Nancy J. Sirianni, Mary Jo Bitner, Stephen W. Brown, & Naomi Mandel

Branded Service Encounters: Strategically Aligning Employee Behavior with the Brand Positioning

This research examines how branded service encounters, in which frontline service employee behavior is aligned with a firm's brand positioning, may positively affect customer responses to brands. Across two brand personality contexts, Study 1 demonstrates that employee–brand alignment increases overall brand evaluations and customer-based brand equity, with more pronounced results for unfamiliar brands. Study 2 shows that conceptual fluency underlies the effect of employee–brand alignment on overall brand evaluations for unfamiliar brands. Study 3 reveals that employee authenticity enhances the effectiveness of employee–brand alignment. Finally, a critical incident study (Study 4) extends the generalizability of these findings to a wider variety of service contexts. This research is the first to demonstrate how firms can leverage employee behavior as a brand-building advantage, particularly for new or unfamiliar brands as they establish their positioning with customers.

Keywords: brand equity, frontline employee, brand personality, conceptual fluency, branded service encounters, brand familiarity

Branding enables marketers to add symbolic meaning to goods and services, but the end customers ultimately determine what a brand means to them. Given this reality, marketers invest significant time and effort in supporting the firm-selected brand image through strategic brand concept management (Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis 1986). Marketers have traditionally accomplished this brand support through positioning or the use of advertising and other promotional messaging to establish key associations in customers' minds (Keller and Lehmann 2006). Yet some brand encounters are not regularly managed as part of the brand's positioning strategy, such as service interactions between frontline employees and customers. In this research, we address the key question of how marketers can leverage these service encounters to reinforce brand meaning to positively influence customers' responses to brands. This topic may be especially important for managers of new-to-market or otherwise unfamiliar brands as they build their positioning with customers.

Prior research has indicated that everyday person-to-person communication is often more persuasive than impersonal media sources such as advertising (Cialdini 1993). Therefore, personal encounters, such as those between employees and customers, may be more influential in communicating brand meaning than marketing-driven, mass-targeted messages. Conveying brand meaning to customers on a one-to-one basis is consistent with the popular press notion of branded customer service, which refers to the strategic alignment of customers' experiences with brand promises (Barlow and Stewart 2004). Building on this idea, we define branded service encounters as service interactions in which employee behavior is strategically aligned with the brand positioning. This strategic alignment may be evident in various elements of the employee's presented behavior, appearance, and manner that can reinforce brand meaning during service interactions with customers. For example, at Southwest Airlines, frontline employees are renowned for bringing the carrier's fun and high-spirited brand image to life with their vivacious brand-aligned behavior (Southwest Airlines 2011). As another example, sportswear retailer Lululemon Athletica strategically hires avid runners and yoga practitioners to promote their physically active brand image with their employees' physically fit, brand-aligned appearances (Sacks 2009).

Branded service encounters differ from generic good service interactions in that their objective is to deliver evidence of the brand positioning at every customer touch

point. Generic good service should ultimately lead to positive brand impressions and, thus, potentially contribute to the positivity effect in services (Folkes and Patrick 2003). In contrast, branded service encounters should not only lead to positive brand impressions but also enable customers to process brand information provided by the employee more easily and thus help them develop a more coherent understanding of a brand's overall meaning.

This article offers several contributions to the existing literature. First, to our knowledge, the current research is the first to empirically examine the relationship between the behavior of service employees and the strategic brand concept (Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis 1986) through the empirical investigation of branded service encounters. This is a notable contribution because prior research has not explored the power of employees in building brand equity, despite the increasing prevalence of retail branding research (Grewal 2004). We also address Keller's (2003) call for research that offers a deeper understanding of how brands and linked entities interact. Second, we examine the conditions under which employee–brand alignment has the strongest influence on brand evaluation and find that it exerts a stronger influence when the brand is unfamiliar than when it is familiar. This is an important contribution because previous work on brand familiarity has not demonstrated how new-to-market brands can leverage their employees as an advantage as they build their positioning with customers. Third, we investigate the cognitive process underlying the relationship between employee–brand alignment and brand evaluation. To that end, we develop a three-item measure for brand conceptual fluency, which measures the ease of processing of brand meaning (Lee and Labroo 2004) and helps explain why branded service encounters are most impactful for unfamiliar brands. Fourth, we explore a potential boundary condition—the authenticity of the employee's behavior—and find that it enhances the effects of brand-aligned behavior. Fifth, we provide guidance for successful adoption of this branding strategy, which should prove insightful for marketing managers and academics.

Branded service encounters are customer–employee interactions that are aligned with the firm's brand positioning. This alignment with the brand positioning can manifest along several dimensions, such as employee appearance, manner, and personality. In the current research, we restrict our focus to the alignment of the employee's behavior with the brand personality. Hereinafter, we use the term "employee–brand alignment" to refer to the level of congruence between the employee's behavior and the brand personality. Across three controlled experiments and one critical incident study, we uncover evidence to support the notion that employee–brand alignment on the presented personality dimension can enhance overall brand evaluation (defined as customers' general affective assessment of a brand) and customer-based brand equity (defined as the value added to a product or service by associating it with a brand name) (Netemeyer et al. 2004). In addition, we examine one mediator (brand conceptual fluency) and two moderators (brand familiarity and employee authenticity) of these effects.

Conceptual Development and Hypotheses

The Effect of Employee–Brand Alignment on Customer Responses to Brands

Marketers influence customer brand knowledge in a variety of ways. One such example involves positioning the brand with a specific brand personality, defined as a set of associated human characteristics that convey the brand's symbolic identity. Brand personality describes a brand's character and core values on five basic personality dimensions: sophisticated, rugged, sincere, competent, and exciting (Aaker 1997). It offers marketing managers a cohesive approach to shape customer brand knowledge around a strong and positive personality image, which can inform customers' understanding of the brand meaning. We propose that aligning an employee's behavior with the brand personality serves to strategically link the employee and the brand in customer knowledge structures. This process will increase the brand-related congruity customers experience, thereby facilitating their understanding of the brand's meaning.

Context congruity enables people to engage high-level mental processes and accurately identify stimulus meaning and its relation to semantic knowledge structures (Schwarz and Clore 2003; Whittlesea 1993). Highly congruent stimuli are easier to process and understand, which leads to increased conceptual fluency and preference (Lee and Labroo 2004; Reber, Schwarz, and Winkielman 2004). Therefore, when employee behavior is aligned with the brand personality, the inherent context congruity will enable customers to experience the brand as a more consistent, unified whole. This process should lead to increased preference and, thus, more favorable overall brand evaluations.

H_{1a}: Overall brand evaluation is more favorable when the employee's behavior is aligned with the brand personality than when the employee's behavior is misaligned with the brand personality.

Although overall brand evaluations are important, there are arguably more direct ways to measure customer responsiveness toward the brand. Customer-based brand equity is one such measure (Keller 1993). Overall brand evaluations measure customers' affective responses toward a brand, such as liking, trust, and desirability assessments, whereas customer-based brand equity more directly measures the managerial implications of brand building, including the benefits of increased brand quality versus competitors, increased perceived value for the cost, increased brand uniqueness, and increased willingness to pay a price premium (Netemeyer et al. 2004). We expect that the effects of employee–brand alignment will hold for customer-based brand equity in the same pattern as for overall brand evaluation, because both scales measure distinct, yet related, types of customer responses to brands.

H_{1b}: Customer-based brand equity is greater when the employee's behavior is aligned with the brand personality than when the employee's behavior is misaligned with the brand personality.

The Moderating Influences of Brand Familiarity

Although testing the main effect of employee–brand alignment is an important contribution on its own, we expect that the effect will vary depending on contextual factors of the service encounter. We thus explore the potentially moderating effect of a critical marketing factor: brand familiarity. Brand familiarity is defined as a customer's background knowledge acquired as a result of direct and indirect experiences with a brand (Alba and Hutchinson 1987; Kent and Allen 1994). Brand familiarity can influence customer processing of brand information in advertising and promotional messaging such that increased brand familiarity is related to decreased processing motivation (Campbell and Keller 2003; Keller 1991; Stammerjohan et al. 2005). According to this literature stream, customers with higher levels of brand familiarity use less extensive, more confirmation-based processing when exposed to advertising for that familiar brand (Keller 1991). Conversely, customers with lower levels of brand familiarity employ more extensive processing and thus take in more information during their initial brand encounters (Hilton and Darley 1991). Prior work has found that customers typically respond more favorably to familiar brands than unfamiliar brands, because greater brand awareness is linked with increased preference and higher brand equity (Aaker 1991). Therefore, unfamiliar brands are at a disadvantage because they lack the knowledge in customers' minds to become established and thereby preferred (Campbell and Keller 2003). Our research aims to understand how unfamiliar brands can leverage employee behavior as a brand-building advantage during customers' extensive processing of their initial brand encounters.

Building on prior literature on brand familiarity, we suggest that employee–brand alignment will have a milder effect on customers of familiar brands due to their decreased processing motivation when encountering a routine brand experience. To explain our predictions, we draw on theory in situated cognition, which suggests that human cognition is adapted to meet situational requirements. Customers with higher levels of brand familiarity will likely engage in top-down processing when they encounter an employee who works for that familiar brand (Schwarz 2002). This processing style is accompanied by less focused attention and relies on customers' general knowledge of the category such that they may judge the employee more on his or her category membership (i.e., working for that brand) than his or her brand-aligned or misaligned behavior.

In contrast, customers with lower levels of brand familiarity will likely engage in bottom-up processing when they encounter an employee who works for that unfamiliar brand (Schwarz 2002). This processing style is more systematic and characterized by focused attention to specific details about the person and his or her behavior. Consistent with this notion, recent functional magnetic resonance imaging research has demonstrated that customers engage in more elaborate cognitive evaluation while consuming unfamiliar brands, whereas they rely more heavily on brand cues while consuming familiar brands (Kühn and Gallinat 2013). Due to this increased cognitive processing when encountering unfamiliar brands, employee–brand alignment should exert a stronger positive effect on customers' brand-related judgments of unfamiliar brands compared with familiar brands. From H$_1$ and this logic, we hypothesize that there will be a two-way interaction between employee–brand alignment and brand familiarity for both overall brand evaluations and customer-based brand equity.

> H$_2$: The positive effect of employee–brand alignment on (a) overall brand evaluation and (b) customer-based brand equity is stronger for unfamiliar brands than familiar brands.

The Mediating Effect of Conceptual Fluency

Conceptual fluency describes the ease with which customers can process and understand information such as brand meaning. Prior research has demonstrated that context congruity increases conceptual fluency (Lee and Labroo 2004). That is, when a stimulus and its context are aligned, the information provided is more easily grasped and becomes more accessible in memory than when a stimulus and its context are misaligned. Following this line of reasoning, when employee behavior is aligned with the brand personality, the perceived congruity between the employee and the brand should enhance conceptual fluency. People typically evaluate brands and other stimuli more positively after experiencing conceptual fluency, even under conditions of a single exposure (Lee and Labroo 2004; Reber, Winkielman, and Schwarz 1998). Therefore, when employee behavior is aligned (vs. misaligned) with the brand personality, customers should process the brand meaning more easily due to increased conceptual fluency, thereby eliciting a more positive affective response toward the brand (Winkielman and Cacioppo 2001). In other words, we expect employee–brand alignment to increase conceptual fluency (i.e., a main effect), thus increasing brand evaluations.

More importantly, we also expect brand familiarity to moderate the effect of employee–brand alignment on conceptual fluency. Recall that in H$_2$, we hypothesize that employee–brand alignment would exert a stronger positive effect on customers of unfamiliar brands due to their use of bottom-up processing, which requires focused attention to specific details during the new brand encounter (Schwarz 2002). Furthermore, when customers encounter an employee whose behavior is aligned with an unfamiliar brand's personality, they should more easily recognize and process the brand information provided by the employee due to their increased processing motivation in the situation. Building on H$_2$, we propose that the positive effect of conceptual fluency will be stronger for unfamiliar brands than familiar brands. Furthermore, we expect conceptual fluency to mediate the employee–brand alignment × familiarity effect on brand evaluation.

> H$_3$: Conceptual fluency mediates the positive effect of employee–brand alignment on overall brand evaluation. This mediational effect of fluency is stronger for unfamiliar than for familiar brands.

Authenticity in Employees' Brand-Aligned Behavior

Given the likely heterogeneity among service employees (Zeithaml, Bitner, and Gremler 2013), one might question whether all brand-aligned employee behaviors affect customers' brand evaluations in the same way. For example, how are brand evaluations affected when an employee delivers a brand-aligned performance that comes across as artificial or unfelt? The concept of emotional labor helps explain why people may perceive differences in authentic versus inauthentic brand-aligned behavior. "Emotional labor" describes the management of one's feelings to create a publicly observable display of organizationally desired emotion (Hochschild 2003). Prior studies of emotional labor have focused on employees' positive affective displays, such as smiling (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2006), but according to Hochschild (2003), emotional labor can also include the transformation of one's presented personality into a symbol of the company to provide customers with cues to the nature of the firm.

As such, altering one's behavior to embody an employer's brand personality represents a less studied yet important type of emotional labor. How this embodiment of the brand is carried out may also influence its effects. When modifying their behavior to meet a firm's brand personality, employees may rely on the emotional labor strategies of surface or deep acting as described by Hochschild (2003). In surface acting, a service employee attempts to change only his or her outward display to exhibit the firm's prescribed behavior without shaping his or her inner feelings or beliefs, similar to the concept of "unfelt" emotions. Conversely, in deep acting, a service employee genuinely modifies his or her inner feelings and beliefs to match the firm's required displays, similar to the concept of "felt" emotions (Ekman and Friesen 1982).

We define employee authenticity as the degree to which customers have confidence in the sincerity of an employee's brand-aligned behavior. Authenticity results when people act in accordance with their espoused values and thus project their true nature to the world (Kernis and Goldman 2005; Wood et al. 2008). Firms such as Nike encourage employee authenticity through corporate storytelling programs and Rookie Camps designed to indoctrinate staff in the company's mission and brand heritage. After these training programs, some employees have been known to get Nike "swoosh" tattoos to outwardly express the brand values they have internalized in a visible display of employee authenticity (Ransdell 1999). Likewise, we predict that service employees who internalize elements of the brand positioning and engage in deep acting will allow their outward expressions to authentically match their inner feelings (Ashforth and Tomiuk 2000). Because these employees outwardly demonstrate brand-aligned behavior consistent with their inner feelings, their customers should be able to connect them more easily to the brand, thereby enhancing conceptual fluency and increasing overall brand evaluations (Lee and Labroo 2004; Reber, Winkielman, and Schwarz 1998). In contrast, when employees do not internalize the brand positioning and associated values and

engage in surface acting, this often results in outward expressions that differ from their true feelings. We propose that customers will sense the less authentic, forced nature of these employees' brand-aligned behaviors, thus creating ambiguity when customers attempt to connect the employee to the brand. This ambiguity should weaken conceptual fluency and result in decreased brand evaluations.

> H_{4a}: The positive effect of employee–brand alignment on overall brand evaluations is stronger when the employee's behavior is more authentic than when it is less authentic.

Building on H_2, we propose that brand familiarity will moderate the effects of employee authenticity.

> H_{4b}: The positive effect of an employee's authentic, brand-aligned behavior is stronger for unfamiliar brands than familiar brands.

We test H_1–H_4 in a series of controlled experiments and a critical incident study. In the first study, we investigate how employee–brand alignment affects overall brand evaluation (H_{1a}) and customer-based brand equity (H_{1b}) and whether employee behavior interacts with brand familiarity (H_{2a-b}). Study 2 provides insight into the mediating role of brand conceptual fluency (H_3). Study 3 addresses the role of authenticity in employees' brand-aligned performances (H_{4a-b}) and tests strategies that service providers can use to embody the brand personality credibly and thus maximally support the brand's positioning during service encounters. Finally, Study 4 broadens the investigation of employee–brand alignment to a greater assortment of service contexts.

Study 1

Overview

In Study 1, we empirically examined H_1 and H_2 in two different brand personality settings by fully crossing sophisticated and rugged employee behaviors with sophisticated and rugged brand personalities. In other words, some participants were exposed to a high level of employee–brand alignment in terms of personality (sophisticated brand/sophisticated behavior or rugged brand/rugged behavior), whereas others were exposed to a low level of employee–brand alignment (sophisticated brand/rugged behavior or rugged brand/sophisticated behavior). In a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ between-subjects experimental design, we manipulated employee behavior (sophisticated vs. rugged), brand personality (sophisticated vs. rugged), and brand familiarity (familiar vs. unfamiliar). Two hundred fifty-four students at Arizona State University were randomly assigned to one of eight conditions in a consumer lab setting. All study participants voluntarily participated for course extra credit.

Method

Upon arrival, participants read a brief cover story and listened to an audio recording of a customer service phone call for the purpose of providing feedback to improve the focal retail firm's employee training program (Mohr and Bitner 1995). We used audio recordings of simulated customer ser-

vice phone calls because they more closely resemble real-life service experiences than written scenarios, which have been employed in prior services research (Bitner 1990; Wentzel 2009). The instructions directed participants to listen carefully and to place themselves in the role of the customer to provide evaluative ratings of the employee's personal qualities, the focal brand, and the customer service delivered during the call. In the audio recording, the customer calls the retailer to initiate a product exchange after mistakenly ordering the wrong shirt size; he learns that he will receive his replacement shirt quickly, and the service encounter ends positively. This scenario describes a common type of failure and recovery service encounter in which customer service is provided in response to an error (Dunn and Dahl 2012; Tax, Brown, and Chandrashekaran 1998).

The cover story included general information on the focal brand's sophisticated or rugged positioning (Aaker 1997; see Appendix A). It also included information on the retailer's date of incorporation, offering a signal of the brand's standing in the marketplace as either an established, familiar brand (actual sophisticated brand: Nordstrom; actual rugged brand: Wrangler) or a new-to-market, unfamiliar brand (hypothetical sophisticated brand: Luxe; hypothetical rugged brand: Tucker Brothers Outfitters).

We selected the brand names after two pretests that we examined via an analysis of variance (ANOVA). In the first pretest (N = 106), we tested potential sophisticated retailer brand names to establish similar likeability ($M_{Unfamiliar\ brand}$ = 3.45, $M_{Familiar\ brand}$ = 3.38 [out of 5]; F(1, 104) = 4.45, not significant [n.s.] and similar consistency with qualities associated with the sophisticated brand personality, including charming, glamorous, smooth, upper-class, and sophisticated traits (Aaker 1997) ($M_{Unfamiliar\ brand}$ = 3.42, $M_{Familiar\ brand}$ = 3.70; F(1, 104) = 1.69, n.s.). In the second pretest (N = 151), we tested potential rugged retailer brand names to establish similar likeability ($M_{Unfamiliar\ brand}$ = 4.46, $M_{Familiar\ brand}$ = 4.50 [out of 7]; F(1, 150) = .46, n.s.) and similar consistency with qualities associated with the rugged brand personality, including outdoorsy, tough, country-western, strong, and rugged traits (Aaker 1997) ($M_{Unfamiliar\ brand}$ = 5.81, $M_{Familiar\ brand}$ = 5.89; F(1, 150) = .04, n.s.).

We manipulated brand-aligned versus brand-misaligned employee behavior with an audio recording of a trained actor who played the role of a frontline worker during the customer service call. From a pretest, the employee's sophisticated script conveyed charming, glamorous, smooth, upper-class, and sophisticated traits that fit with a sophisticated brand personality (Aaker 1997), and the employee's rugged script conveyed outdoorsy, tough, hardy, western, and rugged traits to fit with a rugged brand personality (Aaker 1997; for audio recording scripts, see Appendix B). The trained actor delivered her lines to reflect the intended employee behavior traits in each condition (i.e., formal and refined for the sophisticated employee behavior condition and casual and less polished for the rugged employee behavior manipulation). In another pretest analyzed through ANOVA (N = 57), participants rated the actor's performance as significantly more sophisticated in the sophisticated employee behavior conditions (M = 3.26

[out of 5]) than in the rugged employee behavior conditions (M = 1.84; F(1, 55) = 49.25, p < .001) and significantly more rugged in the rugged employee behavior conditions (M = 3.34) than in the sophisticated employee behavior conditions (M = 1.85; F(1, 55) = 82.53, p < .001). Regardless of brand personality condition, participants heard the same scripts. In other words, the scripts did not mention the brand name and there were no other variations in wording or vocal performance other than the manipulation of sophisticated versus rugged personality.

Immediately following the audio manipulation, participants completed a questionnaire that measured dependent variables of interest as well as questions consistent with the cover story. We measured overall brand evaluation using five scale items to capture perceptions of brand liking, brand trust, brand quality, brand desirability, and brand purchase likelihood (Aaker 1991; Dawar and Pillutla 2000). For hypothesis testing purposes, we created an overall brand evaluation index by averaging the five measures (α = .96). We also measured customer-based brand equity using four scale items to capture perceptions of quality versus competitors, value for the cost, brand uniqueness, and willingness to pay a premium for the brand (Netemeyer et al. 2004). We created a customer-based brand equity index by averaging these four measures (α = .92). For overall brand evaluation and customer-based brand equity item descriptions, factor loadings, and reliabilities, see Table 1. Because perceived employee professionalism could vary between employee behavior conditions, we also measured this variable.[1]

After completing the dependent measures, participants answered manipulation check questions, which included their perceptions of the employee's sophisticated and rugged behavior traits (Aaker 1997), their perceptions of the brand's sophisticated and rugged personality traits, and their familiarity with the focal brand (Kent and Allen 1994; we averaged the three brand familiarity measures to form the brand familiarity index α = .98). At the end of the survey, participants responded to an open-ended question regarding changes this retailer could make to improve its customer service to be consistent with the cover story.

Results

Manipulation checks. We tested the manipulations with a series of $2 \times 2 \times 2$ between-subjects ANOVAs. First, an ANOVA with employee sophistication as the dependent variable revealed a main effect of employee behavior (M_{So-}

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[1]A three-way analysis of covariance revealed a significant interaction between employee behavior and brand personality on overall brand evaluation after controlling for employee professionalism (F(1, 245) = 18.28, p < .001), with the employee–brand alignment × brand familiarity interaction accounting for 7% of the variance of overall brand evaluation ratings. Although employee professionalism exerted a significant main effect (F(1, 245) = 6.63, p < .05), it only accounted for 2% of the variance in overall brand evaluation ratings. The low partial eta-square value of .02 suggests that employee professionalism contributes to brand evaluations independent of the effects of brand alignment on brand evaluations. Analysis of covariance results followed in the same pattern with customer-based brand equity as the dependent variable.

TABLE 1
Study 1: Correlations Between the Overall Brand Evaluation and Customer-Based Brand Equity Items and Factors

	Factor Loading Estimates[a]		
	Overall Brand Evaluation	Customer-Based Brand Equity	Reliability
Item Descriptions			
Overall Brand Evaluation Items (Dawar and Pillutla 2000)			.96
Overall, how do you feel about *the brand*?			
Dislike–Like	.86	.33	
Not at all trustworthy–Very trustworthy	.85	.26	
Very low quality–Very high quality	.85	.25	
Not at all desirable–Very desirable	.86	.31	
How likely are you to shop with *the brand*?			
Not at all likely–Very likely	.70	.34	
Customer-Based Brand Equity Items (Netemeyer et al. 2004)			.92
The brand is the best brand in its product class.	.38	.82	
The brand really "stands out" from other retail clothing brands.	.36	.82	
I am willing to pay more for *the brand* than other comparable retail clothing brands.	.22	.88	
Compared with other retail clothing brands, *the brand* is a good value for the money.	.27	.85	

[a]We used principle components analysis as an extraction method as well as Varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization. The rotation converged in three iterations.

phisticated behavior = 5.28 vs. $M_{Rugged\ behavior}$ = 2.94 [out of 7]; F(1, 246) = 146.67, p < .001). Second, an ANOVA with employee ruggedness as the dependent variable showed a main effect of employee behavior ($M_{Rugged\ behavior}$ = 5.69 vs. $M_{Sophisticated\ behavior}$ = 2.68 [out of 7]; F(1, 246) = 195.82, p < .001). Third, an ANOVA with brand sophistication as the dependent variable indicated a main effect of brand personality ($M_{Sophisticated\ personality}$ = 5.22 vs. $M_{Rugged\ personality}$ = 3.43 [out of 7]; F(1, 246) = 100.15, p < .001). Fourth, an ANOVA with brand ruggedness as the dependent variable showed a main effect of brand personality ($M_{Rugged\ personality}$ = 5.29 vs. $M_{Sophisticated\ personality}$ = 2.80 [out of 7]; F(1, 246) = 176.37, p < .001). Fifth, an ANOVA with the brand familiarity index as the dependent variable showed a main effect of brand familiarity ($M_{Familiar\ brand}$ = 4.35 vs. $M_{Unfamiliar\ brand}$ = 1.34 [out of 7]; F(1, 246) = 490.56, p < .001). All other main and interaction effects for these ANOVAs were nonsignificant (F < 1).

Preliminary analysis. A 2 × 2 × 2 multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with the overall brand evaluation index and the customer-based brand equity index as dependent variables revealed a significant employee behavior × brand personality × brand familiarity effect on overall brand evaluation (F(1, 246) = 23.46, p < .001) and customer-based brand equity (F(1, 246) = 4.76, p < .05; for full results, see Table 2). In support of H_{1a} and H_{1b}, there was also a significant employee behavior × brand personality effect on overall brand evaluation (F(1, 246) = 19.88, p < .001) and customer-based brand equity (F(1, 246) = 8.36, p < .01). We further discuss these findings in the following subsections.

Effect of employee–brand alignment on overall brand evaluation and customer-based brand equity. Participants gave higher overall brand evaluations to sophisticated brands when matched with sophisticated employee behav-

ior (M = 6.07) than with rugged employee behavior (M = 5.22; F(1, 246) = 16.38, p < .001), whereas they gave higher brand evaluations to rugged brands when matched with rugged employee behavior (M = 5.36) than with sophisticated employee behavior (M = 4.88; F(1, 246) = 5.09, p < .05), in support of H_{1a}. Furthermore, participants gave marginally higher customer-based brand equity ratings to sophisticated brands when matched with sophisticated employee behavior (M = 4.69) than with rugged employee behavior (M = 4.28; F(1, 246) = 3.23, p = .07), whereas they gave significantly higher customer-based brand equity ratings to rugged brands when matched with rugged employee behavior (M = 4.78) than with sophisticated employee behavior (M = 4.26; F(1, 246) = 5.25, p < .05), in support of H_{1b}. Moreover, employee behavior by itself did not exert a significant main effect on overall brand evaluation (F(1, 246) = 1.61, n.s.) or customer-based brand equity (F(1, 246) = .12, n.s.). This finding is notable because it indicates that the employee's rugged or sophisticated behavior did not significantly influence participants' responses to brands independent of the brand personality manipulation.

Employee behavior × brand personality × brand familiarity interaction. Consistent with H_{2a}, for unfamiliar brands, overall brand evaluation ratings were significantly higher when the employee behavior and the brand personality were aligned than when they were misaligned (sophisticated brand personality conditions: $M_{Sophisticated\ behavior}$ = 6.05 vs. $M_{Rugged\ behavior}$ = 4.39; F(1, 246) = 33.90, p < .001); rugged brand personality conditions: $M_{Rugged\ behavior}$ = 5.55 vs. $M_{Sophisticated\ behavior}$ = 4.45; F(1, 246) = 13.95, p < .001). However, for familiar brands, there was no significant difference in overall brand evaluations due to employee–brand alignment (sophisticated brand personality conditions: $M_{Sophisticated\ behavior}$ = 6.09 vs. $M_{Rugged\ behavior}$ = 6.05; F(1, 246) = .02,

TABLE 2
Full ANOVA Results for Studies 1–3

Source	Sum of Squares	F	$p <$	Partial η^2
Study 1: MANOVA Dependent Variable: Overall Brand Evaluation				
Employee behavior	2.21	(1, 246) = 1.61	n.s.	.00
Brand personality	16.96	(1, 246) = 12.37	.001	.05
Brand familiarity	18.93	(1, 246) = 13.81	.001	.05
Employee behavior × Brand personality	27.25	(1, 246) = 19.88	.001	.08
Brand personality × Brand familiarity	5.53	(1, 246) = 4.03	.05	.02
Employee behavior × Brand familiarity	.54	(1, 246) = .39	n.s.	.00
Employee behavior × Brand personality × Brand familiarity	32.17	(1, 246) = 23.46	.001	.09
Study 1: MANOVA Dependent Variable: Customer-Based Brand Equity				
Employee behavior	.19	(1, 246) = .12	n.s.	.00
Brand personality	.04	(1, 246) = .03	n.s.	.00
Brand familiarity	9.02	(1, 246) = 5.62	.001	.02
Employee behavior × Brand personality	13.41	(1, 246) = 8.36	.01	.03
Brand personality × Brand familiarity	16.64	(1, 246) = 10.37	.001	.04
Employee behavior × Brand familiarity	4.32	(1, 246) = 2.69	n.s.	.00
Employee behavior × Brand personality × Brand familiarity	7.64	(1, 246) = 4.76	.05	.02
Study 2: ANOVA Dependent Variable: Overall Brand Evaluation				
Employee–brand alignment	73.31	(1, 194) = 59.91	.001	.29
Brand familiarity	4.12	(1, 194) = 3.37	.07	.01
Employee–brand alignment × Brand familiarity	17.61	(1, 194) = 14.39	.001	.07
Study 2: ANOVA Dependent Variable: Conceptual Fluency				
Employee–brand alignment	117.08	(1, 194) = 66.72	.001	.26
Brand familiarity	27.19	(1, 194) = 15.50	.001	.07
Employee–brand alignment × Brand familiarity	35.04	(1, 194) = 19.97	.001	.09
Study 3: ANOVA Dependent Variable: Overall Brand Evaluation				
Employee–brand alignment	22.35	(2, 355) = 8.71	.001	.05
Brand familiarity	.02	(1, 355) = .01	n.s.	.00
Employee–brand alignment × Brand familiarity	11.92	(2, 355) = 4.64	.05	.03

n.s.; rugged brand personality conditions: $M_{Rugged\ behavior} =$ 5.28 vs. $M_{Sophisticated\ behavior} = 5.33$; F(1, 246) = .26, n.s.; see Figure 1).

As we expected, the effects of employee–brand alignment held for customer-based brand equity in the same pattern, in support of H_{2b}. A three-way MANOVA using the overall brand evaluation index and customer-based brand equity index as the dependent variables revealed a significant three-way interaction for customer-based brand equity (F(1, 246) = 4.76, $p < .05$; for full results, see Table 2). Consistent with H_{2b}, for unfamiliar brands, customer-based brand equity ratings were significantly higher when the employee behavior and the brand personality were aligned than when they were misaligned.[2]

[2]Consistent with H_{2b}, planned follow-up analyses revealed that for unfamiliar brands, customer-based brand equity ratings were significantly higher when the employee behavior and the brand personality were aligned than when they were misaligned (sophisticated brand personality conditions: $M_{Sophisticated\ behavior} = 4.55$ vs. $M_{Rugged\ behavior} = 3.53$; F(1, 246) = 10.95, $p < .001$; partial $\eta^2 = .04$); rugged brand personality conditions: $M_{Rugged\ behavior} = 4.89$ vs. $M_{Sophisticated\ behavior} = 4.28$; F(1, 246) = 3.63, $p < .05$; partial $\eta^2 = .02$). However, for familiar brands, there was no significant difference in customer-based brand equity due to employee–brand alignment (sophisticated brand personality conditions: $M_{Sophisticated\ behavior} = 5.04$ vs. $M_{Rugged\ behavior} = 4.84$; F(1, 246) = .38, n.s.; rugged brand personality conditions: $M_{Rugged\ behavior} = 4.66$ vs. $M_{Sophisticated\ behavior} = 4.23$; F(1, 246) = .18, n.s.).

These findings are supported by qualitative evidence from our open-ended question regarding how the company could improve its service. A participant in the unfamiliar brand/sophisticated brand personality/rugged employee behavior (employee–brand misalignment) condition shared the following:

> The company could hire employees that are more consistent with the image that they want to portray. Although she [the employee] is friendly and helpful, her voice and word choice did not match Luxe's image in my mind. The casual manner of the conversation hurt the "uppity" image that Luxe strives for.

Furthermore, a participant in the unfamiliar brand/rugged brand personality/sophisticated employee behavior (employee–brand misalignment) condition commented,

> The customer service was great, yet she [the employee] had no country-western flair. If I were Tucker Brothers, I would hire women from the south. And I would match the spirit of the call by having country music play while putting the customer on hold.

Consistent with our finding that employee–brand alignment is less important for familiar brands, a participant in the familiar brand/rugged brand personality/sophisticated employee (employee–brand misalignment) condition responded,

> I liked the phone conversation. I didn't mind that the particular phone operator didn't exactly match the image that Wrangler puts out. I already know who they are.

FIGURE 1
Study 1: Effects of Employee Behavior, Brand Personality, and Brand Familiarity on Overall Brand Evaluation

A: Unfamiliar Brands
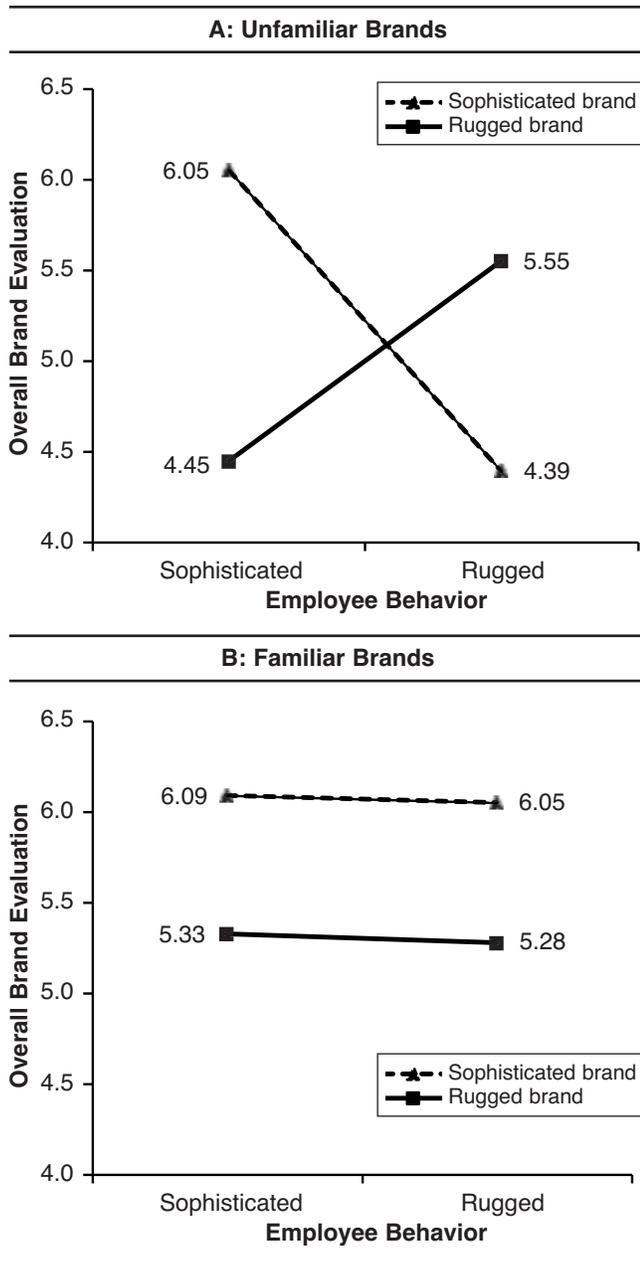
B: Familiar Brands

These findings provide additional support to our contention that unfamiliar brands have the most to gain by extending brand positioning to include their employees' behavior.

Discussion

Study 1 provides support for H_1 and H_2 across two different brand personality settings with employee service provided in response to a customer's mistaken order. The results demonstrate that aligning employee behavior with the brand personality leads to higher overall brand evaluations (H_{1a}) and higher customer-based brand equity evaluations (H_{1b}). Study 1 also demonstrates that employee–brand alignment

is particularly powerful for brands that are new to the market or otherwise unfamiliar to customers (H_{2a-b}). To gain a deeper understanding of why employee–brand alignment affects brand evaluations, especially for unfamiliar brands, we turn to Study 2, in which we test the mediating role of conceptual fluency. To increase generalizability across service contexts, we also extend our test of employee–brand alignment effects beyond the service recovery situation examined in Study 1 to a more neutrally charged customer service context that is commonplace in everyday encounters. Because our findings for customer-based brand equity followed the same pattern as results for overall brand evaluation, we do not continue this line of inquiry in subsequent experiments.

Study 2

Overview

Study 2 tested H_1–H_3 and incorporated the same experimental procedure used in Study 1 with a few modifications. In this study, we tested our hypotheses in the context of routine customer service, rather than service provided in response to an error as in Study 1, and we explored the explanatory role of conceptual fluency. In addition, we held brand personality constant so that all scenarios reflected sophisticated brands. Study 2 consisted of a 2×2 between-subjects experimental design, in which we manipulated employee behavior alignment with the brand personality (aligned vs. misaligned) and brand familiarity (familiar vs. unfamiliar). We recruited 212 nonstudent participants using Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk online panel and randomly assigned them to conditions. Participant ages ranged from 18 years to 71 years, with a mean age of 36.6 years. Fifty-two percent indicated they were female, and all participants were U.S. residents.

Method

As in Study 1, we manipulated service employee behavior with an audio recording of a customer service call in which the employee behaves in either a sophisticated or rugged manner. During the simulated service interaction, the customer calls a sophisticated retailer, asks an employee several general questions regarding the firm's products and shipping policy, and then places an order. This represents a typical service encounter commonplace to retail and service firms and is thus an important context in which to test the effects of branded service encounters. As in the previous study, we pretested the employee's script and line delivery to reflect the intended employee behavior traits in each condition. A pretest (N = 63) ANOVA revealed that participants rated the actor's performance as significantly more sophisticated in the brand-aligned condition (M = 5.40 [out of 7]) than in the brand-misaligned condition (M = 2.41; F(1, 61) = 102.71, $p < .001$) and as significantly more rugged in the brand-misaligned condition (M = 5.82) than in the brand-aligned condition (M = 2.31; F(1, 61) = 182.17, $p < .001$). As in Study 1, we provided information on an actual or a hypothetical sophisticated retail brand's espoused personality and incorporation date to signal an established, familiar

brand (actual brand: Nordstrom) or a new-to-market, unfamiliar brand (hypothetical brand: Luxe).

We used the same procedure and measures as in Study 1, including the overall brand evaluation index (α = .93). Important to this study, we also measured brand conceptual fluency using a three-item measure that we developed for this research. Building on the definition of conceptual fluency as the ease with which people process and understand information (Lee and Labroo 2004), we developed the following items: "I have a clear understanding of what this brand stands for," "It was easy for me to identify what this brand represents to customers," and "It was easy for me to describe what this brand represents to customers." We created a brand conceptual fluency index by averaging these three measures (α = .95). At the end of the survey, participants responded to an open-ended question regarding changes the retailer could make to improve its customer service. They also answered a factual question related to the scenario, which served as an audio and/or attention validation. To assess whether they listened to the entire recording, we asked participants what type of product was discussed during the customer service call (a shirt). Of the 212 participants recruited, 199 passed the audio validation and are included in the subsequent analysis.

Results

Manipulation checks. The manipulations of brand familiarity and employee behavior were effective. A two-way ANOVA with the brand familiarity index measure (α = .97) as the dependent variable and brand familiarity and employee behavior as the two independent factors showed a main effect only for brand familiarity ($F(1, 194) = 238.96$, $p < .001$). Participants in the familiar brand condition rated brand familiarity as significantly higher (M = 4.69) than participants in the unfamiliar brand condition (M = 1.61). Furthermore, a two-way ANOVA with employee sophistication as the dependent variable and brand familiarity and employee behavior as the two independent factors showed a main effect only for employee behavior ($F(1, 194) = 251.33$, $p < .001$). Participants in the employee–brand aligned condition rated employee behavior as significantly more sophisticated (M = 5.40) than participants in the employee–brand misaligned condition (M = 2.38). No other effects in these ANOVAs were significant (F < 1).

Preliminary analysis. A 2 (employee–brand alignment: aligned, misaligned) × 2 (brand familiarity: familiar, unfamiliar) ANOVA with the overall brand evaluation index as the dependent variable indicated a significant main effect of employee–brand alignment ($F(1, 194) = 59.91$, $p < .001$) and a significant employee–brand alignment × brand familiarity interaction ($F(1, 194) = 14.39$, $p < .001$; for full results, see Table 2). As predicted in H_{1a}, overall brand evaluation ratings were higher when employee behavior was aligned (M = 5.77) than when it was misaligned with the brand personality (M = 4.55).

Alignment × brand familiarity interaction. Consistent with H_{2a} and the results of Study 1, for unfamiliar brands, overall brand evaluation ratings were significantly higher when employee behavior and brand personality were

aligned than when they were misaligned ($M_{Aligned}$ = 5.93 vs. $M_{Misaligned}$ = 4.10; $F(1, 194) = 67.30$, $p < .001$). There was also a less powerful but significant difference in overall brand evaluation due to employee–brand alignment for familiar brands ($M_{Aligned}$ = 5.62 vs. $M_{Misaligned}$ = 4.99; $F(1, 194) = 7.70$, $p < .01$). For an illustration of these results, see Figure 2.

The mediating role of conceptual fluency. We conducted a 2 × 2 ANOVA with conceptual fluency as our dependent variable. As we expected, employee–brand alignment exerted a main effect on conceptual fluency ($F(1, 194) = 66.72$, $p < .001$; for full results, see Table 2). This main effect was qualified by a significant employee–brand alignment × brand familiarity effect on conceptual fluency ($F(1, 194) = 19.97$, $p < .001$). Planned follow-up analyses revealed that, for unfamiliar brands, conceptual fluency was significantly higher when the employee behavior and the brand personality were aligned than when they were misaligned ($M_{Aligned}$ = 5.48 vs. $M_{Misaligned}$ = 3.09; $F(1, 194) = 80.80$, $p < .001$). There was also a less powerful but significant effect of employee–brand alignment on conceptual fluency for familiar brands ($M_{Aligned}$ = 5.38 vs. $M_{Misaligned}$ = 4.68; $F(1, 194) = 6.77$, $p = .01$). Therefore, employee–brand alignment affected conceptual fluency, with more pronounced effects for unfamiliar brands.

Next, to establish whether conceptual fluency mediated the interactive effect of employee–brand alignment and brand familiarity on overall brand evaluation (H_3), we conducted a mediated moderation analysis (Hayes 2013; Muller, Judd, and Yzerbyt 2005) using conceptual fluency as our mediation variable. We estimated a path analysis that included direct paths for employee behavior and brand

FIGURE 2
Study 2: Effects of Employee–Brand Alignment and Brand Familiarity on Overall Brand Evaluation
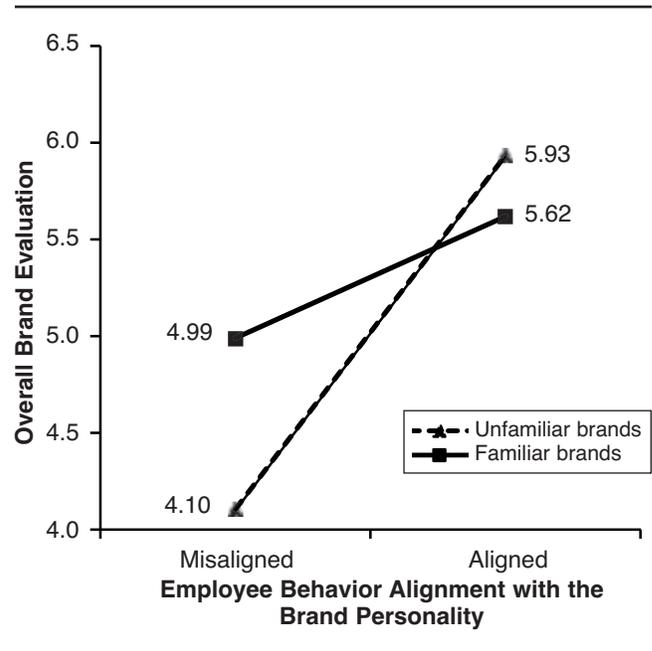
familiarity and their interaction on overall brand evaluation. Using 5,000 bootstrap samples, the procedure indicated a significant indirect path that was mediated by conceptual fluency (b = .5403, t = 11.7896, p < .001), suggesting that conceptual fluency mediated the employee–brand alignment × brand familiarity effect on overall brand evaluation. A 95% bootstrap confidence interval for this indirect effect is wholly below zero (−1.3698 to −.5187). Therefore, consistent with H_3, conceptual fluency mediates the moderated effect of employee–brand alignment and brand familiarity on overall brand evaluations.[3]

Discussion

Study 2 provides a test of employee–brand alignment with nonstudent participants in the context of general, everyday customer service, which is a frequent occurrence in retail and service firms. Consistent with Study 1, we found added support for employee–brand alignment in that aligning employee behavior with the brand personality led to increased overall brand evaluations, with more pronounced results for unfamiliar brands. Furthermore, Study 2 sheds more light on why employee–brand alignment affects brand evaluations by demonstrating the underlying role of brand conceptual fluency, or the ease of processing of a brand's meaning. The results demonstrate that conceptual fluency mediates the moderated effect of employee–brand alignment and brand familiarity on overall brand evaluations. That is, when employee–brand alignment is present, customers more easily process the brand meaning, thereby increasing overall brand evaluation. Moreover, these effects are stronger for unfamiliar brands than familiar brands. Next, Study 3 examines the role of employee authenticity in brand-aligned behavior to understand whether boundary conditions exist that will help predict when employee–brand alignment is more or less influential.

Study 3

In Study 3, we aimed to build on the results of Studies 1 and 2 by establishing a boundary condition in which employees' brand-aligned behaviors would be less influential in supporting the brand positioning. We did so by examining how variations in employee authenticity affect overall brand evaluation ratings. We used the same sophisticated brand names and manipulations used in Studies 1 and 2,

with one important modification. For Study 3, we tested two types of employee behavior–brand alignment: authentic and less authentic. Specifically, in the highly authentic brand-aligned condition, the trained actor embodies the sophisticated brand personality in a felt, natural, and believable manner. In line with work on authenticity (Ashforth and Tomiuk 2000; Hothschild 2003), the actor was directed to use deep acting and internalize elements of the brand personality as if she truly possessed sophisticated traits in her natural personality. In the less authentic brand-aligned behavior condition, the actor was directed to use surface acting and embody the sophisticated brand personality in an unfelt, less natural, and less believable manner. In this condition, she was not directed to internalize the brand personality but to appear sophisticated even though this trait was not a part of her natural personality. For comparison, we also included a brand-misaligned behavior condition using the rugged behavior manipulation from Studies 1 and 2. Study 3 used the service failure and recovery script related to the mistaken shirt order used in Study 1.

Thus, Study 3 tested $H_{4a–b}$ in a 3 × 2 between-subjects design in which we manipulated employee–brand alignment (aligned/authentic, aligned/less authentic, misaligned) and brand familiarity (familiar vs. unfamiliar). Our sample consisted of 361 students from Arizona State University, randomly assigned to one of six conditions; all study participants volunteered for the study to receive course extra credit.

Method

As in previous studies, participants listened to an audio recording of a trained actor who played the role of a frontline employee during a brief customer service call. A pretest (N = 26) of the authentic and less authentic brand-aligned employee conditions analyzed with an ANOVA revealed that the actor's performance was significantly more natural-sounding in the authentic condition (M = 4.00 [on a seven-point scale]) than in the less authentic condition (M = 2.50; F(1, 24) = 6.34, p < .05) and also significantly more sincere in the authentic condition (M = 5.57) than in the less authentic condition (M = 4.25; F(1, 24) = 5.24, p < .05). Conversely, the actor's performance was significantly more dramatic sounding in the less authentic condition (M = 6.00) than in the authentic condition (M = 2.00; F(1, 24) = 68.92, p < .001) and also significantly more theatrical in the less authentic condition (M = 6.45) than in the authentic condition (M = 2.50; F(1, 24) = 51.25, p < .001). As we expected, no differences emerged on perceptions of the actor's perceived sophistication across authentic (M = 4.14) and less authentic brand-aligned employee conditions (M = 3.95; F(1, 24) = 1.67, n.s.). We collected dependent measures for the overall brand evaluation index (α = .96) as well as the measures for manipulation checks, including perceived employee authenticity, using the same procedure and measures as in Study 1.

Results

Manipulation checks. As in previous studies, manipulation checks for brand familiarity, brand sophistication, and

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[3]Although we did not hypothesize mediation effects for customer-based brand equity in Study 2, we conducted a mediated moderation analysis (Hayes 2013; Muller, Judd, and Yzerbyt 2005) using the conceptual fluency index as our mediation variable. We estimated a path analysis that included direct paths for employee behavior and brand familiarity and their interaction on customer-based brand equity. Using 5,000 bootstrap samples, the procedure indicated a significant indirect path that was mediated by conceptual fluency (b = .6197, t = 12.6742, p < .001), suggesting that conceptual fluency mediated the employee–brand alignment × brand familiarity effect on overall brand evaluation. A 95% bootstrap confidence interval for this indirect effect is wholly below zero (−1.5583 to −.5855). Therefore, conceptual fluency mediates the moderated effect of employee–brand alignment and brand familiarity on customer-based brand equity.

employee–brand alignment were successful. A 3 × 2 ANOVA with perceived employee authenticity as the dependent measure and employee–brand alignment and brand familiarity as the two independent factors revealed a main effect only for employee–brand alignment ($F(2, 355)$ = 13.54, $p < .001$). A planned contrast revealed that participants in the employee–brand aligned/authentic condition rated employee authenticity as significantly higher (M = 4.43) than participants in the employee–brand aligned/less authentic condition (M = 3.67; $F(1, 355)$ = 10.20, $p < .01$).

Preliminary analysis. A 3 (employee–brand alignment: aligned/authentic, aligned/less authentic, misaligned) × 2 (brand familiarity: familiar, unfamiliar) ANOVA with the overall brand evaluation index as the dependent variable revealed a significant effect of employee–brand alignment ($F(2, 355)$ = 8.71, $p < .001$) and a significant employee–brand alignment × familiarity interaction ($F(2, 355)$ = 4.64, $p < .05$) (for full results, see Table 2).

Effects of alignment and authenticity on overall brand evaluation. As H_{4a} predicted, overall brand evaluation ratings were significantly higher when employee behavior was aligned and authentic (M = 5.90) than when it was aligned and less authentic (M = 5.31) or misaligned with the brand personality (M = 5.49; $F(1, 355)$ = 15.57, $p < .001$). This finding suggests that implementing branded service encounters without training employees to internalize elements of the brand positioning and deliver authentic performances is not worth the investment. It produces the same effect on customer brand evaluations as not aligning employees' behavior with the brand personality (brand-misaligned behavior).

Moderating role of familiarity. Consistent with H_{4b}, for unfamiliar brands, overall brand evaluation ratings were significantly higher when the employee behavior was aligned and authentic (M = 6.15) than when employee behavior was aligned and less authentic (M = 5.15) or misaligned (M = 5.38; $F(2, 355)$ = 12.95, $p < .001$). For familiar brands, there was no significant difference in brand evaluations due to the authenticity of the employee's brand aligned behavior ($M_{Aligned/authentic}$ = 5.65, $M_{Aligned/less authentic}$ = 5.45, $M_{Misaligned}$ = 5.62; n.s.; see Figure 3). This finding provides support for H_{4b} and suggests that the authenticity of an employee's brand-aligned performance is more important for unfamiliar than for familiar brands.

Discussion

In Study 3, we examined how the authenticity of employees' brand-aligned behavior affected overall brand evaluations. The results related to employee–brand alignment were consistent with Studies 1 and 2. In addition, the results support H_{4a}, which proposes that employees' use of more authentic internalization techniques in their brand-aligned performances would lead to increased overall brand evaluation ratings compared with less authentic performances. As H_{4b} predicts, these results are stronger for brands that were unfamiliar to customers. Notably, when employees did not internalize characteristics of the brand personality and performed "unfelt," less authentic brand-aligned performances,

FIGURE 3
Study 3: Effects of Employee–Brand Alignment, Employee Authenticity, and Brand Familiarity on Overall Brand Evaluation
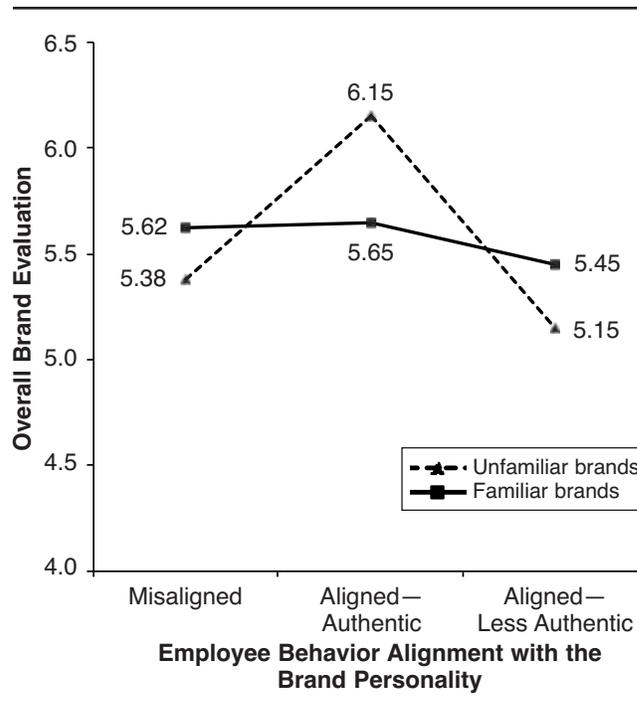
customers viewed this scenario no differently than if the employees had not altered their behavior to align with the brand personality. This finding provides support that employee authenticity acts as a boundary condition for the effects we found previously on overall brand evaluation and has significant employee training implications for the implementation of branded service encounters.

Study 4

Our previous studies have provided strong evidence in support of our theory of employee–brand alignment. In Study 4, we extend the generalizability of our findings to contexts beyond the retail telephone customer service setting used in our experiments. In this study, we used a critical incident methodology in an attempt to better understand the effects of brand-aligned behavior on overall brand evaluation (H_{1a}), customer-based brand equity (H_{1b}), and conceptual fluency in a range of service encounters. Prior research (Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault 1990; Folkes and Patrick 2003) has used this method to gather data on a variety of everyday service interactions in field settings.

Method

We followed the critical incident protocol (Flanagan 1954; Gremler 2004) by asking respondents to describe and evaluate recent service experiences in which they interacted with frontline employees. Participants were recruited using Amazon. com's Mechanical Turk online panel. Ages ranged from 19 years to 75 years, with a mean age of 35 years. Forty-four

percent indicated that they were female, and all participants were U.S. residents.

Participants were asked to think of the last time they visited a service company to which they were new or regular customers, to describe the incident in detail, and to answer questions regarding the interaction they had with a service employee during this visit. Participants provided specific details, including the name of the service-providing firm, the mode of service delivery (88% in person, 9% over the phone, and 3% over e-mail or online chat), the date of service (100% took place within the prior month), and whether they considered themselves new or regular customers of the service company. The time delay between the incident and the report ranged from a few hours to one month.

For each encounter, participants described what the employee said and did during the encounter and what the employee could have done to increase their satisfaction. Afterward, they completed scale items related to the brand, including the five-item overall brand evaluation scale as in Studies 1–3 (for scale items, see Table 1; $\alpha = .98$) and the four-item customer-based brand equity scale as in Study 1 (for scale items, see Table 1; $\alpha = .94$). Next, participants described the brand's image using their own words and then completed the three-item brand conceptual fluency scale used in Study 2 ($\alpha = .94$; averaged to create the brand conceptual fluency index). Finally, participants completed the scale item "The employee fit with this company's brand image" as a measure of employee–brand alignment.

In total, we collected 96 critical incident questionnaires. Participants described and evaluated general service interactions with a variety of service employees in numerous industries, including accounting, banking, investment, medical, dental, automotive, transportation, insurance, telecommunications, retail, salon, hotel, dining, and online services.

Results

A series of linear regression analyses demonstrated that perceptions of employee–brand alignment were a significant predictor of overall brand evaluation, (B = .42, t = 5.30, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .23$), customer-based brand equity (B = .44, t = 4.02, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .15$), and brand conceptual fluency (B = .44, t = 4.40, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .17$). These results support H_{1a-b} and our general premise that employee–brand alignment increases conceptual fluency. Furthermore, using the bootstrapping method for mediation analysis used in Study 2, the procedure indicated a significant indirect path from employee–brand alignment to overall brand evaluation that was mediated by brand conceptual fluency (b = .2590, t = 3.6876, $p < .001$; 5,000 bootstrap samples). A 95% bootstrap confidence interval for this indirect effect is wholly above zero (.1921 to .3386). Therefore, we find additional support that conceptual fluency mediates the effect of employee–brand alignment on overall brand evaluations. Moreover, mediation results followed the same pattern for customer-based brand equity as a dependent variable.

Discussion

Although our controlled experiments provide confident assertions about the causality of employee–brand align-

ment, this critical incident study offers a broader test of employee–brand alignment in an assortment of service contexts outside the retail telephone customer service scenarios tested in the laboratory and provides greater assurance about the generalizability of our findings. It is worth noting that although the results from Study 4 are consistent with our earlier framework, causality cannot be definitively determined using the critical incident method.[4]

General Discussion

Frontline employees are increasingly recognized as a rich source of brand information (Matta and Folkes 2005; Wentzel 2009) and, as such, are becoming more central in companies' brand-building efforts (Morhart, Herzog, and Tomczak 2009). By aligning frontline employees' behavior with the brand's positioning, our research is the first to develop the construct of branded service encounters and to empirically test its impact on customer brand evaluations. Although the term "service encounter" is one of the oldest and most well-established constructs in the service marketing literature, we are the first to develop the new "branded service encounter" construct. Through a series of four studies, we show how branded service encounters, or those in which employee behaviors are aligned with the brand positioning, can significantly influence customer brand responses, particularly for unfamiliar brands. Our findings not only establish the vital role of employees in firms' brand positioning strategies but also uncover when and why employee behavior is most influential in reinforcing brand meaning and shaping affective brand evaluations and customer-based brand equity. Our findings can explain how frontline employees may help position brands by increasing conceptual fluency of brand meaning during one-to-one customer interactions or branded service encounters.

Our findings from Studies 1 and 2 have significant implications for marketing, operations, and human resources managers in that we suggest that firms should recruit, select, train, and motivate frontline employees to perform their service roles in a manner that represents the firm's espoused brand personality. Only then can customer-facing employees truly realize their responsibilities as the "living brand" (Bendapudi and Bendapudi 2005) and represent a powerful brand-building asset, particularly for new-to-market or otherwise unfamiliar brands. When customers initially encounter a brand that is unfamiliar to them, it is critically important for frontline employees to deliver service that supports the brand's espoused image. If this occurs during a customer's initial experiences, unfamiliar brands

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[4]Note also that brand familiarity did not moderate the effects of employee–brand alignment as in earlier studies. This result is likely explained by our instructions to study participants: we asked them to describe service encounters in which they are new or regular customers. Perhaps this treatment was not strong enough to elicit the increased processing motivation that arises from the lowest levels of familiarity manipulated in Studies 1–3 in our experiments with unknown brands. We acknowledge this limitation of Study 4 and suggest that further field research investigate how employees can foster conceptual fluency for brand meaning at all ranges of brand familiarity to explore these effects in more depth.

have the potential to match—or even surpass—market leaders in terms of overall brand evaluations. This is a surprising finding that should also be of interest to more established competitors whose employees do not offer this brand-strengthening advantage to the same degree.

Our third study revealed an important boundary condition of our findings: the authenticity of the employee's behavioral alignment with the brand. The results of this study suggest that employees should internalize elements of the brand's positioning when altering their behavior to meet their employer's brand display rules. This finding has significant implications for the brand-aligned recruiting and selection of employees who can authentically embody the brand personality in their natural behavior or, alternatively, can be trained to use techniques such as internalizing brand values to achieve convincing brand-aligned performances.

The controlled experimental design of the research enabled us to test causal effects between different types of brands and service settings to shed light on situations in which employees can be most influential as brand builders in their customer-facing roles. This is a novel contribution to the branding literature because the strength of retailer-branded private label products has contributed to the rise in retailer power over the past decade (Grewal 2004), but no empirical work to date has focused on the retail brand equity–building effects of employee behavior. This research begins to address this gap. In addition, our research builds a link between Hothschild's (2003) theory of emotional labor and branding in that we examine how frontline employees can effectively alter their behavior to perform to brand display rules by internalizing elements of the brand positioning and values. Our finding, in which authentic brand-aligned emotional labor enhances customer brand evaluations, adds to the increasing body of work that measures the impact of employee authenticity on customer perceptions of service (Ashforth and Tomiuk 2000; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2006).

Our research also has important implications for marketing managers, in addition to human resources and operations managers. First, we call for marketing managers to deliberately design and direct their firms' branded service encounters in concert with other strategic brand concept management efforts, such as branded advertising campaigns and public relations programs. We acknowledge that building standardized brand experiences can be challenging for firms because human-delivered services are essentially performances and, as such, can vary from employee to employee (Zeithaml, Bitner, and Gremler 2013). Our findings lend support to the importance of internal marketing programs, which communicate brand messaging inside the company and help employees understand and internalize brand values (Gilly and Wolfinbarger 1998).

Furthermore, to implement branded service encounters successfully, we suggest that brand managers work closely with their human resources and operations groups to hire employees who naturally typify brand personality characteristics and train them to internalize brand values and authentically perform to brand-aligned standards (i.e., to use brand-aligned phrases and scripting in deep acting techniques) during interactions with customers. These cross-functional brand management efforts should serve to create more consistent evidence of the brand meaning in every service encounter, but careful attention must be paid so that employees' brand-aligned behavior does not become unfelt, robotic, or otherwise inauthentic. We suggest that firms work to strike a balance between branded service standardization and customization by empowering employees with a degree of personal latitude to bring the brand to life authentically in their own manner during service encounters. With this goal in mind, firms should use role-play training methods in which managers and/or other associates play the part of customers so employees can practice their deep acting techniques in a risk-free setting. Furthermore, we recommend the use of "mystery shopping" to periodically observe employees' interactive behaviors with customers. Human resources professionals might use the results from this research in coaching individual employees and in modifying hiring, training, and performance management practices as needed. Although firm investments in customized brand-based recruiting, training, and performance management can be expensive and risky due to the high turnover in frontline service positions (Sussman 2006), we suggest that it is a worthwhile endeavor, particularly for new or otherwise less familiar brands.

We recognize several limitations that must be taken into account when generalizing our results. The first limitation is that our experiments did not include neutral conditions (in which the brand is not sophisticated or rugged). Another limitation involves the audio manipulations of customer service phone calls. Although audio manipulations offer a realistic experience for study participants, it remains unclear whether findings would be similar if we had used a stronger manipulation, such as allowing participants to experience a live service encounter with an actor playing the role of a frontline employee in a field experiment. Further research might manipulate the employee's physical appearance, uniform, or other branded tangibles to align (misalign) with the brand positioning to investigate effects on the perceived authenticity of an employee's brand-aligned behavior. Moreover, the employee's service performance could also be manipulated to explore how service quality might interact with employee–brand alignment.

Although our experimental design enabled us to isolate the effects of brand-aligned behavior and familiarity on customer brand evaluations, it remains unclear if findings would be similar for business-to-business brands or professional service brands. Although we expect effects to be stronger in business-to-business branding contexts because key contact employees typically hold more power and influence over customer–firm relationships than frontline business-to-customer workers (Bendapudi and Leone 2002), it is our hope that future studies explore this topic. We also call for additional research that investigates how branded service encounters interact with other factors prevalent in service environments, such as other frontline employees (Matta and Folkes 2005) and store atmospherics (Bitner 1992). In addition, future studies might uncover employee–brand alignment's relationship to actual customer spending to fully realize the financial power of this integrated branding strategy.

Appendix A: Brand Personality Descriptions

Sophisticated Brands: Familiar Brand (Unfamiliar Brand)

Nordstrom Inc. (Luxe Inc.) is one of the nation's leading (newest) upscale retailers with many (a growing number of) stores located across the United States. Nordstrom (Luxe) also serves customers through its online presence and catalogs.

Since 1901 (the previous year), customers have come to Nordstrom (Luxe) for glamour, sophistication, exceptional fashion, and a smooth shopping experience.

Known for their charm and refinement, Nordstrom's (Luxe's) goal is to provide outstanding service every day, one customer at a time.

Rugged Brands: Familiar Brand (Unfamiliar Brand)

Wrangler Inc. (Tucker Brothers Outfitters Inc.) is one of the nation's leading (newest) country-western and outdoors retailers with many (a growing number of) stores located across the United States. Wrangler (Tucker Brothers Outfitters) also serves customers through its online presence and catalogs.

Since 1904 (the previous year), customers have come to Wrangler (Tucker Brothers Outfitters) for rugged, sturdy clothing and a rock-solid shopping experience.

Known for their hardy construction and use of strong, durable materials, Wrangler's (Tucker Brothers Outfitters') goal is to provide outstanding service every day, one customer at a time.

Appendix B: Scripts for Study 1

Customer: I just received a shirt from your company and realized that I ordered the wrong size. I ordered a medium, but should have asked for a large. It was my mistake completely.

Sophisticated Employee: I'm sorry that happened. Did you place your order online or through our catalog?

Rugged Employee: Well bless your heart. I'm sorry that happened. Tell me now, did you place your order online or through our catalog?

Customer: Online.

Sophisticated Employee: Thank you. Do you have your order number?

Rugged Employee: Thanks. Do you have your order number handy?

Customer: Sure. It's E-102985.

Sophisticated Employee: I've located your order in the system. Are you Mr. David Hall?

Rugged Employee: I've found you in our system here. Are you David Hall?

Customer: Yes.

Sophisticated Employee: I have all of the information about your recent order, Mr. Hall. Please hold for a moment while I review our current stock to locate a size large.

Rugged Employee: I have everything I need to know about your recent order right here, David. Please hang on for a sec while I check if we have a large in stock.

Customer: OK.

Sophisticated Employee *(puts customer on hold for 3 seconds)*: Yes, we have a large in stock and we'll be pleased to send it to you immediately at no extra charge.

Rugged Employee (puts customer on hold for 3 seconds)*: Yes, we do have a large in stock and we'll be happy to send one out to you right quick at no extra charge.*

Customer: That's great. Now how do I return the size medium that I originally ordered?

Sophisticated Employee: We will include a prepaid return label with the new shirt so you may simply place the unwanted shirt into the shipping box, attach the label, and send it back to us in the mail. Or, if you'd prefer, you can always return the unwanted shirt to one of our stores. It is our goal to make the return process simple for customers.

Rugged Employee: We will include a prepaid return label with the new shirt so you can simply place that unwanted shirt into the shipping box, attach the label, and send it back to us in the mail. Or, if you'd rather, you can always return the unwanted shirt to one of our stores. We hope to make the return process easy as pie for you customers.

Customer: Well, that was easy. Thank you.

Sophisticated Employee: It was my pleasure. You should receive your shirt within 2–3 business days. Do you need assistance with anything else today?

Rugged Employee: You betcha. You should receive your shirt within 2–3 business days. What else can I do for you today?

Customer: That will be it.

Sophisticated Employee: Wonderful. Thank you for calling. Goodbye.

Rugged Employee: Okey-dokey. Thanks for calling. Bye now.

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