand authenticity.

Next, we examined the mediating role of perceived trust. The model with perceived trust as the dependent variable is significant ( $F(6,220) = 4.00, p < .01$ ) and FSE authenticity has a positive main effect on perceived trust (Beta = 0.41 S.E. = 0.18,  $p < .05$ ). However, the interaction



**Fig. 3.** Perceived quality of hairdresser, across conditions of high/low FSE and brand authenticity.



**Fig. 4.** Trust in hairdresser: across conditions of high/low FSE and brand authenticity.

between FSE and brand authenticity on trust is not significant (Beta =  $-0.39$ , S.E. =  $0.26$ ,  $p > .10$ ). Similar to perceived quality, perceived trust acts as a mediator of personal authenticity on purchase intentions for less authentic brands (Effect =  $0.16$ , Bootstrapped S.E. =  $0.08$ , CI[ $0.03$ ,  $0.37$ ]) but not for more authentic brands, as shown in **Fig. 4**. These findings support hypothesis 3 (trust mediation) and provide further support for hypotheses 1, 5a, and 5b.

Overall, this study replicates the findings from Study 1 in a different setting. It seems that in these two contexts, the brand is the first source of authenticity that consumers look for to establish their perceptions of trust and quality, and only when it is not found there do consumers turn to the FSE as a source of authenticity. However, both of these service contexts can be classified as experience products: products where the quality of the service can be assessed after the service is performed (Darby & Karni, 1973; Nelson, 1970). In these studies, consumers can tell whether they like a haircut after it has been completed and know whether they feel like they got a good workout after a personal training session. Having identified the differential importance of FSE authenticity in different brand contexts in experience services, it is important to test this effect in credence-based service contexts: services wherein quality cannot be assessed even after use (e.g. medical services) (Darby & Karni, 1973).

### **5. Study 3**

The objective of this study is to replicate the findings from previous studies in a new credence service context of medical doctors. Credence services are seen as having more inherent risk than experience services, though consumers attempt to mitigate the uncertainty inherent these services by focusing on intangible brand attributes (Ding & Keh, 2017; Sun, Keh, & Lee, 2012). Trust, perceived quality, and liking of a physician, as intangible attributes, may therefore prove more important in credence than experience level services, leading to a stronger and more important role of FSE authenticity as a potential driver of these mediators in credence contexts.

Medical services are a context in which both the reputation of the company (practice) and of the provider (doctor) may influence whether consumers use the service, thus providing us with an opportunity to examine the effect of FSE authenticity when a brand is more or less authentic. Further, medical doctors provide a credence-based service, as it is very difficult for customers to assess their doctor's relative ability and quality (Zeithaml et al., 2009). By examining the effects of FSE authenticity in a credence based and highly specialized service, we can extend our discussion of when and how FSE authenticity impacts purchase intentions for service providers.

### 5.1 *Participants and design*

For this purpose, we recruited 149 respondents for this study using MTurk in exchange for monetary compensation. Twenty-nine respondents failed attention checks, resulting in a final sample of 120 observations (48% female, median age = 35.5 years). Similar to previous studies, this study followed a 2 (FSE authenticity: high vs. low)  $\times$  2 (brand authenticity: high vs. low) between-subjects factorial design.

### 5.2 *Procedure*

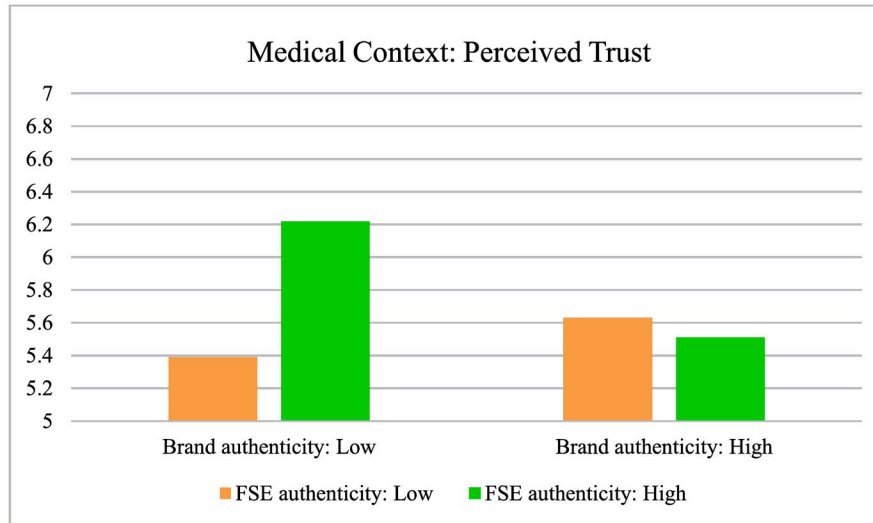
FSE and brand authenticity were manipulated in a similar manner to studies 1 and 2. A separate pretest of 59 MTurk panel respondents showed that the manipulations worked: higher authenticity was perceived in the high than in the low authenticity conditions for both the doctor (mean<sub>high</sub> = 5.61/7, mean<sub>low</sub> = 4.93/7,  $F(1,57) = 6.03, p < .05$ ), and medical practice (mean<sub>high</sub> = 5.22/7, mean<sub>low</sub> = 4.33/7,  $F(1,56) = 8.36, p < .01$ ).

We then measured the extent to which respondents, based on these reviews, were likely to use the provider's services (1 = Would definitely not use, 7 = Would definitely use), in a manner consistent with previous studies. As before, we also measured perceived quality, trust, liking of the provider, perceived doctor-firm overlap, and respondent gender and age. As before, all alphas were greater than 0.7.

### 5.3 *Results and discussion*

We analyzed this study using PROCESS Model 8. The model with purchase intentions is significant ( $F(9,110) = 9.32, p < .01$ ). FSE authenticity has a positive direct effect on purchase intentions (Beta = 0.86, S.E. = 0.31,  $p < .01$ ), supporting hypothesis 1. The interaction with brand authenticity, however, is not significant ( $p > .10$ ).

The main effect for perceived trust (Beta = 0.40, S.E. = 0.13,  $p < .01$ ) is positive and significant. In addition, liking of the provider has a significant positive impact on purchase intentions (Beta = 0.28, S.E. = 0.08,  $p < .01$ ). Interestingly, the main effect of perceived quality (Beta = 0.17, S.E. = 0.17,  $p > .10$ ) is not significant, thus ruling out perceived quality as a mediating mechanism and failing to support hypothesis 2 regarding quality as a mediator of FSE authenticity in this study. The



**Fig. 5.** Trust in doctor, across conditions of high/low FSE and brand authenticity.

mean of perceived quality was a high 4.2/5 (S.D. = 0.75), possibly indicating that the strong educational background needed to achieve a medical degree reduced consumer perceived variation in quality.

To investigate mediation, we examined the roles of perceived trust and liking. The model with perceived trust as the dependent variable is significant ( $F(6,113) = 2.48, p < .05$ ). As shown in **Fig. 5**, FSE authenticity has a positive main effect on perceived trust (Beta = 0.81 S.E. = 0.27,  $p < .01$ ) that is negatively moderated by brand authenticity (Beta = -0.94, S.E. = 0.37,  $p < .05$ ). In turn, perceived trust mediates between personal authenticity and purchase intentions for lower-authenticity brands (Effect = 0.32, Bootstrapped S.E. = 0.15, CI [0.08, 0.66]) but not higher-authenticity brands. These results support hypotheses 2, 5a and 5b, providing further evidence that FSE authenticity serves as an effective substitute for brand authenticity. However, the model predicting liking failed to indicate that FSE authenticity, brand authenticity, or their interaction impacted liking of the FSE (all  $p > .10$ ), failing to support Hypothesis 4.

This study thus successfully replicated in a medical (credence) context several of the findings from earlier studies: FSE authenticity positively impacted consumer purchase intentions by enhancing trust, and these effects were stronger in conditions when a brand was seen as less authentic. The lack of quality as a significant mediator may indicate that in service contexts where quality is either perceived to be

universally high, or where quality is difficult for consumers to ascertain (i.e. credence services), authenticity does not drive quality perceptions, and consumers may be attentive to different cues. Further, it appears that while liking of the provider is important to purchase intentions in a credence context, it does not appear to be a mediator of FSE authenticity.

Finally, we extend our research to a new low-knowledge context. Consumers sometimes have to search for and choose providers in areas about which they have little knowledge. In these contexts, consumers are more likely to use heuristics (Bettman & Park, 1980; Sujan, 1985) rather than to actively analyze brand information. Consumers may therefore be less sensitive to differences in and relative importance of brand and FSE authenticity in these industries. To test this, we conducted our last study in a context where participants had relatively low average knowledge: the financial planning industry.

## **6. Study 4**

The objective of this study is to examine the role of FSE authenticity and brand authenticity in consumer purchase intentions in a low consumer knowledge context. We chose the context of financial planners for this study, as we discovered through a pretest that students have relatively low familiarity with this important industry.

### *6.1 Participants and design*

Three hundred eighteen undergraduate students at a Southeastern public university were recruited to participate in this study. Of these, 61 failed attention checks or had missing data, resulting in a final sample size of 257. This study followed a 2 (FSE authenticity: high vs. low)  $\times$  2 (brand authenticity: high vs. low) between-subjects factorial design.

### *6.2 Procedure*

In line with the previous studies, respondents read instructions asking them to imagine that they moved to a new city and were looking

for a local financial planner. In addition, respondents were asked to rate their overall familiarity with the financial planning industry. As expected, average familiarity was relatively low: 2.9/5, or slightly less than the midpoint.

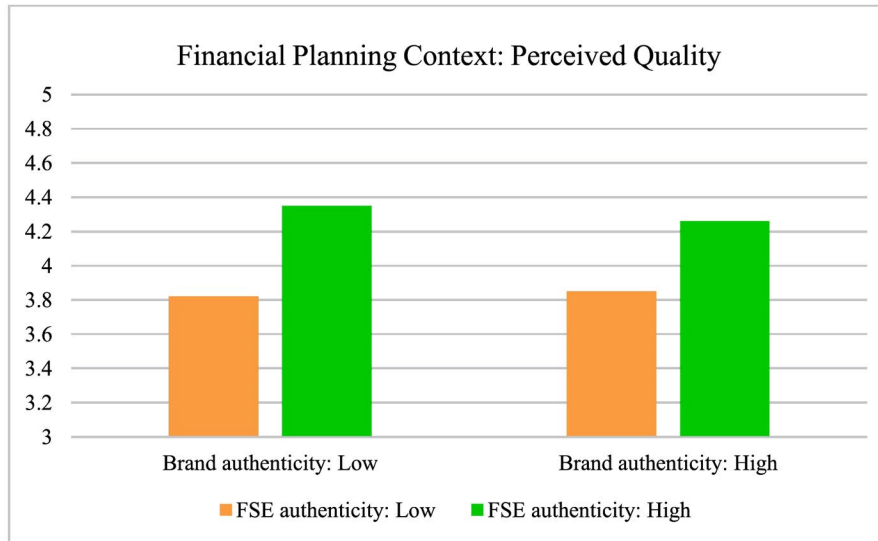
Manipulations were created to be as similar as possible to those in previous studies. The manipulations were successful: more authenticity was perceived in the high authenticity than the low authenticity condition for both the financial planner (mean = 5.48/7, mean low = 4.59/7,  $F(1,255) = 48.7, p < .01$ ), and the brand (mean<sub>high</sub> = 5.20/7, mean<sub>low</sub> = 4.76/7,  $F(1,255) = 37.8, p < .01$ ). All other measures were identical from previous studies, and all alphas were higher than 0.7.

### 6.3. Results and discussion

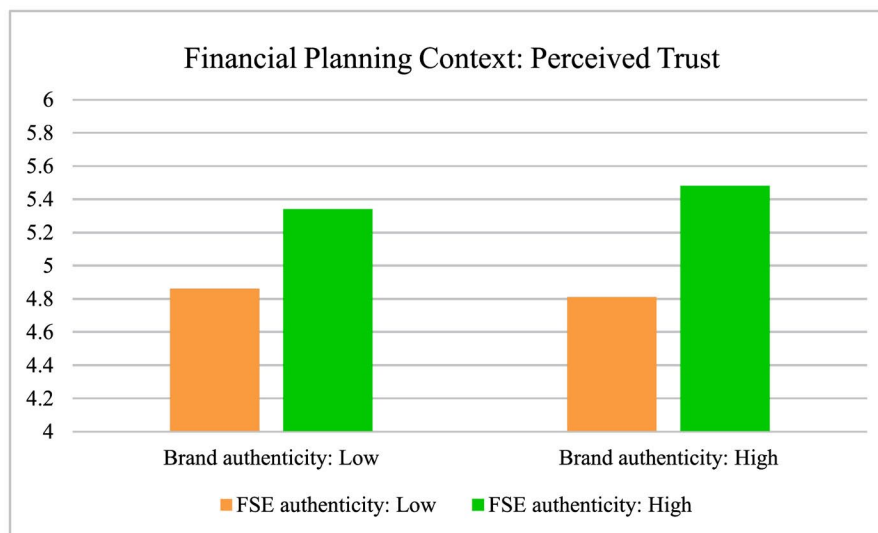
We analyzed this study using PROCESS Model 8. The model predicting purchase intentions is significant ( $F(9, 247) = 31.57, p < .01$ ). A positive main effect of FSE authenticity was found on purchase intentions (Beta = 0.31, S.E. = 0.18,  $p = .09$ ). Quality and trust both had significant positive main effects on purchase intentions (Beta<sub>Quality</sub> = 0.73, SE = 0.10,  $p < .01$ ; Beta<sub>Trust</sub> = 0.42, S.E. = 0.07,  $p < .01$ ), and liking of the provider had a marginally significant effect on purchase intent (Beta = 0.12,  $p = .07, p = .08$ ).

The model with perceived quality as the dependent variable is significant ( $F(6,250) = 7.75, p < .01$ ). FSE authenticity increased perceived quality of the financial planner (Beta = 0.53, S.E. = 0.13,  $p < .01$ ), but no effects of brand authenticity or the interaction term between these was found ( $p > .10$ ). Similar results were found for the model of trust, which was significant ( $F(6, 250) = 6.92, p < .01$ ). FSE authenticity increased trust in the financial planner (Beta = 0.90, S.E. = 0.19,  $p < .01$ ), but no effects were found for either brand authenticity or the interaction term between these ( $p > .10$ ). These effects are shown in **Figs. 6 and 7**.

In this low-familiarity context, the model with provider liking is significant ( $F(6, 250) = 2.88, p < .01$ ), and FSE authenticity enhances liking of the provider (Beta = 0.40, S.E. = 0.18,  $p < .05$ ), while brand authenticity and their interaction do not ( $p > .10$ ). This effect is shown in **Fig. 8**. Further, a conditional mediation is found for provider liking, such that FSE authenticity enhances purchase intentions



**Fig. 6.** Perceived quality of financial planner, across conditions of high/low FSE and brand authenticity.

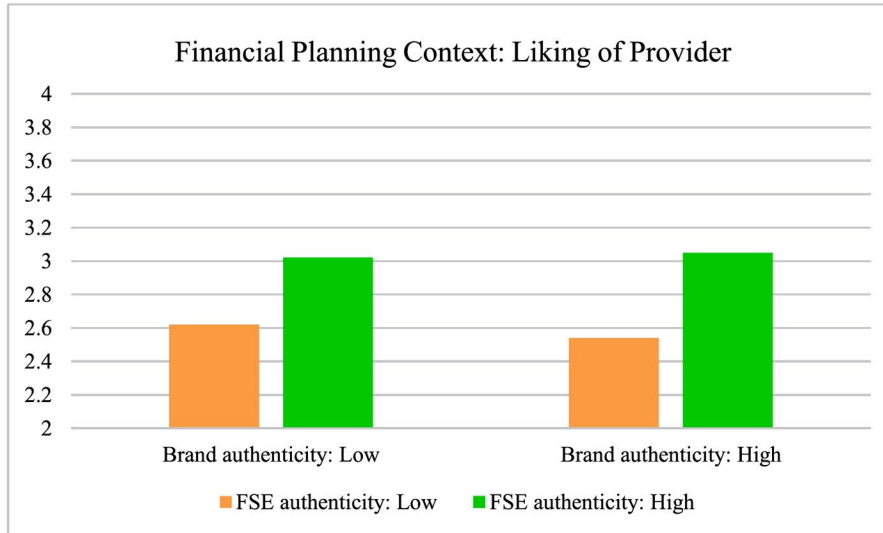


**Fig. 7.** Trust in financial planner, across conditions of high/low FSE and brand authenticity.

by increasing provider liking in high brand authenticity conditions (Beta = 0.06, Bootstrapped S.E. = 0.04, CI[0.003, 0.147]), but not in low brand authenticity conditions.

Taken together, this study supports hypotheses 1, 2, and 3, as the effect of FSE authenticity on purchase intentions is positive and partially mediated through perceived quality and trust regardless of





**Fig. 8.** Liking of financial planner, across conditions of high/low FSE and brand authenticity.

brand authenticity (Quality Effect  $B_{low} = 0.39$ , Bootstrapped S.E. = 0.12,

CI [0.17, 0.65]; Quality Effect  $B_{high} = 0.30$ , Bootstrapped S.E. = 0.10, CI [0.13, 0.51]; Trust Effect  $B_{low} = 0.38$ , Bootstrapped S.E. = 0.10, CI [0.19, 0.61]; Trust Effect  $B_{high} = 0.19$ , Bootstrapped S.E. = 0.09, CI [0.04, 0.37]). In addition, hypothesis 4 is partially supported in this low-knowledge context, as liking of the provider also mediates the effects of FSE authenticity for high-authenticity brands. However, we fail to support hypotheses 5a and 5b in this study, as brand authenticity perceptions do not change the effect of FSE authenticity on purchase intentions.

This experiment thus both supports and adds nuance to our previous findings. It appears that the FSE, rather than the brand, is the primary driver of purchase intentions in this context. Personal authenticity has a perceptions do not change the effect of FSE authenticity on purchase intentions.

This experiment thus both supports and adds nuance to our previous findings. It appears that the FSE, rather than the brand, is the primary driver of purchase intentions in this context. Personal authenticity has a strong direct effect and mediated effects through trust, perceived quality, and liking, which may reflect the high stakes and

low industry knowledge relevant in this context: if a consumer is giving control of their finances to someone else, personal characteristics of the FSE appear to be far more salient than characteristics of a brand and its image. In addition, a lack of context knowledge may drive consumers to place more importance on general heuristics such as liking of the provider, especially due to a match between the provider's personality and the brand's positioning (Sirianni et al., 2013). In low-knowledge contexts, then, showing that a provider is a good representative of an authentic brand may increase consumer purchase intentions beyond the previously identified effects of FSE authenticity through trust and quality.

## **7. General discussion**

The objective of this research was to examine the role of FSE authenticity on consumer purchase intentions across different service contexts. In four studies, we find that FSEs who display high levels of authenticity generate higher purchase intentions for their services than do less authentic – but still high quality – FSEs. Further, we find that this effect is stronger for low-authenticity brands when consumers are relatively familiar with the industry. Across experience and credence services, multiple types of desired consumer relationships, and amount of industry knowledge, FSE authenticity helps generate trust for low authenticity but not high-authenticity service brands. FSE authenticity also improves quality perceptions for low-authenticity experience service brands and both high and low-authenticity brands in low-knowledge credence contexts. Finally, FSE authenticity only appears to impact liking of a provider in low-knowledge contexts when the provider is associated with an authentic brand.

### *7.1 Theoretical contributions*

This paper is the first to examine the impact of FSE personal authenticity on consumer purchase intentions for service providers while controlling for brand authenticity. We contribute to the business literature by identifying the importance of FSE authenticity at different levels of perceived brand authenticity, identifying the process through

which FSE authenticity operates, and testing the effects in a range of service contexts.

A key theoretical implication of this research is the need to separately investigate FSE authenticity and brand authenticity. In contrast to past findings, having an authentic brand did not strongly drive purchase intentions for service providers. It appears that when an individual provider is the primary driver of purchase decisions, it does not add high value for a brand to also emphasize its authenticity. Indeed, a service provider's authenticity was generally given more weight and resulted in greater purchase intentions for brands that were seen as less authentic. This may be because individuals who position themselves as being authentic, when their brand does not, inherently show greater intrinsic motivation than individuals whose brands stand for authenticity.

Our findings also extend the literature on authenticity into a new and important context of service providers, and we find that professional service provision serves as a boundary condition for the effects of brand authenticity. Specifically, this study finds that FSE authenticity tends to be a stronger driver of purchase intentions than is brand authenticity for professional service providers, indicating that FSE authenticity rather than brand authenticity may be a preferred way for service brands to provide unique consumer value.

Moreover, the present study extends the literature that examines the role of FSEs in generating an attractive service. Prior studies have shown that cues from an FSE, such as needs knowledge or emotional labor (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006; Homburg et al., 2009), are important drivers of consumers' perceptions of services. FSE authenticity is an intangible cue that FSEs can send to consumers to help build both trust and perceived quality of their service.

## *7.2. Managerial implication*

The importance of authenticity to service providers is widely discussed in the practitioner literature. However, this paper is the first to give providers clear direction as to how different types of perceived authenticity impact consumer perceptions and intentions. First, providers should recognize that FSE authenticity is important to their clients apart from brand authenticity, that it may drive repurchase of

their services, and that this effect is especially strong if their firm's brand does not already emphasize authenticity. Further, for brands that do not emphasize authenticity, brand managers should recognize that FSE authenticity can help increase trust and perceived quality of the services provided by the brand. While many providers are concerned about how to build their brand authenticity, this research suggests that focusing on encouraging FSE authenticity may be an equally or more impactful strategy for long-term success.

Further, managers should recognize the interplay between brand authenticity and FSE authenticity in different service contexts. Brand managers of experience services should recognize the continued importance of brand authenticity to their consumers: having a highly authentic brand resulted in generally high trust and perceived quality of the service regardless of FSE authenticity in these cases. However, for experience service brands that are unable or choose not to position themselves as being highly authentic, FSE authenticity serves as an equally effective means of increasing consumer purchase intentions by enhancing trust and quality of the service.

Brand managers of credence services, in contrast, should recognize the high importance of FSE authenticity regardless of their corporate brand's positioning. The results of this research indicate that medical services, and similar credence level services that are high-risk to the consumer, may not desire to focus on authenticity in their corporate branding strategy. Other positioning strategies, such as competence and quality, may be necessary for consumers to trust the services they provide. Once assured of this competence, however, consumers may respond more favorably to authenticity offered by individual FSEs — and through them, to the brand. It is even possible that FSE authenticity might improve a brand's own authenticity perceptions over time (Wentzel, 2009), though empirical work is needed to test this hypothesis. Credence brand managers and managers of lower-authenticity experience brands might therefore encourage FSEs to express their passions, background, and unique selves with customers, even if this reduces conformity to brand positioning.

Managers can foster authentic FSE behavior through training by deemphasizing corporate brand identification and instead emphasizing the development of FSEs' unique passions, helping them identify authentic reasons that they can enjoy their work, with the explicit

intentions of encouraging them to build trust with consumers. Moreover, managers should empower FSEs (Bowen & Lawler III, 1992) to identify their own unique style of brand service and emphasize general rather than specific codes of conduct and professional norms when possible. For instance, managers might instruct employees to be “friendly” but not mandate specific verbal scripts to follow. Such empowering practices should allow FSEs the flexibility to implement brand policy in ways that are true to themselves.

### *7.3. Limitations and future research*

This research provides a first stepping stone to addressing the knowledge gap on how FSE authenticity affects consumer outcomes given brand positioning differences. As such, there is much room for future research to be done. While this research identified similar effects across different contexts (e.g. personal training, hair styling, physicians, financial planning), contextual differences regarding the impact of personal authenticity on purchase intent were also identified. It will be important for future research to investigate additional context effects to increase this study’s generalizability and help providers understand the specific impact of personal authenticity in their field. Other research could be done using field experiments, longitudinal studies, and other natural settings to investigate how consumers use authenticity both in initial and repeat purchase decisions. Further, this research manipulated levels of perceived authenticity, but did not investigate severe “inauthenticity” or service failure. Future research could investigate the dark side of attempting to maintain an authentic presence. For instance, research could address how an authenticity focus mitigates or exacerbates service failure or scandal.

Finally, there is a great deal of room for future research to examine how service providers can build perceptions of their own personal authenticity. This study used manipulations of intrinsic motivation and sincerity of values in a service context, created using data from open-ended interviews with consumers regarding how they view authentic providers. However, many different variables such as communication style, humor, rule-breaking, perceptions of attribution, and helping behavior might also increase consumer perceptions of personal authenticity. Future research could investigate these, as well as

other, potential drivers of personal authenticity and their impact on consumer behavior.

The importance of perceived authenticity of brands and service providers to consumers has been widely recognized but not well understood. This paper begins to address this managerial problem and contributes to theory on authenticity, branding, and FSE positioning across four experiments in different services contexts. While much research still needs to be done to understand the role of perceived authenticity in brand success for services firms, this paper takes an initial and significant step forward in addressing these issues.

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## Appendix A. Authenticity manipulations for personal trainer context

### Introduction

Please imagine that you have taken a job in a new city. Please further imagine that you have a specific goal of losing 15 lb, and are looking to find a local personal fitness trainer to help you achieve this fitness goal. One of your new coworkers recommends Matthew Jones, a licensed personal trainer, who helps run a small business in the area named Mountainview Fitness Center. Based on your friend's recommendation, you look online and find the following entry on a consumer review website.

MOUNTAINVIEW FITNESS CENTER: Overall rating 4.2/5 stars (68 reviews). Specific ratings: Service quality: 4.5/5 stars. Professionalism: 4.2/5 stars. Facilities: 4.4/5 stars. Ease of access: 4.3/5 stars. Matthew Jones, licensed personal trainer: 4.3/5 stars. Inga Bilken, licensed personal trainer: 4.4/5 stars. Nicole Williams, licensed personal trainer: 4.2/5 stars. Thomas Prince, licensed personal trainer: 4.3/5 stars.

### FSE high-authenticity condition

*When you ask your friend more about Matthew Jones as a person, they tell you the following:*

"I love training with Matthew Jones. He's an absolutely genuine person. I've been training with him for three years now, and he's a great trainer. I lost twenty-five pounds with his help! I admit, I was a little concerned at first; he seems more like a normal person than like a licensed personal trainer. I mean, he talks with his clients about his family, sports, religion, politics. I bet he acts exactly the same way in the training center as he does when he's out with her friends - he really wears his heart on his sleeve. It might offend some people, but it's because he thinks it's important for his clients to know who he really is. I don't think he'll retire any time soon - he really loves his work and is passionate about fitness. So he'll be around, and I would really recommend him to anyone looking to meet specific weight loss goals."

### FSE low-authenticity condition

*When you ask your friend more about Matthew Jones as a person, they tell you the following:*

"I love training with Matthew Jones. He's an absolutely professional person. I've been training with him for three years now, and he's a great trainer. I lost twenty-five pounds with his help! I admit, I was a little concerned at first; he is pretty closed about himself, his family, anything other than my specific fitness issue at hand. I even saw him once out at the shopping center, and when I tried to talk to him, he acted like we didn't know each other at all. But when I asked him the next time I had a training session, he told me that he keeps his personal and professional selves completely separate for business reasons, so that's fine. I don't think he'll retire any time soon - he has said he isn't enjoying personal training as much as he used to, but that he has to stay at least another fifteen years in order to maximize his pension benefits. So he'll be around, and I would really recommend him to anyone looking to meet specific weight loss goals."

**Brand high-authenticity condition**

*When you ask your friend more about Mountainview Fitness Center, they tell you the following:*

“Mountainview Fitness Center is really good, as much as any small fitness center can be. The firm is really passionate about its values – caring, generosity, transparency, and excellence. It knows what it stands for and it tries to make sure its employees always act like it. I would say the company itself really cares about the community and health outcomes. They provide high quality service overall: I’d say about an eight out of ten. Personally, they’ve helped me lose a lot of weight and keep it off, so I’m happy.”

**Brand low-authenticity condition**

*When you ask your friend more about Mountainview Fitness Center, they tell you the following:*

“Mountainview Fitness Center is really good, as much as any small fitness center can be. They’ve had some changes in direction recently – I think they’ve changed their values statement two or three times, and I don’t think anyone there really knows what the company stands for except earning money. But that said, they provide high quality service overall: I’d say about an eight out of ten. Personally, they’ve helped me lose a lot of weight and keep it off, so I’m happy.”

**Appendix B. Measures used in studies 1-4**

Construct	Measurement scale	Items
Purchase intentions	7-point rating scale (adapted from Mitchell & Olson, 1981)	How likely would you be to use this provider's services? 1 = Would definitely not use/ 7 = Would definitely use
Trust in provider	7-point Likert-type scale (Moulard et al., 2016)	1. I trust [PERSON]. 2. I could rely on [PERSON]. 3. [PERSON] is an honest person.
Expected level of service quality	5-point bipolar scales (Moulard et al., 2016)	Overall, what is the level of service quality you would expect to receive from [PERSON]? 1. Extremely poor/extremely good. 2. Awful/excellent. 3. Very low/very high
Overlap between perceptions of the person and brand	5-point graphic rating scale (adapted from Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000)	Please imagine that one of these circles represents [PERSON, e.g. Matthew Jones] and the other represents [BRAND, e.g. Mountainview Fitness Center]. Please indicate which set of circles best represents the amount of overlap between your perceptions of [PERSON] and your perceptions of [BRAND].
Liking of provider	5-point bipolar scale (adapted from Mitchell & Olson, 1981)	Please indicate your attitude toward [PERSON]. Like very much/Dislike very much.
Age	Open-ended numeric	In what year were you born? (YYYY)
Gender	Nominal	What is your gender? M/F/Other