Interaction with a frontline employee is common in most retail and service encounters in which customers are looking to make product and service choices. During these customer-employee interactions, customers are exposed to service employees’ personal characteristics, such as their displayed creativity, which can influence consumer behavior. The proposed research seeks to develop an understanding of how service employee characteristics influence customer choice and post-choice satisfaction.

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Results. Results showed a significant interaction of priming and consistency on spelling accuracy ($F(1, 88)=13.60, p<.001$). For consistent brands, respondents were able to use the direct route to spelling regardless of priming condition. However, for inconsistent brands (which initially inhibit the direct route to spelling), priming had a positive effect on spelling accuracy ($F(1, 85)=20.05, p<.001$).

Interestingly, spelling accuracy influenced brand evaluations in the inconsistent condition ($F(1, 49)=3.94, p<.05$), but not in the consistent condition ($F(1, 38)=.45, p=.505$). Therefore, only when the direct route to spelling was inhibited (inconsistent non-words), evaluations were enhanced by guessing the correct spelling.

Study 2
Study 2 examines how, when the direct route to spelling is inhibited, increased semantic elaboration can lead to greater spelling accuracy and higher evaluations. We expect that, for inconsistent brands, semantic elaboration will only enhance brand evaluations when the direct route is facilitated by priming.

Method. Seventy-five undergraduate students participated in the study. We designed a 2 (Semantic elaboration: elaboration or no elaboration) x 2 (spelling prime: prime or no prime) between-subjects experiment. Semantic elaboration was operationalized by changing the word used in the priming sentence to be congruent (e.g., fuel) or incongruent (e.g., staff) with the product category (e.g., cars). We used study 1’s inconsistent brand names. The procedure and measures were the same as in study 1.

Results. Results showed that both elaboration and spelling prime had significant main effects on spelling accuracy ($F(1, 74)=4.54, p<.05$ and $F(1, 74)=18.45, p<.01$, respectively). Those effects were qualified by a significant interaction of priming and elaboration on brand evaluations ($F(1, 74)=5.75, p<.05$). As expected, when primed, participants in the elaboration condition had higher brand evaluations than those in the no-elaboration condition ($F(1, 74)=4.10, p<.05$). In the no-prime condition, however, there was no effect of elaboration on brand evaluations ($F(1, 74)=1.816, p=.18$). Finally, spelling accuracy proved to be a significant predictor of brand evaluations ($F(1, 74)=5.99, p<.05$).

Conclusion
By exploring the underlying mechanisms of sound-to-writing processing, we develop a greater understanding of how consumers process brand names auditorily and how can these processes be facilitated and affect brand evaluations.

References

The Influence of Service Employee Characteristics on Customer Choice and Post-Choice Satisfaction
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Abstract
Interaction with a frontline employee is common in most retail and service encounters in which customers are looking to make product and service choices. During these customer-employee interactions, customers are exposed to service employees’ personal characteristics, such as their displayed creativity, which can influence consumer behavior. The proposed research seeks to develop an understanding of how service employee characteristics influence customer choice and post-choice satisfaction.
Frontline employees are the store associates, sales floor personnel, and other service workers who personally interact with customers in retail and service encounters (Ellinger, Almadag, and Ellinger 2007). Past research notes the importance of these employees in their interactions with customers, as these workers can have a powerful impact on customers’ perceptions of the brand and the firm, and on customers’ overall satisfaction with the service encounter and the firm (Czepiel, Solomon, and Surprenant 1985; Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1996; Zeithaml, Bitner, and Gremler 2006).

Each and every action by frontline employees can contribute to the total experience of customers (Pine and Gilmore 1999), including employee-demonstrated attitudes and behaviors, which can influence customers’ perceptions of the service rendered (Bowen and Schneider 1985). In sum, the literature has demonstrated that customer-facing employees’ actions play a pivotal role in shaping customers’ experiences during the service encounter, but outside of studies of employee attractiveness (Reingen and Kernan 1993), little is known about how service employees’ appearances can influence customer preferences and behavior during these interactions.

For example, does a person choosing to redecorate his or her house prefer a creative- or conservative-looking interior designer? Does having a creative-looking interior designer lead the person to make more creative choices and, if so, how high is the person’s post-choice satisfaction? Our research seeks to address these questions.

Past work in psychology and marketing has provided compelling evidence that individuals can be primed to behave in certain ways. Priming studies are concerned with the temporary activation of an individual’s representations and how these internal readinesses interact with environmental information to produce perceptions, evaluations, motivations and social behavior (Bargh 1997). Our proposed research seeks to extend priming theory by investigating how service employees’ appearances can influence customers and their choices during service encounters and understanding how these choices are evaluated by customers.

Pre-tests-Method and Results

Three pre-tests were conducted to determine how respondents would evaluate customer-facing employees on five dimensions, some of which were derived from the services literature, including competence, internal personality factors, external personality factors, creativity and conservativeness. In pre-test I, respondents were asked to evaluate photographs of employees on the five dimensions mentioned above. In pre-test II, respondents were asked to evaluate job titles (for example, interior designer) on the same five dimensions. Based on the results of pre-tests I and II, photographs and job titles were chosen to be tested together. In pre-test III, participants were asked to evaluate the employee in the photograph based on the job title given. The conditions included photographs and job titles that were matched (creative photo and creative job title) and photographs and job titles that were mismatched (creative photo and conservative job title). Participants were also asked to indicate the likelihood that they would hire the employee in the photograph to perform the job title specified.

The results from the pre-tests indicate that customers evaluate service employees differently based on whether they look creative or conservative. Participants were more likely to hire the service employees in the conditions where the photograph and job title matched (creative photograph and creative job title or conservative photograph and conservative job title) than in the conditions where the photograph and job title did not match.

Study 1-Method and Preliminary Results

The goal of the pre-tests was to develop an understanding of how customers would evaluate service employees on five key dimensions (competence, internal personality factors, external personality factors, creativity, and conservativeness) and whether the employees’ appearance (creative or conservative) would influence the customers’ likelihood to hire that employee. Study I was designed to address the question: Do employee characteristics (for example displayed creativity) affect customer choice and, if so, how satisfied are customers with those choices?

Data were collected from a convenience sample of 271 students enrolled in an introductory Marketing course at a large southwestern university. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: creative or conservative. The study employed the use of a confederate who was either creatively dressed or conservatively dressed, based on the condition. The confederate provided participants with the cover story that she worked for a major office supply company that was seeking customer feedback on one of its products. Participants were told that they would be given a pen as a gift for their participation and that they could select the color of the pen. Participants were presented with both creative and conservative pen color choices and were asked to make an actual choice.

After completing a number of filler tasks, participants answered questions regarding their overall evaluations and quality of the pen, satisfaction and regret with their pen choice, evaluations of the service employee (confederate), their own need for uniqueness, and their own chronic creativity motivation.

To check that the confederate portrayed the desired characteristic, participants completed an evaluation of the confederate on the five dimensions discussed above. Participants in the creative condition rated the confederate as more creative and less conservative than participants in the conservative condition, who rated the confederate as less creative and more conservative. The differences in scores were statistically significant at the p<.05 level.

The initial analysis focused on the key dependent variable of pen choice. While there were no significant differences in pen choice between the creative and the conservative conditions, a large number of the participants (32 percent) chose a creative-colored pen in the creative conditions. Further analysis will be conducted for post-choice satisfaction and regret.

Discussion

Our initial findings shed light on the importance of service employee appearances, offering a fresh perspective that customers have preferences regarding the personal characteristics of the frontline employees with whom they interact and that these characteristics can potentially influence customer choice during customer-employee service encounters. Our future work in this area will extend this investigation to include post-choice satisfaction and regret to further understand how these choices are evaluated after they are made.