

Branded Employee Behaviour as a Double-Edged Sword: How Perceptions of Service Employees Impact Job Seekers' Application Intentions

By Nancy V. Wunderlich*, Anja Iseke, and Hürrem Becker-Özcamlica

Prior brand experiences affect job seekers' application decisions, as they recall service encounters with brands which they have experienced as customers. As brand representatives, service employees play a critical role in these recollections. Their behaviour might inform job seekers' understanding of the employer brand, thereby affecting their application decision. The impact of the service employee's behaviour might be even more impactful if this behaviour is *branded*, meaning that the employee's appearance and manner are representative of the brand values. In this paper, we analyse whether and how branded service employee behaviour affects job seekers' application intentions. We argue that branded service employee behaviour provides two opposing signals: it contributes to consistent evaluations of the brand, leading to more brand trustworthiness and enhancing job seekers' application intentions. However, it may also be perceived as inauthentic, reducing job seekers' application intentions. Findings from a scenario experiment provide evidence of both effects.

1. Introduction

Providers of people-intensive services depend on the quality of their workforce. A relative advantage in human

resources management (HRM) might lead to superior service quality levels (Schneider and Bowen 1993). Thus, service firms have to pay careful attention to recruitment and selection processes, training, job design, performance management and other components of HRM (Frei 2008). HRM practices should reflect the service attributes by which the company aims to be defined because "the people make the brand" (Hurrell and Scholarios 2014, p. 54).

In intangible service encounters, much focus is on front-line service employees who often personify the brand (e.g., Berry 2000; Henkel et al. 2007; Morhart et al. 2009) and constitute a rich source of brand information (Burmman et al. 2012; Sirianni et al. 2013). The more the behaviour of service employees is aligned with brand characteristics, the more it contributes to a company's branding efforts (Löhdorf and Diamantopoulos 2014). Moreover, research shows that branded service employee behaviour improves customer brand evaluations (Chang et al. 2012; Sirianni et al. 2013).

In this paper, we argue that branded service employee behaviour signals brand characteristics to both customers and job seekers; therefore, it influences application decisions. Research shows that job seekers' application intentions are influenced by a variety of signals, including corporate image (e.g., Collins and Stevens 2002; Wei et al. 2016) and brand reputation (Cable and Turban 2003; Ferris et al. 2002). In considerations of whether to apply, job



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seekers recall service encounters they have experienced as customers (Gatewood et al. 1993; Lemmink et al. 2003) and may interpret service employee behaviour as a signal of employer brand characteristics (Moroko and Uncles 2008). Therefore, as brand representatives, service employees may play a critical role in the application decision (App et al. 2016). Nevertheless, we know very little about the signalling effects of branded service employee behaviour on job seekers (Knox and Freeman 2006).

We analyse whether and how branded service employee behaviour affects job seekers' application intentions. We argue that branded service employee behaviour provides two opposing signals. On one hand, it contributes to consistent evaluations of the brand, leading to higher levels of brand trustworthiness (Sirianni et al. 2013) and enhancing job seekers' application intentions. On the other hand, it could also be perceived as inauthentic (Hochschild 2003), reducing job seekers' application intentions. Findings from a scenario experiment provide evidence of both effects.

By depicting branded service employee behaviour as a double-edged sword in the recruitment context, we make the following contributions to the literature. First, we provide evidence that service employees' brand-building behaviour influences not only customers but also job seekers. This effect has been overlooked in prior research on branded service behaviour and by recruiting managers alike. Our findings indicate that job seekers view service employees as both potential brand advocates and exemplary employees; each perspective has a unique impact on job seekers' application intentions. Second, our study extends the scarce literature on the impact of current employees on job seekers' application decisions (Knox and Freeman 2006). We advance our limited understanding of image perceptions in recruitment (Lievens and Slaughter 2016) by introducing branded service employee behaviour as a relevant signal of brand and job characteristics. We show that branded service employee behaviour influences application decisions prior to all other recruitment activities. Furthermore, we extend the theoretical knowledge on signalling mechanisms in recruitment (Jones et al. 2014) by providing evidence that one particular signal may have opposing effects on application decision-making, depending on how the signal is interpreted by job seekers.

2. Branded service employee behaviour as a signal of employer characteristics

Job seekers tend to know little about potential employers, so they infer unobservable, though important, employer and job characteristics from easily observable pieces of information or signals (e.g., Albinger and Freeman 2000; Rynes and Miller 1983). Signals are particularly important when job seekers are ill-informed about an organisation, which tends to be the case for graduates with little or no job experience (Chapman and Webster 2006; Falk et al. 2013). Research has identified various signals that influence job seekers' application intentions, such as organisational image (e.g., Baum et al. 2016; Chapman et al. 2005; Highhouse et al. 2007; van Hove et al. 2013), corporate social performance (e.g., Jones et al. 2014), executive board composition (Iseke and Pull 2017), organisational architecture (Radermacher et al. 2016) and HRM practices (Beauregard and Henry 2009; Erhart et al. 2012).

Nevertheless, job seekers do not only revert to observable organisational characteristics; they may also interpret employees' behaviour as a signal of employer and task characteristics. Research confirms that recruiter behaviour signals organisational characteristics, affecting applicant attraction either directly (e.g., Eberz et al. 2012; Turban and Dougherty 1992) or indirectly (Harris and Fink 1987; Turban et al. 1998). However, job seekers' application decision usually precedes all interactions with recruiters. Therefore, job seekers who are also consumers may recall service employee behaviour in informing their decision to apply. To date, there is no research on the impact of service employee behaviour on job seekers, even though service research indicates that consumers interpret service employee behaviour in two ways, as displayed in Fig. 1.

First, service employees are perceived as brand advocates who may contribute to the organisation's branding efforts (e.g., Berry 2000; Henkel et al. 2007; Morhart et al. 2009). They may vary in the degree to which their behaviour can be seen as branded or merely functional. Ideally, branded service employee behaviour prioritises the brand's interests (Harquail 2004; Mitchell 2002) and exceeds functional employee behaviour, which is characterised by friendliness and competence (Henkel et al. 2007). Branded behav-

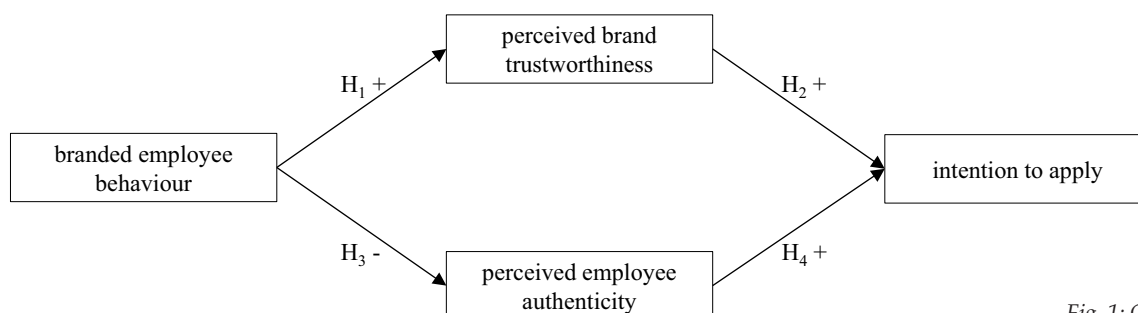


Fig. 1: Conceptual model

behaviour can occur along several dimensions, particularly in terms of employee appearance and manner (Sirianni et al. 2013). The more service employees align their appearance and manner to the brand, the stronger their effect on consumers' brand evaluations (e.g., Engel et al. 2013; Sirianni et al. 2013; Wentzel 2009). In line with these findings, we propose that branded service employee behaviour may also influence job seekers' brand perceptions. An understanding of a company's service brand may also inform job seekers' understanding of the employer brand (Moroko and Uncles 2008) and thereby influence their application intention.

Second, service employee behaviour may also serve as a reliable signal of the company's expectations of its employees. Research indicates that current employees provide realistic and accurate information on both the job and employer during the recruitment process (Bretz et al. 1991). For example, site visits as later-stage recruitment activities are shown to influence job seekers' image of employers (Cable and Yu 2006; Slaughter et al. 2014). We argue that branded service employee behaviour may also inform job seekers' expectations of what it would be like to work for the company, which in turn affects their decision on whether to apply.

2.1. Branded service employee behaviour as a driver of brand trustworthiness and application intention

Brand perceptions are influenced by employee behaviour, particularly in service settings (Bergstrom et al. 2002). Marketing research shows that there is consistency between consumer brand expectations and service experiences when service employees behave in a branded manner (Burmman and Piehler 2013). When service employee behaviour is consistent with the brand, it is easier for customers to understand the brand's meaning, and they are more likely to experience the brand as a "unified whole" (Sirianni et al. 2013, p. 109). Hence, branded service employee behaviour increases brand trustworthiness, i.e., consumer perceptions that the service firm is willing to deliver on its promises (Baek et al. 2010; Erdem and Swait 2004). Brand image appears to be important not only to consumers but also job seekers, in particular in the early recruitment stages (Collins 2007, Cable and Turban 2003). We therefore hypothesise that

H1: Branded service employee behaviour increases perceived brand trustworthiness.

Brand trustworthiness is expected to enhance job seekers' application intention in two ways. First, it may signal a company's expertise and trustworthiness as an employer (Tsai and Fang 2010). Job seekers may consider a service provider's ability to establish brand trustworthiness as an indicator of superior organisational performance and professional HRM. Furthermore, they may infer that a com-

pany demonstrating its willingness to meet customer expectations is also willing to meet employee expectations, further demonstrating trustworthiness as an employer. Job seekers' evaluations of a prospective employer as trustworthy (Hoeffler and Keller 2002), including its ability to deliver on its promises (Erdem and Swait 1998), are likely to enhance their application intention. Second, brand trustworthiness is likely to be positively related to a positive organisational image. Job seekers are in search of employers with a good reputation and positive recognition from customers (Keller 2000), as such reputable employers offer a positive and meaningful social identity to the organisation's (prospective) members (Tajfel and Turner 1985). Therefore, becoming a member of a trustworthy and highly recognised organisation is likely to be attractive. As such, we assume that perceived brand trustworthiness increases job seekers' application intention. We hypothesise that

H2: Brand trustworthiness positively affects job seekers' application intention.

2.2. Branded service employee behaviour as a driver of perceived employee authenticity and application intention

Beyond being a cue for service brand trustworthiness, branded service employee behaviour can also be interpreted as signalling working conditions and employer expectations. Branded service employee behaviour may indicate that the employee does not act in an authentic way. Authenticity implies that service employees act "in accord with the true self, expressing oneself in ways that are consistent with inner thoughts and feelings" (Harter 2002, p. 382). In service contexts, employees are often required to display expected emotions and adhere to social scripts (e.g., Ashforth and Humphrey 1993; Humphrey et al. 2015; Steinberg and Figart 1999). Branded employee behaviour may be considered less authentic because it more likely follows prescribed scripts and provides fewer opportunities for service employees to express their true nature. In contrast, if a service employee's appearance and manner are in conflict with a brand, this is typically evaluated as the authentic behaviour of the employee (Wentzel 2009). We hypothesise that

H3: Branded service employee behaviour decreases perceived employee authenticity.

Job seekers are expected to consider service employee behaviour as a signal of what it is like to work for the organisation. Employees value the opportunity to be authentic and express their true self; if they act authentically, they are more satisfied, feel attached to their employer and are happier with their lives (Hochwater et al. 1999; Wood et al. 2008). In contrast, being forced to put on a work persona to express brand characteristics that are not in line with

the employee's personal values, attitudes and mood is considered emotional labour (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993; Grandey 2000; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2006). If job seekers observe an employee behaving in a way that they perceive as inauthentic, they may infer that the service provider expects its employees to perform emotional labour. Given that emotional labour often reduces individual well-being (Johnson and Spector 2007), job seekers may be less inclined to apply. Therefore, we hypothesise that

H4: Perceived employee authenticity positively affects job seekers' application intention.

3. Method

We empirically examined the hypotheses with a scenario-based experiment (study 1). In a 2x1 between-subjects experimental design, we manipulated highly sophisticated branded employee behaviour vs. non-branded employee behaviour. We targeted students with high potential and no or minimal prior application experience to participate in our study. We offered each participant the opportunity to take part in a lottery of gift vouchers worth USD\$30–50. In total, 171 students attending German universities (40 % male; 60 % female; 62 % bachelor; 37 % master; mean age of 25 years) voluntarily participated. We randomly assigned them to one of the two conditions of our experiment.

Upon arrival, the participants read a job advertisement of a fictive hotel brand and a scenario describing an interaction between an employee and a customer of this brand. We constructed the job advertisement for the position of a management trainee based on job advertisements from real organizations. Pre-tests indicate that this position is considered appropriate for a variety of university students. The focal brand described in the scenario was a highly sophisticated brand (Aaker 1997). The instructions

directed the participants to first read the job advertisement so as to gain familiarity with the focal brand. The job advertisement included general textual information and visual stimuli to characterise the focal brand as highly sophisticated (see Appendix A.1). Based on a pre-test (N = 11), we selected the verbal descriptions of the brand positioning (e.g., "We are known for our outstanding service, stylish atmosphere and comfort at the highest level.") and the visual materials used to reflect the highly sophisticated brand positioning in the job advertisement. The participants were then instructed to read the scenario description carefully and to place themselves in the role of the customer. The scenarios describe a situation in which the hotel concierge offers dinner recommendations to a customer (see Appendix A.2).

We manipulated the branded and non-branded behaviour of the concierge with variations in the employee's script ("What a wonderful day, how may I be of service?" vs. "Good afternoon, how can I help you?"), his behaviour ("The employee bade you farewell by holding the door open for you and wishing you a pleasant day." vs. "The employee bade you farewell by nodding and wishing you a pleasant day."), outer appearance ("The employee who received you at the reception wore cufflinks on the suit shirt of his hotel uniform." vs. "The employee who received you at the reception wore a hotel uniform.") and recommendation ("He recommended a gourmet restaurant, as you wanted to have dinner before your drive back." vs. "He recommended to you a nearby restaurant, as you wanted to have dinner before your drive back."). In a second pre-test (N = 18), we tested the scenarios to establish a similar likability for the brand as well as a similar level of employee friendliness and competence. Immediately following the scenario manipulation, the participants completed a questionnaire that measured the dependent variables of interest, the control variables and the demographic data. We used validated scales to

Measurements	Study 1		Study 2	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Perceived employee authenticity (Grandey et al. 2005)	2.968	1.501	3.479	1.532
1. The employee is faking how s/he feels in this interaction.				
2. The employee is putting on an act in this interaction.				
Perceived brand trustworthiness (Dawar and Pillutla 2000)	5.538	0.961	5.582	0.808
The brand is				
1. not at all trustworthy – very trustworthy				
2. not at all dependable – very dependable				
3. not at all reliable – very reliable				
Intention to apply (Highhouse, Lievens, and Sinar 2003)	4.701	1.325	4.245	1.322
1. I would accept a job offer from this company.				
2. I would make this company one of my first choices as an employer.				
3. If this company invited me for a job interview, I would go.				
4. I would exert a great deal of effort to work for this company.				
5. I would recommend this company to a friend looking for a job.				

Tab. 1: Measurements and reliability statistics

Tab. 2: Correlation matrix
(Study 1; N = 165)

Construct		AVE	1.	2.	3.
1.	Perceived brand trustworthiness	0.86	0.84		
2.	Perceived employee authenticity	0.77	-0.029	0.87	
3.	Intention to apply	0.67	0.202	0.252	0.87

Notes: The boldface numbers on the diagonals are Cronbach Alpha values.

measure authenticity (Grandey et al. 2005), brand trustworthiness (Dawar and Pillutla 2000) and intention to apply (Highhouse et al. 2003), employing a 7-point scale anchored with scale items of strongly disagree/agree (see *Tab. 1*).

We omitted six participants from the sample due to their non-completion of the survey. We analysed the reliability of the measured constructs, all of which showed Cronbach's alpha scores exceeding the threshold value of .70 (Nunnally 1978), composite reliability scores greater than .90 (Bagozzi and Yi 1988) and average variance extracted scores exceeding .67 (see Table 1 and 2). Discriminant validity was also confirmed according to the criteria proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981): (1) the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) of each construct was greater than its correlations with the remaining constructs, and (2) the correlation of each item with its intended construct was greater than its correlations with the remaining constructs (see *Tab. 2*; Fornell and Larcker 1981).

4. Results

Before analysing the model, we tested our manipulation of branded employee behaviour. We used the natural fit scale by Simmons and Beckel-Olsen (2006) to measure the fit of the employee's appearance and behaviour with the focal brand. An ANOVA confirmed that branded service employee behaviour had a significantly greater fit than non-branded service employee behaviour ($M_{\text{branded}} = 6.26$, $SD = .93$; $M_{\text{non-branded}} = 5.26$, $SD = 1.40$; $F = 27.88$; $p < .001$). In addition, the branded service employee was perceived as more sophisticated than the non-branded employee ($M_{\text{branded}} = 6.25$, $SD = .93$; $M_{\text{non-branded}} = 5.28$, $SD = 1.43$; $F = 27.93$; $p < .001$). We used structural equation modelling (SEM) analysis with a maximum likelihood (ML) estimator to analyse the data from our experiment. Our conceptual model fit the data very well (see Table 3), with a comparative fit index (CFI) of .94, a Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) of .92 and a standardised root mean square residual (SRMR) of .05. We included the gender, application experience and study subject of the participants as control variables.

Our results show that both paths of highly sophisticated branded (vs. non-branded) employee behaviour worked

	Study 1		Study 2	
Source	B	p-value	B	p-value
DV: Perceived brand trustworthiness				
Branded employee behaviour	0.206	0.012	-0.058	0.529
DV: Perceived employee authenticity				
Branded employee behaviour	-0.294	0.000	-0.110	0.292
DV: Intention to apply				
Perceived brand trustworthiness	0.214	0.021	0.243	0.013
Perceived employee authenticity	0.300	0.001	0.270	0.018
Branded employee behaviour (direct effect)	0.141	0.106	0.163	0.065
Branded employee behaviour (indirect effect over brand trustworthiness)	0.041	0.098	-0.014	0.576
Branded employee behaviour (indirect effect over employee authenticity)	-0.093	0.012	-0.030	0.302
Control: gender	-0.049	0.886	0.200	0.018
Control: experience	0.035	0.617	0.079	0.336
Control: study subject	0.148	0.113	-0.162	0.059

Notes: Model fit (study 1): CFI = .94; TLI = .92; SRMR = .05; RMSEA = 0.068; Model fit (study 2): CFI = .96; TLI = .93; SRMR = .06; RMSEA = 0.066; DV = dependent variable. The table displays standardised estimates.

Tab. 3: Results of structural equation modelling (Study 1: highly sophisticated brand context, N = 165; Study 2: neutral brand context, N = 140)

Construct	AVE	1.	2.	3.
1. Perceived brand trustworthiness	0.74	0.82		
2. Perceived employee authenticity	0.87	0.057	0.85	
3. Intention to apply	0.72	0.241	0.210	0.90

Notes: The boldface numbers on the diagonals are Cronbach Alpha values.

Tab. 4: Correlation matrix
(Study 2; N = 140)

and eventually impacted application intention (see Table 3). Branded employee behaviour had a significant positive impact on brand trustworthiness ($\beta = .21$, $p < .05$), confirming *H1*. It also had a significant negative impact on employee authenticity ($\beta = -.29$, $p < .001$), confirming *H3*. Our results support the relationships between employee authenticity and intention to apply ($\beta = .30$, $p < .01$) and brand trustworthiness and intention to apply ($\beta = .21$, $p < .05$). Branded employee behaviour had no significant direct effect on intention to apply. However, a parallel mediation analysis using a multiple mediator (Hayes 2013) indicated full mediation of the effect of branded employee behaviour on intention to apply through employee authenticity (indirect path $\beta = -.09$; $p < 0.05$) and brand trustworthiness (indirect path $\beta = .04$; $p < 0.1$). The results confirm *H2* and *H4*.

To explore whether our findings were dependent on a strong pronounced brand, we conducted a second study (N = 140), this time, with a neutral positioning of the focal brand in the job advertisement (see Appendix A.3). Again, we analysed the reliability of the measured constructs in study 2, all of which showed Cronbach's alpha scores exceeding the threshold value of .70 (Nunnally 1978) and average variance extracted scores exceeding 0.72 (see Table 4). Our conceptual model fit the data very well, with a comparative fit index (CFI) of .96, a Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) of .93 and a standardised root mean square residual (SRMR) of .06. The results (see Table 3) show that neutrally branded employee behaviour had neither a significant effect on brand trustworthiness ($\beta = -.06$, $p > .1$) nor on employee authenticity ($\beta = -.11$, $p > .1$). Thus, *H1* and *H3* could not be supported. As in the main study, employee authenticity ($\beta = .27$, $p < .05$) and brand trustworthiness ($\beta = .24$, $p < .05$) were significant drivers of job seekers' intention to apply. The results of the second study confirm *H2* and *H4*.

5. Discussion

Our results show that branded employee behaviour informs job seekers about the employer brand, thereby affecting their intention to apply. Thus, our study adds branded service employee behaviour to the list of organisational characteristics identified in research in the area of influencing job seekers' intention to apply (Baum et al. 2016; Uggerslev et al. 2012; Highhouse et al. 2007; Iseke and Pull 2017). Our results show that job seekers interpret

the service employees' behaviour as a signal of employer and task characteristics. This finding extends research that has identified recruiter behaviour as a signal for organisational characteristics (Eberz et al. 2012; Turban and Dougherty 1992; Harris and Fink 1987; Turban et al. 1998) by showing that even informal encounters between job seekers and an employer's staff, e.g., prior service encounters in which the job seeker was a customer, directly affect applicant attraction.

However, the results also show that branded employee behaviour acts as a double-edged sword. On one hand, it increases perceived brand trustworthiness, which in turn drives the job seeker's intention to apply; on the other hand, it reduces perceived employee authenticity, decreasing the job seeker's application intention. By showing the impact of branded employee behaviour on brand trustworthiness, this study confirms research emphasising the role of service employees as brand advocates (Berry 2000; Henkel et al. 2007; Morhart et al. 2009). The study extends research on branded employee behaviour by showing that the appearance and manner of an employee do not only impact consumers' brand evaluations (Engel et al. 2013; Sirianni et al. 2013; Wentzel 2009); they also impact consumers' downstream application decisions.

The study findings support research showing that current employees provide realistic and accurate information on both the job and the employer (Bretz et al. 1991; Cable and Yu 2006; Slaughter et al. 2014). However, the results show that this link might backfire if the employee's behaviour is perceived as inauthentic, which is an undesirable way of living (Deci and Ryan 1985). The employer brand is perceived as less attractive, as job seekers fear that they would have to act in an inauthentic way if hired. The results illustrate the potential downsides for brands in the service context, where employees are often required to display expected emotions and adhere to social scripts (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993; Humphrey et al. 2015; Steinberg and Figart 1999).

Whereas our study 1 shows that impact of branded employee behaviour on job seekers' application decision is existent in the context of a highly sophisticated brand, our study 2 showed that these effects do not occur in the context of a neutral brand positioning. The results of our second study support the notion that brand trustworthiness and authenticity are important perceptions influencing a job seeker's intention to apply, but that these perceptions are not significantly impacted by employees representing

a neutral brand. In fact, our study 2 shows that having a strongly emphasized brand positioning on which employees can act upon, is a necessary requirement for the job applicants to notice employees' branded behavior. Job applicants might noticed brand-aligned or misaligned behavior only if the brand position itself is strong and thus memorable.

6. Managerial implications and future research

Even though branded service employee behaviour increases job seekers' intention to apply through increased perceived brand trustworthiness, our findings show that job seekers can evaluate branded employee behaviour negatively if the behaviour is deemed inauthentic. Thus, the core recommendation of this study is that service brand managers should encourage branded behaviour so as to strengthen the trustworthiness perception of the brand while simultaneously striving for authenticity as a corporate culture. An interpersonal climate of authenticity within the organisation has been shown to lead to happiness in the workplace (Metin et al. 2016; Reis et al. 2016) and reduce the negative effects of emotional labour (Grandey et al. 2012). Moreover, service brand managers should focus on selecting service personnel that represent a strong match with the brand values and, thus, are more likely to act naturally, i.e., without performing an artificial role. Employers are encouraged to use recruitment advertising and selection methods that proactively communicate the brand values and stimulate job seekers to reflect on their own fit with the brand values.

Brand managers should thus encourage service employees to exhibit brand values in their manner and appearance as long as they feel authentic. Fixed scripts that do not leave freedom for service employees to improvise and adapt to each unique interaction with a customer seem to

be inappropriate in facilitating the employee's brand-aligned and authentic behaviour. Instead, brand managers should explicitly communicate and explain the brand values to employees and offer training in which service employees can learn, in role-play scenarios, how to express brand values in typical service situations.

This study has some limitations that call for future research. The study shows the impact of branded employee behaviour on job seekers' application decision in the context of a highly sophisticated brand. The study also showed that these effects do not occur in the context of a neutral brand positioning. The findings call for future research to explore the differential impact of branded employee behaviour in the context of positioning other brands, such as with rugged or sincere brand personalities (Aaker, 1997). Furthermore, future research may distinguish between service employees' deep and surface acting as two strategies employees may use in dealing with branded employee behaviour. Prior research indicates that deep or surface acting have differential effects on customers' attitudes and behaviour (Groth et al. 2009).

The participants of this study were German students, who were well suited to represent the group of job seekers for management trainee positions in the German market. However, further studies should validate the study's findings in different cultural contexts and with different groups of applicants. This study used scenarios within a hotel context which most students have experienced as customers or at least can imagine experiencing as customers. Although the results might relate well to other high-touch services, research should explore whether the mechanisms of branded employee behaviour effects are the same in contexts with less frequent or technology-mediated customer-employee interactions or contexts which are even more familiar to university graduates. Moreover, this study calls for research that validates the results in a field setting.

Appendix

A.1 Brand positioning text in the job advertisement (highly sophisticated brand)



Hotel

lamour



United with Hotel Glamour into the future.

Hotel Glamour is a hotel chain headquartered in Berlin. As an internationally operating company with fifty locations across Europe, we have maintained a presence in many large cities and cultural centers since 1976, offering sophisticated guests an unforgettable stay with the right degree of elegance and flair.

We are known for our outstanding service, stylish atmosphere and comfort at the highest level. Our maxim is to convey a feeling of luxury to everyone around us. Hotel Glamour is a paradise for those seeking the impressive world of elegance, and you could be a part of it.

A.2 Scenario description with branded employee behaviour (highly sophisticated brand)

As you think about applying for the open position, remember that you have been a guest at this hotel chain. Think back to an interaction you had with one of the employees of that hotel during your check-out.

In particular, remember that the employee who received you at reception wore cufflinks on the suit shirt of his hotel uniform. You can also recall a conversation you had with him. 'What a wonderful day, how may I be of service?' You answered that you would like to check out. 'Of course! Was everything to your satisfaction?' he asked. You nodded and paid for your stay. The employee then asked, 'May I put the bill into an envelope?' You also remember that he recommended a gourmet restaurant as you wanted to have dinner before your drive back. The employee bade you farewell by holding the door open for you and wishing you a pleasant day.

A.3 Brand positioning text in the job advertisement (neutral brand)



Hotel

tandard



United with Hotel Standard into the future.

Hotel Standard is a hotel chain headquartered in Berlin. As an internationally operating company with fifty locations across Europe, we have maintained a presence in many cities since 1976, offering our guests a good stay.

We are known for our outstanding service, feel-good atmosphere and friendliness. Our maxim is to give everyone around us a good feeling. Hotel Standard is a place for those who want to feel comfortable, and you could be a part of it.

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Keywords

Branded Service Behaviour, Service Employees, Authenticity, Brand Trustworthiness, Job Seekers

ISSN 2511-8676

SMR JOURNAL OF SERVICE
MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

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Subscription: An annual subscription to the journal comprises four issues.

Subscription rates 2020: € 219 (VAT incl.) annual subscription rate, campus licence € 399 (VAT incl.). Single Issue: € 61 (VAT incl.), shipping charges have to be added to the rates. Subscription and rate include print issue and a licence for the online archive. The components cannot be cancelled separately. Complaints about copies not received must be lodged within 6 weeks starting at the end of the quarter.

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Citation: SMR – Journal of Service Management Research, number of volume (number of issue), year, page.

Typesetting: FotoSatz Pfeifer GmbH, 82152 Krailling.

Printing: Druckerei C.H.BECK, Bergerstraße 3–5, 86720 Nördlingen.