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Customer response to interactional service experience: The role of interaction environment

Carmen-Maria Albrecht Stefan Hattula Torsten Bornemann Wayne D. Hoyer

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# Customer response to interactional service experience

## The role of interaction environment

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Carmen-Maria Albrecht

*Department of Quantitative Marketing and Consumer Analytics,  
University of Mannheim, Mannheim, Germany*

Stefan Hattula and Torsten Bornemann

*Marketing Department, University of Stuttgart, Stuttgart, Germany, and*

Wayne D. Hoyer

*Department of Marketing, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas, USA*

### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to examine causal attribution in interactional service experiences. The paper investigates how triggers in the environment of a customer-employee interaction influence customer behavioral response to employees' negative and positive affect. Additionally, it studies the role of sympathy and authenticity as underlying mechanisms of this relationship.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Two scenario-based experimental designs ( $N_1 = 162$ ;  $N_2 = 138$ ) were used. Videotaped scenarios served as stimulus material for the manipulation of two focal variables: the employee's emotional display as either negative or positive and the availability of an emotion trigger in the interaction environment to convey the attribution dimension of cause uncontrollability. The emotion trigger's visibility was varied in the two studies. Customer response was captured by buying intentions.

**Findings** – Customer responses are more favorable for both positive and negative interactional experiences when customers have access to information on cause uncontrollability (i.e. notice triggers in the interaction environment). Analyses reveal that these effects stem from feelings of sympathy for negative experiences and authenticity for positive experiences.

**Originality/value** – This research supports the relevance of causal attribution research on interactional service experiences, which have high-profit impact. Moreover, the findings underline the importance of the experience of fact in service interactions and thereby provide a more nuanced view on the discussion of whether service providers should use impression management strategies to engender customer satisfaction even when this behavior is "faked."

**Keywords** Causal attribution, Customer-employee interaction, Interaction environment, Positive and negative interactional service experience

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

Imagine that you go to a nearby hardware store to get some advice for a new drill you are interested in. You finally find a frontline employee and approach him or her, but unexpectedly, the response to your request is harsh and unfriendly. How would you react? Now imagine the same situation, but before approaching the employee, you witness a rude order from a co-worker that precedes the employee's grumpy behavior. How would your reaction to the frontline employees' emotional display differ in light of this additional information indicating a reason for the behavior beyond the employee's control?

Both scenarios describe customers' service experiences as they occur daily in supermarkets, bookshops, hotels, and many other service environments. Typically, work on causal attribution intends to explain such differences in reactions to service employees'



behaviors. Individuals engage in spontaneous causal thinking about reasons for behaviors or events before they respond to them because when things happen, it is human nature to ask “why” (Hareli, 2014; Weiner, 2014). Previous studies have related causal attribution to a wide variety of core service experiences, such as providing incorrect information regarding warranties or providing no service at all for products that were bought in the store (e.g. Grewal *et al.*, 2008; Puccinelli *et al.*, 2009). However, the previously described interactional service experiences reflect the manner in which the service employee faces the customer (Hess *et al.*, 2007). These interactional experiences play a crucial role for the service industry since they account for more than 30 percent of customer switching behavior (Keaveney, 1995), and 40 percent of customers reconsider their purchase intentions in the store as a result of employee interactions (Court *et al.*, 2009).

This research therefore examines causal attribution in interactional service experiences and, as an overall contribution, further enhances knowledge on consumer behavior in service and retail research, which is more important than ever before (Puccinelli *et al.*, 2009). Specifically, this study examines how an attribution of uncontrollability – that is, the customer’s perception that the employee has little or no control over the reasons for his or her behavior toward the customer – affects the customer’s behavioral responses to a frontline employee’s emotional display. The role frontline employees’ emotions play in customer outcomes has received increasing attention in recent service literature (Lin and Lin, 2011; Puccinelli *et al.*, 2009; Subramony and Pugh, 2015), as employees’ emotions may influence customers’ behaviors during the customer service interaction through the conscious or unconscious induction of behavioral attitudes (Schoenewolf, 1990). In this regard, the effects of uncontrollability attribution have mostly been studied together with causes directly related to the customer-employee relationship *per se*, such as the level of helpfulness of the employee (Hess *et al.*, 2007). However, previous studies have not examined how triggers in the interaction environment might affect interactional service experiences. This neglect is surprising, given the call of practitioners and researchers to provide detailed accounts of environmental conditions and the resulting behaviors of customers (e.g. Berger and Fitzsimons, 2008; Pareigis *et al.*, 2012). Situational conditions can provide a myriad of informational cues that customers can use to form an impression of the typical store experience (Berry *et al.*, 2006; Wang and Mattila, 2015). Therefore, this study concentrates on attribution effects in customer response that result from observing triggers in the interaction environment, such as orders or plaudits given by a supervisor or by fellow employees, and thus do not refer to any relations between employee and customer.

Moreover, previous literature has indicated that the effect of customer attributions of positive events to frontline employees remains an important unexamined research question (Puccinelli *et al.*, 2009). Specifically, prior research has called for investigators to “tease apart the positive versus negative effects of employee-customer interactions” (Subramony and Pugh, 2015, p. 356) and to study the “causal mechanisms mediating the [...] relationship between employees’ job attitudes and customer evaluations” (p. 359). Think again of the paper’s opening scenarios. However, now the frontline employee smiles at you and is very friendly. How would your reaction to the frontline employee’s positive emotional display differ in a scenario where you have additional information indicating the employee’s inability to control the actions triggering his or her behavior as compared to a situation where you do not have this information and simply see the smiling and friendly employee? Would you perhaps perceive the employee’s behavior as more authentic and thus respond to it more favorably?

To shed light on these questions, this research studies uncontrollability attribution not only in the context of negative interactional service experiences but also in that of positive experiences. The study posits that positive customer response to an employee's positive emotional display is more likely if the cause of the interactional service success is attributed to triggers in the interaction environment. Given that employees in a wide variety of service jobs noticeably act in conformance with some predefined service role, customers increasingly value cues that help them to assess when the behavior of employees is authentic (Bujisic *et al.*, 2014; Grandey, 2003). This cue-based evaluation of authenticity refers to indexical authenticity (Grayson and Martinec, 2004): customer judgments of originality and genuineness are based on personal experiences of absolute, objective criteria that are thought to have a factual link with an original or pre-existing reality (Grayson and Shulman, 2000; MacCannell, 1973). Such an experience of fact (i.e. observation of emotion triggers) distinguishes "the real thing" from its imitators (Grayson and Martinec, 2004) and, as a mediator, increases the likelihood of a positive customer response to the employee's behavior.

With regard to a negative experience, a negative behavioral customer response should be less likely if customers attribute negative emotions displayed by an employee to uncontrollable triggers in the interaction environment. Attribution theory suggests that people not only evaluate individuals who are believed to have control of the causes of their negative behaviors more negatively but also express less sympathy toward them (Weiner, 2000, 2014). This holds for situations where customers do not have access to any information (i.e. do not observe emotion triggers) that enables them to infer causes for employees' negative affect. Research has shown sympathy to be a strong mediator of customer behavior (Darden *et al.*, 1991), making negative customer response to the employee's behavior less likely.

In sum, this investigation makes three important contributions. First, it provides evidence that the attribution dimension of uncontrollability is appropriate to the study of customers' behavioral responses to frontline employees' interactional behaviors in face-to-face situations with customers. Specifically, customers respond more favorably to both positive and negative interactional experiences when they have access to information on cause uncontrollability. Second, this study expands existing knowledge by showing that customers evaluate causes for an interactional service experience as uncontrollable by the employee if they observe triggers in the interaction environment. Finally, the study contributes to the emotional labor literature by providing a more nuanced view of whether service providers should use impression management strategies such as surface acting (i.e. modifying displays without shaping inner feelings) to engender customer satisfaction even though this behavior is "faked" (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Grandey, 2000; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2006). More generally, this study's findings suggest that customers perceive "service with a smile" more favorably compared to authentic negative emotional displays. At the same time, however, results show that when the authenticity of service providers' positive displays can be inferred from the context of the interaction, customer response is more favorable than when no such authenticity cue exists.

## **Theoretical background and hypotheses development**

### *Causal attribution*

Attribution theory focuses on the perceived causes for people's behaviors (e.g. display of emotions) or for events they observe (Hareli, 2014; Hess *et al.*, 2003; Puccinelli *et al.*, 2009; Weiner, 2000, 2014). The theory holds that individuals engage in spontaneous causal

thinking about reasons for behaviors or events before they respond to them. In this regard, most causes can be classified into three dimensions of attribution: stability (whether the cause is expected to reoccur), locus (whether the location of the cause is customer- or firm-/third party-related), and uncontrollability (whether the cause is not subject to a person's own volitional influence) (Weiner, 2000, 2014). This research focuses on the third dimension – uncontrollability – since research suggests this dimension is the “very heart of social behavior” (Weiner, 2000, p. 385) because it is linked to inferences regarding responsibility, moral judgments, and moral emotions (including anger, sympathy, and gratitude). Moreover, and highly relevant to the current research focus, uncontrollability seems to be the heuristic individuals most commonly use in attributional search (Wong and Weiner, 1981), as it constitutes the dimension that is most directly relevant to emotion (Perrewé and Zellars, 1999) and to the service context (Varela-Neira *et al.*, 2010). Compared to the other two dimensions, uncontrollability has received the least research attention (Harvey *et al.*, 2014), even though its importance is acknowledged in the service literature (Van Vaerenbergh *et al.*, 2014).

The dimension of uncontrollability relates to the extent to which a person perceives the cause of a behavior or event as volitional and thus controllable (Van Vaerenbergh *et al.*, 2014; Weiner, 2000, 2014). In the service and retail context, this perception includes the extent to which the customer believes the cause of a service failure or success to be volitional on the part of an organization or a service employee (Choi and Mattila, 2008; Hess *et al.*, 2007; Varela-Neira *et al.*, 2010). Thus, cause uncontrollability refers not only to causes of behaviors or events that cannot be controlled by the customer but also to causes of behaviors or events not controlled by the employee that, however, affect the customer.

This paper follows this understanding and refers to this dimension as the customer's belief that the frontline employee has little or no control over the triggers in the interaction environment causing his or her negative or positive emotional display. These uncontrollable causes could lie, for instance, in undesirable orders or encouraging plaudits given by a supervisor or fellow employees, but are not customer-induced at any time and thus do not vary regarding the dimension of locus (Van Vaerenbergh *et al.*, 2014; Varela-Neira *et al.*, 2010). Since causal attributions are “attempts to explain why an event has occurred” (Hess *et al.*, 2007, p. 81) and individuals' causal analysis of events influences their subsequent behaviors and feelings (Hareli, 2014), the extent to which employee emotions affect customers' behavioral responses may depend on the reasons that customers ascribe to the employee emotions. This study examines whether customers attribute the causes of those positive or negative emotions to uncontrollable triggers in the interaction environment.

### *Negative interactional service experience*

Frontline employees “are the face of the first and often the only interaction” between the service organization and its customers (Kumar *et al.*, 2014, p. 369). In these interactions, negative interactional service experiences cannot be fully prevented (Joireman *et al.*, 2013), even though companies try to implement impression management strategies such as surface acting to avoid such negative experiences (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Groth *et al.*, 2009). Surprisingly, however, the significance of the consequences of negative experiences on, for instance, customers' satisfaction and loyalty levels is often insufficiently accounted for by service providers (Kumar *et al.*, 2014). Regarding customer response to negative interactional service experience, attribution theory suggests that people not only more negatively evaluate individuals who are believed to have control of the causes of their negative behaviors but also express less sympathy to them

(Weiner, 2000, 2014). This assessment and response occur when a person is able to infer the causes for the negative behavior – but also when the person does not have access to information that enables him or her to do so. This situation alludes to the fundamental attribution error, which holds that attributors tend “to underestimate the impact of situational factors and to overestimate the role of dispositional factors in controlling behavior” (Ross, 1977, p. 183). Consequently, when customers do not have access to information that enables them to infer causes for employees’ negative affect, they automatically attribute greater control to the employee (Van Vaerenbergh *et al.*, 2014). This may occur because customers have underestimated the potential impact of triggers in the interaction environment that have caused the employee’s display of emotion. Hence, customers do not feel and express sympathy toward the employee as they would if they considered the cause for the negative emotional display as being uncontrollable. Therefore, if they are not given or cannot infer a reason for a behavior, customers typically believe that service failures are preventable (Choi and Mattila, 2008), leading to more negative behavioral responses on their part (Hess *et al.*, 2003). Thus:

*H1.* Negative customer behavioral response to employees’ negative emotional display is less likely in a condition where customers have access to information on cause uncontrollability (i.e. notice triggers in the interaction environment) than when they have no access to cause-uncontrollability information.

#### *Positive interactional service experience*

Regarding positive interactional service experience, this investigation argues that uncontrollability attributions stimulate a positive behavioral response because they increase the likelihood that customers judge the employee’s emotional expression as authentic. Especially today, when organizations expect service employees to align their displayed emotions with organizationally desired emotions through emotional labor strategies such as surface acting (Grandey, 2003; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2006), authenticity is acknowledged as a universal value and an essential driving force that motivates customer responses in service environments (Grandey *et al.*, 2005). Specifically, indexical authenticity (Grayson and Martinec, 2004) drives customer behavior in response to emotion triggers in the interaction environment. Indexical authenticity manifests in customer responses to objects, brands, and experiences (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010) and has been used to explain a wide variety of customer outcomes such as loyalty to a restaurant brand (Lu *et al.*, 2015), visitor satisfaction in museums (Hede *et al.*, 2014), or purchase intention toward fine art (Moulard *et al.*, 2014). It views behaviors or expressions (verbal and non-verbal) as genuine when they reflect who a person really is and are not in adherence to either social or commercial conventions (Grayson and Martinec, 2004). To identify the other person’s true self, customers evaluate verifiable indexical cues (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010; Chronis and Hampton, 2008) and cognitively compare a factual and spatio-temporal link to the reference context (Grayson and Martinec, 2004). A person’s own experiences thus can serve as an emotion-sensitive detector, allowing customers to evaluate cues from emotional service displays regarding their factual and spatio-temporal fit. High fit should result in the perception of indexical authenticity – that is, the perception of genuineness of displayed emotions based on customers’ previous experiences in similar contexts. The authentic emotion in service contexts is therefore a function – and thus an index – of employees’ credible display and the emotion’s contextual appropriateness.

Applied to the current study, this account implies that compared to customers in a situation in which they cannot attribute the employee's positive behavior to triggers in the interaction environment, customers who have access to such cues associate a higher level of authenticity with the employee's positive emotional display. This response is in line with philosophical reasoning (authenticity is not historical but visual; Eco, 1986) and suggests that the mere act of observing and experiencing a reason for a behavior brings with it the perception of authenticity (Hoch, 2002). The consequence is a more positive behavioral response of customers. Thus:

- H2.* Positive customer behavioral response to employees' positive emotional display is more likely in a condition where customers have access to information on cause uncontrollability (i.e. notice triggers in the interaction environment) than when they have no access to cause-uncontrollability information.

The following sections report two studies conducted to test the above hypotheses. Study 1 serves as a baseline investigation. Study 2 aims to replicate the results obtained in Study 1 with a different manipulation of the emotion trigger and provide further insights into the processes underlying its relationship with buying intention.

## Study 1

### *Design*

Study 1 tested the hypotheses through an online experiment in which participants viewed experimental stimuli on a computer monitor and completed a set of questions. In a 2 (emotional display of frontline employee: negative vs positive)  $\times$  2 (emotion trigger: provided vs not provided) between-subjects design, participants were randomly assigned to one of four scenarios. To provide a realistic situation of a service setting, the scenarios simulated a customer service interaction in a hardware store. Such an interaction between customer and service employee is particularly important in hardware stores (KPMG, 2013).

### *Stimulus development*

In line with prior research on negative and positive emotions in services (Dallimore *et al.*, 2007; Du *et al.*, 2011; Luong, 2005), videotaped scenarios served as stimulus material and provided the manipulation of the service employee's emotional display and the emotion trigger in the interaction environment. In particular, the study employed a scenario role-play-based experimental design (Du *et al.*, 2011). The researchers produced a total of four videotapes (negative/positive emotional display and provision/non-provision of the emotion trigger) to test the quality and effectiveness of the chosen manipulations.

To provide a realistic setting and to minimize confounding effects, several measures standardized the scenarios (Dallimore *et al.*, 2007; Grandey, 2003; Luong, 2005). A professional cinematographer filmed the stimulus material in a local hardware store operating nationwide. Each videotape began with the same short-introductory scene, showing the customer first getting a shopping cart in the parking lot in front of the hardware store and then entering the store, pushing the shopping cart through the store while following the signposting until s/he arrives at the laminate flooring section, where s/he walks up to a frontline employee to ask for advice. A professional actor played the service employee to ensure a natural performance in front of the camera. Previous empirical research indicates no differences in individuals' responses to others' displays of emotion resulting from gender of the service provider (Luong, 2005;



Söderlund and Rosengren, 2008). Therefore, a male service employee was used in the scenarios because hardware stores are dominated by male frontline employees (expert interviews conducted prior to the experimental study revealed that 90 percent of the frontline employees are male in this study's particular context).

Throughout the videotapes, the camera filmed from a first-person perspective, so that the camera represented the "eyes" of the customer, and the customer was never shown during the interaction. Moreover, the customer's questions directed at the frontline employee appeared only in written language on slides that were inserted at appropriate points of the film. These techniques aimed to exclude any potential bias resulting from gender, age, or physical attractiveness of a visible customer and from his/her way of speaking. Thus, study participants, who were to assume the role of the customer, were given a realistic impression of what it is like to be the customer. During the customer-employee interaction, the camera focused on the head/face and upper body of the frontline employee as he began to answer the customer's questions.

The use of a realistic script ensured control of the verbal content to the customer in all scenarios, so that the objective service level – that is, the content of the consultation (Jacobucci and Ostrom, 1993) – was held constant (see Appendix 1). The only difference in the performance of the actor was the emotional display of the frontline employee (i.e. facial expressions, gestures, body movements, and ways of speaking, such as vocal tone, tempo, and volume, which generally account for up to 90 percent of all communication in service interactions) (Dallimore *et al.*, 2007).

In the negative emotional display condition, the actor was instructed to express the negative emotion of unfriendliness (Roseman *et al.*, 1990) by showing non-verbal behaviors such as compressed lips and frowning and by glancing away and avoiding eye contact, engaging in jerky movements, and speaking in a curt, harsh, loud, and fast-paced fashion. In contrast, in the positive emotional display condition of "smile display" (Söderlund and Rosengren, 2008), the actor was instructed to smile since smiling is "universally recognized as an indication of a positive emotional experience" (Miles and Johnston, 2007, p. 259) and is particularly associated with friendliness (Berg *et al.*, 2015). In addition, the actor was asked to show a generally friendly demeanor. That is, his non-verbal behaviors included showing a relaxed face, having a relaxed and open posture, moving around smoothly, having good eye contact, and talking in a soft and calm tone at a normal pace. Instructions for the actor were based on the non-verbal communication literature (Puccinelli *et al.*, 2010; Sundaram and Webster, 2000), feedback from a university-enrolled acting student and his professor, and discussions with frontline employees, as well as prior research on emotional display that also describes various non-verbal behaviors (e.g. Dallimore *et al.*, 2007).

The provision of the emotion trigger signaled to the customer information about the uncontrollability of the cause of the frontline employee's behavior (i.e. the subsequent emotional display). Cause uncontrollability can be inferred from the provision and thus the noticeability of the trigger in the interaction environment. In contrast, cause controllability may be inferred when no such factor is noticeable (the fundamental attribution error). Immediately before the service interaction, the frontline employee received an SMS message on his business cell phone. SMS messages (like e-mails) are an important technology-mediated communication mode that enable interaction between employees (Wajzman and Rose, 2011). However, customers can also notice them. Pre-service events are therefore an important part of a service interaction with the customer because they create a first impression and feeling that affect the subsequent service experience (Harris and Rosenthal, 1985; O'Neill and McGinley, 2014).

In watching the videotape, the participants could only hear the SMS ringtone, see that the employee took out his cell phone to read the SMS, and see the employee's reaction to the SMS as they walked down the floor and approached the employee. They were not able to read the message, nor were they informed about the sender or content of the SMS. The frontline employee's reaction to the SMS reception corresponded to his emotional display in the respective video scenario (negative/positive). In the condition where no emotion trigger was provided, participants did not see the service employee receiving an SMS prior to the customer service interaction.

All conditions were filmed in exactly the same way and were identical in terms of set, lighting, background sound, and verbal content (i.e. the words spoken to the customer by the actor are exactly the same). The only variations were in the emotional display and the occurrence of the trigger in the interaction environment. Three independent academics and another actor individually evaluated the videos and agreed on this point.

### *Pretest*

The four videotapes (negative/positive emotional display and provision/non-provision of the emotion trigger) were first pretested with five doctoral students to ensure that viewers had enough time to read the insertions in the videos. Subsequently, the videos were tested with a larger group of participants to verify the effectiveness of the manipulations. In total, 246 persons (54.1 percent men, mean age = 45.63) participated in the pretest. They were first asked to watch one of the four videos and put themselves in the role of the customer. After they had watched the video, they were asked to answer several questions. Among other things, they were requested to rate the perceived unfriendliness and smiling of the frontline employee (Du *et al.*, 2011). They also indicated whether they perceived the cause of the employee's emotional display as uncontrollable (Hess *et al.*, 2007).

Results of the pretest clearly revealed that the actor succeeded in displaying negative (i.e. unfriendliness) and positive (i.e. smiling) emotional displays, as called for by the scenario. An ANOVA shows that the perceived unfriendliness (measured on a seven-point low-high scale) was significantly higher in the group of participants confronted with the negative display condition as compared to the group of participants confronted with the positive display condition ( $M_{\text{negative}} = 4.96$ ,  $M_{\text{positive}} = 1.93$ ,  $F(1, 244) = 223.45$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). In contrast, the employee was rated as significantly more smiling in the positive display condition than in the negative display condition ( $M_{\text{negative}} = 1.54$ ,  $M_{\text{positive}} = 5.24$ ,  $F(1, 244) = 525.10$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

Another ANOVA indicates that participants perceived the causes of the employee's affect to be significantly less controllable by the employee (measured on a seven-point low-high scale) when the SMS was provided than when no trigger in the interaction environment was noticeable ( $M_{\text{provided}} = 4.33$ ,  $M_{\text{not provided}} = 2.19$ ,  $F(1, 244) = 83.623$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). In sum, the results of this pretest confirm the effectiveness of the manipulations with regard to emotional display and the provision of an emotion trigger to convey information about cause uncontrollability.

### *Procedure*

The online experiment used the stimulus material developed in the pretest as to the negative/positive emotional display and the provision/non-provision of the emotion trigger. Participants were an online panel that was representative of the population in terms of age, gender, and education. Moreover, participants of this panel speak the same language, have the same cultural background, and take part in studies

voluntarily, without being paid an incentive. Participants were told that they were taking part in a study on customer service and were instructed to turn on the sound of their computer.

At the beginning of the experiment, the introduction to the video scenario appeared on the screen and subjects were asked to put themselves in the following situation. The participant has desired new laminate flooring for his/her living room for a while and has now decided on a certain type of flooring. S/he goes to his/her favorite nearby hardware store to buy the flooring and other materials. However, s/he would first like to clarify some aspects regarding the installation with one of the frontline employees in the store. This introduction then announced that the participant was about to see a short video scenario showing how s/he goes to the hardware store and consults the frontline employee.

Before and after watching the video, participants filled out a questionnaire comprising realism checks, manipulation checks, and buying intention, which served as the behavioral response measure. Moreover, individuals indicated their perceived authenticity of and sympathy for the employee's emotional display as well as potential covariates. At the end, participants answered a standard set of socio-demographic questions. A total of 162 individuals (38.9 percent male; mean age = 32.77) participated in the online experiment.

### *Measures*

Customers' buying intention was measured by averaging four items ( $\alpha = 0.933$ ) taken from Taylor and Baker (1994). To assess the proposed theoretical rationales, respondents rated the single-item scales "I have some sympathy for the salesperson's unfriendly behavior" (perceived sympathy) and "I think that the salesperson's smile is authentic" (perceived authenticity). In a baseline investigation, such single items represent an acceptable balance between practical needs and psychometric concerns (Robins *et al.*, 2001). Moreover, they have been shown to be similarly valid as multiple-item measures (Bergkvist and Rossiter, 2007), particularly when a construct reflects a subjective experience (Robins *et al.*, 2001), as for perceived sympathy and authenticity in this study. With respect to the covariates, pre-encounter mood was captured by a bad-good item following Pham (1996). Susceptibility to catch emotions was assessed by averaging three items ( $\alpha = 0.714$ ) taken from Du *et al.* (2011). Moreover, participants had to specify their age and gender (dummy-coded with 0 = women and 1 = men). To capture shopping frequency, participants had to indicate how regularly they visit their favorite hardware store. This measure best characterizes and captures the intensity of a service pseudo-relationship (Hess *et al.*, 2007), which is very common in retailing and refers to a setting in which customers interact with different frontline employees across encounters with a service organization (Guttek *et al.*, 1999). Finally, participants' dwell time on the introduction to the video scenario and the video scenario itself was accounted for to rule out potential effects resulting from having more time to cope in the emotion trigger condition. Owing to the additional sequence, the videos with the emotion trigger took longer than those that contained no trigger (Dallimore *et al.*, 2007). Participants could not click off the video before it ran its full length and had to watch the entire video before proceeding to the remaining survey questions. Results of an exploratory factor analysis revealed that all items loaded on the conceptually proposed factors. Table I summarizes the variables and descriptive statistics. A list of all measures along with their reliabilities (if applicable) appears in Appendix 2.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.
1. Customer buying intention	3.80	1.79	1											
2. Customer perceived sympathy	2.47	1.66	0.54*	1										
3. Customer perceived authenticity	3.69	2.37	0.69*	0.54*	1									
4. Employee emotional display			0.61*	0.88*	0.88*	1								
5. Emotion trigger provision			0.12	0.44*	0.08	-0.02	1							
6. Customer susceptibility to catch emotions	5.10	1.32	0.08	0.08	0.00	0.01	-0.11	1						
7. Customer pre-encounter mood	5.27	1.25	-0.04	-0.02	-0.10	-0.10	-0.05	0.13	1					
8. Customer age	32.77	12.68	0.05	-2.1	0.09	0.06	-0.05	-0.04	0.16*	1				
9. Customer gender			-0.01	0.35*	-0.02	-0.03	0.07	-0.19*	0.03	0.13	1			
10. Customer shopping frequency	3.49	1.68	0.04	-0.24*	0.11	0.09	-0.16*	-0.02	0.10	0.37*	0.10	1		
11. Dwell time (in sec.)	228.20	168.42	-0.03	-0.05	-0.09	-0.11	-0.03	-0.01	-0.12	-0.11	-0.08	-0.05	1	
12. Customer realism evaluation	5.72	1.13	0.06	-0.48*	-0.06	-0.08	-0.17*	0.09	0.23*	0.19*	-0.02	0.14	0.04	1

**Notes:** Employee emotional display: 0 = negative, 1 = positive; emotion trigger provision: 0 = not provided, 1 = provided; customer gender: 0 = female, 1 = male. Cells were left blank if data were not applicable. \* $p < 0.05$

**Table I.**  
Means, standard deviations, and correlations among variables in Study 1

### Results

*Preliminary analyses.* Examination of the responses to a suspicion probe revealed that none of the participants was aware of the true purpose of the study. Additionally, participants evaluated the scenario as a realistic service interaction ( $M = 6.06$  on a seven-point disagree-agree scale) and they were able to put themselves in the position of the customer ( $M = 5.98$  on a seven-point disagree-agree scale) (Du *et al.*, 2011; Mattila, 2001). The full sample was retained, but the researchers controlled for this realism evaluation (averaging the two items;  $\alpha = 0.70$ ) in the analyses to rule out any confounding effects that resulted from participants who indicated that the scenario was not realistic or that they were unable to put themselves in the customer's position.

Manipulation checks indicated that participants perceived both manipulations as intended. ANOVAs revealed that the service employee was perceived as significantly more smiling ( $M_{\text{positive}} = 5.35$ ,  $M_{\text{negative}} = 1.24$ ,  $F(1, 160) = 503.158$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and as using a nicer tone in the positive display condition ( $M_{\text{positive}} = 4.82$ ,  $M_{\text{negative}} = 1.16$ ,  $F(1, 160) = 293.073$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) than in the negative display condition. Additionally, almost all participants were able to correctly identify whether an emotion trigger was provided.

*Hypothesis testing.* A  $2 \times 2$  ANCOVA tested the hypotheses that the attribution of emotional display to uncontrollable triggers in the interaction environment fosters customer buying intention irrespective of the emotional display's nature as positive or negative. To comply with the study's propositions, this analysis should reveal a significant main effect of the emotion trigger on buying intention, but no significant effect for its interaction with the emotional display of the frontline employee. Indeed, this pattern showed up for the data. The results indicated a significant main effect for the emotion trigger manipulation, suggesting that buying intention was always higher when an explanation for the employee's emotion (positive or negative) was provided ( $M_{\text{provided}} = 4.01$ ,  $M_{\text{not provided}} = 3.59$ ;  $F(1, 151) = 5.359$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). In contrast, no effect was found of the interaction between emotional display and the provision of an emotion trigger ( $F(1, 151) = 1.072$ ,  $p > 0.10$ ). Not surprisingly, the main effect of emotional display was significant, indicating that buying intention was higher in the condition where the employee's display was positive rather than negative ( $M_{\text{positive}} = 4.86$ ,  $M_{\text{negative}} = 2.68$ ;  $F(1, 151) = 98.975$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

To provide a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms, bootstrapping tests (5,000 samples) were conducted individually for the negative and the positive emotional display conditions (Zhao *et al.*, 2010). In these models, the emotion trigger (SMS reception: provided/not provided) served as the independent variable, the theoretical reasoning (perceived sympathy in the negative condition and perceived authenticity in the positive condition) served as the mediator, and buying intention served as the dependent variable. As to the covariates, the study captured customers' susceptibility to catching emotions, pre-encounter mood, age, gender, shopping frequency, and participants' dwell time on the introduction to the video scenario and the video scenario itself.

In the negative emotional display condition, bootstrapping analysis revealed a significant positive indirect link between emotion trigger and buying intention mediated by perceived sympathy ( $\gamma = 0.405$ ,  $CI_{95} = 0.137-0.776$ ) since the 95 percent confidence interval (CI; one-tailed) for the indirect effect did not include zero. That is, after mediation through perceived sympathy, buying intention was significantly higher when customers had access to information on cause uncontrollability (i.e. notice an emotion trigger) than when the trigger in the interaction environment was not provided

( $M_{\text{negative, provided}} = 3.01$ ,  $M_{\text{negative, not provided}} = 2.35$ ), supporting *H1*. Moreover, in additional support of perceived sympathy as the underlying mechanism, perceived sympathy was significantly higher when the trigger was provided than when no such cue was present ( $\beta = 0.903$ ,  $CI_{95} = 0.380-1.426$ ).

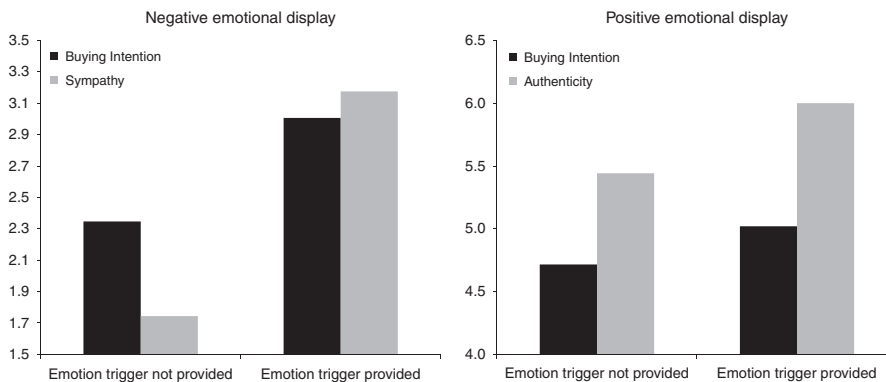
In support of *H2*, bootstrapping analysis also revealed a significant and positive indirect relationship between emotion trigger and buying intention mediated by perceived authenticity ( $\gamma = 0.363$ ,  $CI_{95} = 0.117-0.748$ ) in the positive emotional display condition. After mediation through perceived authenticity, buying intention was significantly higher when an explanation for the employee's positive emotional display was provided than when such information was absent ( $M_{\text{positive, provided}} = 5.02$ ,  $M_{\text{positive, not provided}} = 4.72$ ). Moreover, a parallel effect occurred of the emotion trigger on the mediator variable (i.e. perceived authenticity) ( $\beta = 0.780$ ,  $CI_{95} = 0.291-1.269$ ), providing support of perceived authenticity as the underlying mechanism.

No direct link was found between emotion trigger and buying intention in either condition when theoretical reasoning was additionally captured as a mediator (negative:  $\beta = 0.018$ ,  $CI_{95} = -0.474-0.511$ ; positive:  $\beta = 0.044$ ,  $CI_{95} = -0.452-0.539$ ). Therefore, mechanisms other than perceived sympathy and perceived authenticity can be ruled out as underlying the relationship. As to the covariates, only realism evaluation significantly affected the mechanisms, while all other links did not exert significant effects. Figure 1 summarizes the findings.

## Study 2

### *Design, stimulus development, procedure, and measures*

Study 2 employed the between-subjects design of Study 1 with a few extensions. The first and most notable change was a new manipulation of the emotion trigger. In Study 1, the text of the SMS received and a potential previous conversation were invisible to the customer. However, the experience of conversation may be relevant because a rude order from a co-worker may be the result of a previous negative behavior of the employee, and thus within the control of the employee. This possibility could have an impact on customers' perceived sympathy for the employee's emotional display. To rule out any



**Notes:** Cell sizes were 40 (negative display/trigger provided), 39 (negative display/trigger not provided), 40 (positive display/trigger provided), 43 (positive display/trigger not provided) participants

**Figure 1.**  
Visualization of  
results in Study 1

confounding effects from potential assumptions of previous employee behavior, participants of the second experiment saw a complete video sequence of the emotion trigger. Specifically, at the beginning of the service interaction, the frontline employee now received a phone call from one of his colleagues. In watching the videotape, the viewer could hear the ringing of the phone, see how the employee answered the call, and see and hear his reaction to the colleague on the phone (see Appendix 3). From his responses on the phone, it was implicitly clear what his colleague on the phone was saying to him. This condition was pretested with a university seminar class. Students watched the new video sequence and then wrote down their thoughts on what the talk was about and on what the colleague on the phone had said to the service employee. The results confirmed the intended manipulation of the emotion trigger in Study 2 in that it was perceived as “implicitly visible” to the customer. The employee’s reaction to the phone call corresponded to his emotional display (negative/positive) in the respective video scenario (e.g. harsh tone at a fast pace vs calm tone at a normal pace). This was followed by the dialogue between the customer and the employee. The script for this dialogue was the same as in Study 1 (Appendix 1) in order to hold constant the objective service level (i.e. content of the consultation) and, more importantly, to avoid any effects from changing the conversation between employee and customer itself. In the condition where no emotion trigger was provided, there was no phone call.

The second change involved measuring perceived sympathy and perceived authenticity with multi-item scales. In Study 1, both concepts were measured with a single item. In baseline investigations, single-item measures are often used as supplements to more extensive measures (Robins *et al.*, 2001). The goal of Study 2 was to examine the mechanisms that help to explain the differences in customer response to the employee’s emotional display in more detail. Therefore, since this study needed to account for the more complex nature of both perceived sympathy and authenticity, multi-item measures of both concepts were employed (Bergkvist and Rossiter, 2007). Perceived sympathy was measured by averaging three items ( $\alpha = 0.956$ ) taken from Escalas and Stern (2003). In accordance with Weiner (2000, 2014), the scale captures the “heightened awareness [...] of another person’s state of mind and his or her circumstances [...] stemming from recognition of his or her feelings” (p. 567). With respect to perceived authenticity, Brach *et al.* (2015) recommend measuring the construct as a combination of naturally felt emotions and perceived surface acting of the other person. The current study followed this recommendation not just conceptually but also in terms of measurement. Specifically, five items were averaged ( $\alpha = 0.841$ ) – the three items provided by Dahling and Perez (2010) to capture the former component, and the (reverse-coded) original two surface acting items from Grandey (2003) to assess the latter component.

Finally, the study included several additional covariates to further demonstrate the robustness of the findings. Attitude toward the firm was captured by averaging six items ( $\alpha = 0.969$ ) taken from Hess *et al.* (2007). A customer may have sympathy for the particular employee, but this positive response may be offset by a negative opinion of the firm that treated the employee badly. Moreover, the study additionally captured customers’ locus and stability perceptions, each with a single-item measure following Wagner *et al.* (2009) and Hess *et al.* (2003). Potential interactive effects of cause uncontrollability with causal locus or stability may exist. For instance, customer-employee interactions are characterized by bi-directionality so that in some contexts customers might also be regarded as responsible for employees’ negative affect (Dallimore *et al.*, 2007).

Table II summarizes the variables and descriptive statistics in Study 2. A list of additional measures along with their reliabilities appears in Appendix 2.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.	14.	15.
1. Customer buying intention	4.22	1.95	1														
2. Customer perceived sympathy	4.07	1.91	0.67*	1													
3. Customer perceived authenticity	4.97	1.26	0.26*	0.39*	1												
4. Employee emotional display			0.53*	0.54*	0.18*	1											
5. Emotion trigger provision			0.16	0.29*	0.11	0.00	1										
6. Customer susceptibility to catch emotions	5.01	1.26	0.01	0.04	0.06	0.12	-0.03	1									
7. Customer pre-encounter mood	5.15	1.35	0.21*	0.22*	0.25*	0.10	0.03	0.04	1								
8. Customer age	47.8	14.0	0.13	0.15	0.22*	0.10	0.12	0.00	0.11	1							
9. Customer gender			0.06	0.02	-0.04	0.05	0.12	-0.19*	0.08	0.24*	1						
10. Customer shopping frequency	3.90	1.66	0.05	0.03	0.10	0.04	0.01	0.08	0.11	0.17*	0.09	1					
11. Dwell time (in. sec.)	227.3	47.8	-0.08	-0.14	-0.6	-0.18*	0.14	-0.03	-0.07	-0.15	-0.02	-0.12	1				
12. Customer realism evaluation	5.71	1.20	0.16	0.07	0.29*	-0.01	-0.16	0.05	0.21*	0.07	0.04	0.14	-0.10	1			
13. Customer attitude toward the firm	4.14	1.65	0.76*	0.70*	0.27*	0.74*	0.08	0.09	0.22*	0.20*	0.02	0.10	-0.10	0.01	1		
14. Customer locus perception	2.41	1.63	0.13	0.12	0.12	0.31*	-0.19	0.15	0.05	-0.12	-0.07	0.11	0.01	0.00	0.28*	1	
15. Customer stability perception	4.19	1.71	-0.03	-0.11	0.19*	0.05	-0.10	-0.01	0.01	0.06	0.05	0.05	-0.02	0.06	-0.04	0.25*	1

**Notes:** Employee emotional display: 0 = negative, 1 = positive; emotion trigger provision: 0 = not provided, 1 = provided; customer gender: 0 = female, 1 = male. Cells were left blank if data were not applicable. \* $p < 0.05$



### Results

For this second computer-based experiment, 138 usable responses were received (mean age = 47.88 years; 50.0 percent male) from participants recruited in the same way as in Study 1. Again, the analyses began with the  $2 \times 2$  ANCOVA with the changes described above. This analysis replicated the findings from Study 1. The results revealed a significant main effect of the emotion trigger manipulation on buying intention ( $M_{\text{provided}} = 4.52$ ,  $M_{\text{not provided}} = 3.92$ ;  $F(1, 120) = 3.778$ ,  $p = 0.054$ ) and no effect of the interaction with emotional display ( $F(1, 120) = 0.469$ ,  $p > 0.10$ ).

In addition, the bootstrapping tests introduced in Study 1 were conducted. In support of *H1*, in the negative emotional display condition, a significant positive indirect link was found between the emotion trigger and buying intention mediated by perceived sympathy ( $\gamma = 0.868$ ,  $CI_{95} = 0.470-1.453$ ). That is, after mediation through perceived sympathy, buying intention was significantly higher when an emotion trigger was present than when such information was absent ( $M_{\text{negative, provided}} = 3.67$ ,  $M_{\text{negative, not provided}} = 2.70$ ). Moreover, a significant and parallel effect occurred of the emotion trigger on the mediator variable perceived sympathy ( $\beta = 1.563$ ,  $CI_{95} = 0.849-2.277$ ), thus providing further support of sympathy as the underlying mechanism.

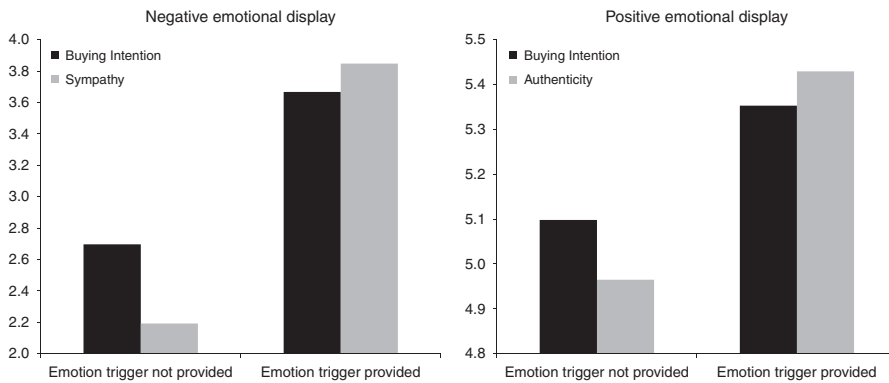
In the positive emotional display condition, the emotion trigger provision likewise increased buying intention, providing support for *H2*. Bootstrapping analysis revealed a significant and positive indirect link between emotion trigger and buying intention mediated by perceived authenticity ( $\gamma = 0.208$ ,  $CI_{95} = 0.027-0.555$ ). That is, after mediation through perceived authenticity, buying intention was significantly higher when customers had access to information on cause uncontrollability than when the emotion trigger in the interaction environment was not provided ( $M_{\text{positive, provided}} = 5.35$ ,  $M_{\text{negative, not provided}} = 5.09$ ). Also, the emotion trigger had a significant effect on the mediator variable perceived authenticity ( $\beta = 0.529$ ,  $CI_{95} = 0.022-1.035$ ).

Again, no direct link was found between emotion trigger and buying intention in both the negative ( $\beta = -0.050$ ,  $CI_{95} = -0.597-0.697$ ) and the positive ( $\beta = 0.071$ ,  $CI_{95} = -0.561-0.704$ ) emotional display conditions when additionally capturing the respective mediator. This finding once more provides evidence of full mediation by the concepts of perceived sympathy and perceived authenticity.

As to the covariates, attitude toward the firm significantly affected sympathy in the negative emotional display condition. Results of a further test as to whether the attitude toward the firm effect outweighed the positive sympathy effects on buying intention refute such considerations. While results showed a significant and positive indirect effect of the emotion trigger on buying intention mediated by sympathy ( $\gamma = 0.598$ ,  $CI_{95} = 0.263-1.239$ ) when additionally capturing attitude toward the firm as a second mediator, no significant indirect effect emerged for this latter variable ( $\gamma = 0.266$ ,  $CI_{95} = -0.017-0.692$ ). Of the remaining covariates, only pre-encounter mood had a significant impact on authenticity, and all other control variables did not exert significant effects. Figure 2 summarizes the findings.

### Discussion

Researchers have long argued that environmental cues strongly affect consumer behavior (Dijksterhuis *et al.*, 2005), but few studies have empirically investigated such cues in the context of interactional service experiences. The current research



**Notes:** Cell sizes were 34 (negative display/trigger provided), 34 (negative display/trigger not provided), 36 (positive display/trigger provided), 34 (positive display/trigger not provided) participants

**Figure 2.**  
Visualization of  
results in Study 2

examines how triggers in the interaction environment can affect customers' behavioral response to service employees' emotional display. The following sections review the key findings and implications.

*Summary of findings and contributions*

Two studies illustrate that attribution of employees' displays of emotion to uncontrollable emotion triggers in the environment of customer-frontline employee interactions can shape the judgment and behavioral response of customers. Specifically, customers noticing such cues respond more favorably (i.e. show higher buying intention) to both negative and positive emotions expressed by the employee than customers having no access to that information. These effects occurred both in situations where customers saw only the final response of the employee to the emotion trigger and where they were able to follow a full conversation (i.e. the emotion trigger was implicitly fully "visible"). The data suggest that these effects reflect an increase in sympathy when customers are confronted with negative emotional display (unfriendliness) of employees and an increase in authenticity when the display is positive (smiling), respectively.

These findings contribute to the understanding of attributional effects in interactional service experiences. Customers do not interact in a vacuum with service employees, but little is known about the role of the interaction environment in shaping customer decisions. By showing that emotion triggers have an impact on customer response to employees' displays of emotion, this work extends service research on attribution effects. Attribution effects have been examined in the context of customer response to core service experiences (i.e. objective service aspects). The findings of this study support this research's relevance to interactional service experiences, which account for more than 30 percent of customer switching behavior and for 40 percent of customers' final buying decisions, thus having a significant impact on a firm's profitability (Court *et al.*, 2009; Keaveney, 1995).

These findings also underline that experience of fact can influence customers' response to a stimulus through perceptual connections (Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Ross, 1977). Two further contributions follow from this. First, this study introduces interactional service experience as another area of consumer behavior where the

assumptions of the fundamental attribution error hold true – that is, individuals initially attribute a behavior to dispositional factors and later correct this attribution for situational constraints (Gilbert *et al.*, 1987). The findings suggest that customers attribute the employee's negative emotional display to dispositional factors and thus, evaluate it as controllable when they have no information on situational constraints, whereas customers perceive the display as less controllable when they experience the emotion trigger responsible for the behavior. Consequently, customers express less sympathy for the employee display in the former condition. Second, these findings contribute to research on indexical authenticity, which regards behaviors or expressions of individuals as authentic when those are not “put on” or imitated to conform with social or commercial conventions (Grayson and Martinec, 2004). In this respect, the phenomenological experience of fact – a personal experience to which they can refer – has been argued to increase authenticity perceptions (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010; Grayson and Martinec, 2004). In the context of interactional service experiences, the findings of this investigation provide powerful support for this reasoning by showing that customers perceived employees' positive emotional display as more authentic when they experienced the emotion trigger than when they had no access to such information.

Finally, and related to the previous argument, the findings implicitly contribute to recent research on emotional labor strategies in service encounters. Researchers have long argued that service providers should use impression management strategies to engender positive customer outcomes (Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987). Specifically, the regulation of expressions in a way to appear more friendly and to hide negative emotions – a strategy called surface acting (Grandey, 2000) – should reduce the subjective distress and frequency of unacceptable emotional behavior (Kanfer and Klimoski, 2002). The resulting friendly behavior then increases customer satisfaction (Pugh, 2001). However, these management strategies have been criticized (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Goodwin *et al.*, 2011; Grandey, 2000; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2006). For instance, Hennig-Thurau *et al.* (2006) show in the context of a video consulting store that surface acting stimulates perceptions of inauthenticity which, in turn, trigger negative emotions since customers prefer to be treated in an authentic and honest way. Thus, the assumed benefits of “service with a smile” can be undermined by an inauthentic emotional display. By comparing negative and positive interactional service experiences, this research provides a more nuanced view on this issue. The findings suggest that, more generally, “service with a smile” stimulates a more favorable customer behavior (i.e. higher purchase intention) as compared to negative emotional displays. This finding supports the former view that impression management strategies such as surface acting, even though they are inauthentic, are more effective in stimulating positive customer response than deep acting strategies that do not hide negative emotions. At the same time, however, results also show that when the authenticity of service providers' positive displays can be inferred from the context of the interaction, buying intention is even higher than when no such authenticity cue is available. This finding supports the latter view, suggesting that authentic positive displays signal a sincere and genuine interest in customers' needs (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2006). Therefore, this study's data suggest that the two views are not oppositional but complementary.

### *Implications*

At a general level, the results speak to the importance of environmental cues for customer perceptions of service experiences. Their appearance can influence customer attributions and behavior in both service failure and service success contexts.

For instance, across both studies, buying intention increased by 32 percent when participants were provided with the emotion trigger of the negative emotional display of the employee. Hence, the symbolic meaning of non-verbal messages may be critical to service encounter evaluations, which is why evaluations need to be managed professionally. This management requires coordination among the functional areas within the service firm, because related decision making involves not only marketing managers but also human resource managers, operations managers, and design professionals (Bitner, 1990).

On a more specific level, the findings suggest that impression management is a critical part of the service provider's role. Often, the service employee is the only person within a company who interacts with the customer. In this respect, a key dimension of interaction quality is the positive attitude and demeanor of the employee, which enhances overall quality perceptions (Tsai and Huang, 2002). This study's results support the idea that facial expressions should fulfill established expectations for social behavior. Buying intention was always higher if customers faced a positive emotional display of the employee as compared to experiencing a negative display. Thus, typical service handbook guidelines such as "Your troubles should be masked with a smile [...] once an unhappy or dissatisfied customer walks out the door, they are gone forever!" (Grandey *et al.*, 2005, p. 38) have their place in daily management practice.

However, results also suggest that "service with a smile" stimulates favorable customer behavior even more effectively when it is perceived as authentic. That is, the smile of the employee should be perceived as not "put on" or imitated merely to conform with social conventions or make money (Grayson and Martinec, 2004). This study's findings highlight the value of the truly "happy worker," who is not putting on an act with customers for companies' success. Employee happiness can be established by positive supervision, work organization, and team climate (Evanschitzky *et al.*, 2011). In addition, employees may benefit from training in deep acting, which entails learning techniques of emotion regulation (Totterdell and Parkinson, 1999). In this respect, deep acting means working on inner feelings so as to be authentic to customers.

With regard to the service organization itself, this study's results imply that customers' perceptions of the service encounter are strongly influenced by events and triggers emanating from the organizational environment, including interactions between members of the service organization. These findings extend research that stresses the importance of the physical/material environment – that is, the servicescape (Pareigis *et al.*, 2012) – of the service encounter for customers' service evaluation by demonstrating that customers also attend to cues that stem from persons other than the directly involved service employee. This finding is in line with the finding that customers' perceptions of internal relations between members of the service organization influence their perceptions of service quality (Schneider *et al.*, 1998). Thus, in addition to fostering individual employees' happiness, service companies should try to establish and maintain a good working climate among service employees to enhance the likelihood that positive emotion triggers – as opposed to stress and conflict – emanate from the organizational environment (see also Totterdell and Holman, 2003).

#### *Limitations and future research*

Although the findings of this research expand the knowledge of attributional effects in interactional service experiences, several limitations open avenues for future research. First, the attribution of uncontrollability for the emotional display of the frontline employee could only be inferred in this study's scenario experiments. One question that

deserves further attention is whether the depicted effects also hold if the cause of the emotional display is made explicit to customers. For instance, frontline employees could tell customers the reasons for their emotional reactions. This approach implies that employees have to be aware of their emotional states, indicating high self-control, when telling customers the reasons for their behaviors. Managers often try to instill this self-control through so-called emotional display rules ("always smile to the customer"; Grandey *et al.*, 2005). Further research could investigate whether a high level of employee self-control attenuates the effect of cause uncontrollability since the employee is now no longer perceived as authentic by customers.

This research studies service pseudo-relationships, where no prior personal relationship to the specific frontline employee exists. However, emotional contagion may result in service contexts representing true relationships (Barsade, 2002). In these relationships, customers repeatedly interact with the same employee, and the extent to which people know each other could have an impact on interpersonal affection. Because emotional bonding might outweigh attributional effects, future research might replicate this study's experimental design in other service domains with true relationships to generalize the results (e.g. hair styling or medical care).

Finally, an employee-employee interaction was purposely chosen as the emotion trigger in this study's experiments to manipulate the working climate as an important antecedent of employee well-being (Evanschitzky *et al.*, 2011). In this examination, reception of an SMS (Study 1) and a phone call (Study 2) supplied the emotion triggers in the interaction environment of employee and customer. The content of the environmental trigger itself was not explicitly visible to the customers. Thus, the intensity of the emotional content was not directly observed and perceptions of emotional display adequacy were not captured. However, customer sympathy for negative emotional response of employees to mildly disturbing emotion triggers may be limited. An employee-other customer interaction as the emotion trigger might thus be used to vary the trigger intensity.

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### Appendix 1. Dialog between frontline employee and customer in video scenarios

*Note: the questions of the customer appear only as written text in the video.*

**Customer:** Excuse me, I have a question. It's about the laying of laminate flooring.

**Employee:** Hello, what exactly is it about?

*Video pauses and the following text appears for the customer:*

*First, you tell the service employee about your intentions and the condition of the room in which the laminate flooring is to be laid.*

**Customer:** Are there any specifics I need to consider before laying the flooring?

**Employee:** Yes, first of all it is important that the unopened parcels with the laminate are put in the room where they are to be laid for about two days. By doing so, the material can adjust to the room temperature.

Next, you need to pay attention to the direction in which you want to have the laminate laid. According to your descriptions of the room, you normally orient yourself on the main source of light in the room, for example a big window. Therefore you should simply lay the laminate lengthwise, with the natural light.

**Customer:** Ah ok. I also would like to ask whether and—if yes—how I have to prepare the ground to lay the laminate?

**Employee:** Well, the ground should be as flat as possible, and especially dry and clean. If this is the case, you lay a PE foil first. It protects the laminate from dampness from below. On the foil you put an impact sound insulation.

*Video pauses and the following text appears:*

*You thank the salesperson for the answers to your questions and end the conversation.*

Measures	Cronbach's $\alpha$
<i>Study 1</i>	
Customer buying intention (Taylor and Baker, 1994)	0.933
I would probably buy the laminate at this hardware store	
I would definitely buy the laminate at this hardware store	
I would certainly buy the laminate at this hardware store	
The next time I need laminate from a hardware store, I will buy it in this hardware store	
Customer perceived sympathy (self-provided)	–
I have some sympathy for the salesperson's unfriendly behavior	
Customer perceived authenticity (self-provided)	–
I think that the salesperson's smile is authentic	
Pre-encounter mood (Pham, 1996)	–
Bad/good	
Customer susceptibility to catch emotions (Du <i>et al.</i> , 2011)	0.714
Touching movie scenes deeply affect me	
I am very concerned about emotional changes of other people	
I don't feel comfortable when I see people quarreling furiously	
Customer shopping frequency (Hess <i>et al.</i> , 2007)	–
Sporadic/regular	
Customer realism evaluation (Du <i>et al.</i> , 2011; Mattila, 2001)	0.700
I think there are similar service situations in everyday life	
I could imagine myself to be the customer in the video	
<i>Study 2 (additional or changed to Study 1)</i>	
Customer perceived sympathy (Escalas and Stern, 2003)	0.956
Based on what was happening, I had sympathy for the salesperson's behavior	
Based on what was happening, I understood the salesperson's behavior	
Based on what was happening, I understood what the salesperson was feeling	
Customer perceived authenticity (Dahling and Perez, 2010; Grandey, 2003)	0.841
The salesperson's behavior and emotions were authentic	
The salesperson's behavior and emotions were genuine	
The salesperson's behavior and emotions came naturally	
The salesperson faked his behavior and emotions(r)	
I have the impression that the salesperson pretended his behavior and emotions(r)	
Customer attitude toward the firm (Hess <i>et al.</i> , 2007)	0.969
Overall, how do you feel about the hardware store as a whole?	
Displeased/pleased	
Upset/not at all upset	
Unhappy/happy	
Dissatisfied/satisfied	
Unpleasant/pleasant	
Unfavorable/favorable	
Customer locus perception (Wagner <i>et al.</i> , 2009)	–
I'm the cause for the employee's behavior	
Customer stability perception (Hess <i>et al.</i> , 2003)	–
The cause of the employee's behavior is something that is not likely to change	
<b>Note:</b> "–" indicates that data were not applicable	

**Table A1.**  
Measures of study  
constructs

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### Appendix 3. Script for the phone call in Study 2 before the customer-employee interaction

*The employee's phone is ringing. The employee takes the phone out of his pocket and takes the call. [The employee's reaction to the phone call corresponded to his emotional display in the respective video scenario (negative/positive).]*

#### **For the negative emotional display condition:**

*Script for the employee: speak in a curt, loud, and fast-paced fashion; show a tense face; engage in jerky movements; show a general unfriendly demeanor.*

*The employee takes the phone out of his pocket and takes the call.*

**Employee** talking on the phone: Hello my dear colleague [...] Oh no - not me again [...]. No. No. I have now worked on four Saturdays in a row [...]. No [...]. You do not need to ask me [...] No.

*The employee ends the call and puts the phone back in his pockets. He now looks at the customer.*

*Then the dialog between the frontline employee and customer begins (Appendix 1).*

#### **For the positive emotional display condition:**

*Script for the employee: speak in a soft and calm tone at a normal pace; show a relaxed face; have an open posture; move around smoothly; show a general friendly demeanor.*

*The employee takes the phone out of his pocket and takes the call.*

**Employee** talking on the phone: Hello my dear colleague [...] Oh this is great [...] thank you for taking over my work shift this Saturday on such short notice [...]. I will call you back in a couple of minutes [...] Bye. Talk to you soon.

*The employee ends the call and puts the phone back in his pockets. He now looks at the customer.*

*Then the dialog between the frontline employee and customer begins (Appendix 1).*

Note: [...] signals pauses during which the employee does not talk and listens to his counterpart on the phone.

#### **Corresponding author**

Carmen-Maria Albrecht can be contacted at: [carmen-maria.albrecht@bwl.uni-mannheim.de](mailto:carmen-maria.albrecht@bwl.uni-mannheim.de)