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Perceived Employee's Authenticity - What Is It? How Can It Be Measured? Does It Affect Customer Behavior?

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Customers increasingly demand authenticity in the behavior they experience. Past research focuses on employee's self-reported authenticity and employee's authentic emotional display. Due to the rising need for authenticity in consumption processes, the present study aims to conceptualize and operationalize the customer's perception of authentic employees.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The concept of customer's perceived authenticity is intensively discussed in the marketing literature and is termed as "one cornerstone of contemporary marketing" (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003, p. 21). Past research focuses on authenticity within the brand arena (e.g., Napoli et al. 2014), employee's self-reported authenticity (e.g., Ashforth and Tomiuk 2000), and employee's authentic emotional display (e.g., Grandey et al. 2005). Only a few studies have investigated the customer perspective of employee authenticity so far (Sirianni et al. 2013; Yagil 2014), whereby the exact nature and dimensional structure of the construct have been largely ignored. To the best of the authors' knowledge, no holistic conceptualization and operationalization of customer's perceived employee's authenticity exists. Due to the rising need for authenticity in consumption processes, a comprehensive examination of customer's perceived employee's authenticity (PEA) is a research topic that demands further attention. This is emphasized by the subjectivity of service evaluations due to the *uno actu* principle and the immaterial nature of services, since no objective quality criteria (e.g., durability, workmanship) can be drawn on. Therefore, customer employee interactions serve as a surrogate measure for quality constituting a crucial success factor. The fact that individuals' perceptions of each other are the basis of social interactions (Fiske et al. 1987), and thus of positive service experiences, highlights the importance of investigating the underlying mechanisms that affect customers' perceptions of employees. Thus, a comprehensive understanding of how customers perceive authentic employees would provide relevant insights into customers' perceptual processes and help to explain behavioral outcomes of service interactions for the purpose of improving service encounters.

To fill this research gap, the present study aims to conceptualize the customer's perception of authentic employees as well as to develop a PEA scale and analyze it. Therefore, the following steps are implemented: First, by building on relevant findings drawn from the social cognition literature, a theoretical framework is developed. Second, to integrate the customer's conceptions of authentic employees, two qualitative studies (Study 1, N=66; Study 2, N=34) are conducted along with a literature review. Third, building on these findings, items covering the identified dimensions are generated. In Study 3 (N=216), an exploratory factor analysis is implemented to determine the dimensionality of the scale. In Study 4 (N=303), using a shorter scale and a new sample of individuals, exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses are used to further determine the dimensionality of the scale. Additionally, the scale's distinctiveness from relevant service constructs is shown, whereby discriminant validity is examined. Moreover, multigroup confirmatory factor analyses test measurement invariance of the PEA scale across samples and gender (Study 5, N=385). Fourth, using a role-playing experimental design, it is analyzed when and how PEA predicts customer outcomes (Study 6, N=435). This method allows us to investigate the direct and indirect impacts of PEA on customer outcomes, as well as the moderating effects of customer-specific characteristics.

Employee perceptions arise in a variety of settings and forms when customers interact with service employees. Accordingly, PEA is conceptualized as a subjective concept that involves variant and invariant aspects of an employee's behavior, appearance, and per-

sonality, which characterize his or her role identity as an employee as well as his or her personal identity. The present investigation demonstrates that PEA can be broken down into four dimensions (i.e., working passion, naturalness, advisory skills, and need orientation). The constructed PEA scale consists of 16 items and is therefore acceptable with regard to its length and ease of implementation. The identified items and dimensions capture the concept of perceived employee's authenticity in a reliable and valid way. The scale's invariance across different samples and demographics (i.e., gender) further supports the construct's generalizability. Internal consistency as well as the scale's conceptual distinctiveness from other relevant and related marketing concepts is confirmed. Moreover, the appropriateness of a second-order structure is supported by the data. Furthermore, the findings indicate that the four identified PEA dimensions successfully capture the phenomena of employee authenticity. The superior impact of employee authenticity on customer's in-role and extra-role behaviors compared to inauthentic employees is demonstrated and can be explained by a mediation effect through psychological safety. In addition, the findings show that the analyzed effects vary depending on customer-specific characteristics (i.e., aspiration level). Overall, our results not only highlight the crucial role of perceived authenticity in service interactions, but also uncover when and why employee authenticity is most influential in reinforcing customer outcomes.

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