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Highlighting Effort versus Talent in Service Employee Performance: Customer Attributions and Responses

Firms often attribute their service employees' competent performance to either dedicated effort or natural talent. Yet, it is unclear how such practices affect customer evaluations of service employees and customer outcomes. Moreover, prior work has primarily examined attributions of one's own performance, providing little insight on the impact of attributions of others' performance. Drawing on research on the warmth-competence framework and performance attributions, the current research proposes and finds that consumers expect a more communal and less exchange-oriented relationship when a service employee's competent performance is attributed to dedicated effort rather than natural talent, because effort (vs. talent) attribution leads consumers to perceive the employee as warmer (Studies 1-3). The authors further propose customer helping behaviors as downstream consequences of relationship expectations, and find that effort (vs. talent) attribution is more likely to induce customers' word-of-mouth and idea provision behaviors (Studies 4-5). The findings enrich existing literature by identifying performance attributions as a managerially meaningful antecedent of relationship expectations, and offer practical guidance on how marketers can influence consumers' relationship expectations and helping behaviors.

Keywords: communal and exchange relationships, attribution theory, competence and warmth, service employee performance, customer helping behaviors

Statement of Intended Contribution

The current research suggests that consumers are more likely to expect a communal relationship when a service employee's competent performance is attributed to dedicated effort rather than natural talent, because effort (vs. talent) attribution leads consumers to perceive the service employee as warmer. This paper offers several theoretical contributions. First, while most prior work in the marketing literature focuses on attributions of one's own performance and their effects on product evaluation and choice, this paper examines attributions of others' performance. Second, it broadens our understanding of social judgments in commercial relationships. While prior research on the warmth–competence framework has examined how a certain level of competence is related to warmth perception, the current research examines the attributions of competence as a new dimension that influences warmth perception, holding an objective level of competence constant. Third, while prior work has predominantly examined the downstream consequences of relationship expectations, we propose attributions of service employee performance as an antecedent of relationship expectations. The current research also provides important practical insights. The findings suggest that highlighting effort or talent of a service employee's performance can change consumers' attention to person- and job-related information about the employee. The findings also provide guidance to service firms regarding whether to highlight dedicated effort or natural talent as the cause of competent performance to induce customer helping behaviors. Findings in a real firm context and a field experiment indicate that firms can highlight effort (vs. talent) attribution to make consumers more likely to engage in customer helping behaviors such as word-of-mouth behaviors or generating new product ideas.

When firms communicate information about their service employees' competent performance, they often attribute it to either dedicated effort or natural talent. For example, on their websites, financial services firms such as Citigroup states that "Citi works tirelessly...we strive to create the best outcomes" and Partners Group Holding asserts that "we work hard and deliver outstanding results." In contrast, Manulife Financial highlights that the "talent of our employees is what makes Manulife Financial a successful organization" and BlackRock says "our best solutions come from the contributions of a group of talented and smart people" (see Web Appendix W1 for more examples). We systematically examined the company websites of the top service firms on the 2018 Forbes Global 2000 list and found that many top financial and healthcare services firms mention these two types of performance attribution on their websites (see Figure 1). Despite the real-world prevalence of references to these two types of performance attribution, it is unclear how firms' promotions of performance attributions affect customer evaluations of service employees and customer outcomes.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Academic research suggests two types of attribution of people's performance—one to dedicated effort and the other to natural talent (Brown et al. 2018; Dweck 2000; Weiner 1972). Both psychology and marketing literature has mainly examined a fixed or malleable view of their own performance and its impact on how one judges him/herself (e.g., judgements of one's own intelligence or personality; Dweck 2000; Dweck and Leggett 1988), his/her own performance (e.g., academic performance; Hong et al. 1999; Weiner 1972), or brand and product evaluations (Mathur, Block, Yucel-Aybat 2014; Murphy and Dweck 2016), providing little insight on relationship judgments and behaviors toward others. However, in service relationships, beliefs about others' performance can influence relationships with those others (e.g., how a customer

views a service employee's performance can influence the customer's relationship with the employee; Bitner 1995). Recognizing this characteristic in service relationships, as well as a lack of research on the attributions of others' performance and their impact on relational aspects, the current research examines how attributions of service employees' performance influence consumers' relationship expectations with and behaviors toward service employees.

We propose that attributions of service employees' competent performance can change the extent to which customers expect a more communal- (or less exchange-) oriented relationship. Prior work conceptualized consumers' relationship expectations with service employees along the communal-exchange continuum (Aggarwal 2004; Clark and Mills 1993). In a communal relationship, consumers expect a service employee to take genuine care of them and understand their needs as a friend or family member would. In an exchange relationship, consumers consider a service employee strictly as a business partner and expect the employee to provide services that will be worth their money. We propose that consumers will expect a more communal and less exchange-oriented relationship when a service employee's competent performance is attributed to dedicated effort rather than natural talent, because effort (vs. talent) attribution leads consumers to perceive the employee as warmer. We further examine customer helping behaviors toward firms (i.e., voluntary and discretionary behaviors that aid firms beyond those required in the purchase of products and services; Bettencourt 1997; Bove et al. 2009) as downstream behavioral consequences of relationship expectations. In particular, we propose that highlighting service employees' effort (vs. talent) can increase customer helping behaviors such as word-of-mouth (WOM) and idea provision.

Our investigation of service employees' performance attributions makes several theoretical and managerial contributions. First, the current research broadens our understanding

of social judgments in commercial relationships. While a considerable body of research has investigated the relation between judgments of competence and warmth (Judd et al. 2005; Yzerbyt, Kervyn, and Judd 2008), this prior work has mainly examined how a certain level of competence is related to warmth perception. The current research examines the *attributions* of competence as a new dimension that influences warmth perception, holding the objective level of competence constant. Second, the marketing literature has focused on the downstream *consequences* of a communal versus exchange relationship with consumers (Aggarwal 2004; Aggarwal and Zhang 2006; Wan, Hui, and Wyer 2011), while very few studies have proposed firm tactics that could induce a certain type of relationship expectation (communal or exchange). For instance, McGraw, Schwartz, and Tetlock (2012) showed that a company's communal obligations (e.g., providing medical care based on need instead of ability to pay) can influence consumers' relationships with the company. The current research enriches the existing literature by examining performance attributions as an *antecedent* of relationship expectations. Third, as mentioned, while most prior work in the marketing literature has focused on attributions of one's own performance and their effect on product evaluation and choice (Mathur, Block, Yucel-Aybat 2014; Murphy and Dweck 2016), our work examines the attributions of *others'* performance.

Our findings also provide important marketing insights. Figure 1 indicates that firms often attribute their employees' performance to effort or talent. Our research proposes that firms can strategically implement such performance attributions to evoke a type of relationship expectation that they want to promote (e.g., highlighting employees' effort when a firm wants to promote a communal-oriented relationship with customers). Thus, performance attribution is a managerially meaningful antecedent of relationship expectations, because it can be embedded in communication messages without requiring customers to have direct interactions with service

employees. Our research also provides implications on customer attention to communication messages. We suggest that customers' relationship expectations can be manifested in their attention towards service employee information. If firms want to attract customers' attention to person-related information (e.g., personal background information about service employees), they can highlight the effort of their employees, whereas if they want customers to focus on job-related information (e.g., what service employees do), they can highlight the talent of their employees. Finally, our research suggests that promoting different types of performance attribution can shape customer behavior. Specifically, by highlighting employees' effort (vs. talent), firms can increase customer helping behaviors such as sharing the firms' information on social networks or providing new product ideas.

Social Judgments and Performance Attributions

Research in social psychology as well as marketing has supported the notion that when people form impressions about others, they tend to make judgments along two fundamental dimensions—competence (e.g., capability, skillfulness, and efficacy) and warmth (e.g., friendliness, helpfulness, and trustworthiness) (Abele and Wojciszke 2014; Fiske et al. 2002). For example, judgments of competence and warmth shape consumers' relationships with commercial partners, such as nonprofit and for-profit firms (Aaker, Vohs, and Mogilner 2010), salespeople (Scott, Mende, and Bolton 2013), and brands (Kervyn, Fiske, and Malone 2012). This line of research has investigated the relations between judgments of competence and warmth, mainly by examining how a certain level of competence is related to warmth perception. Some studies reported that a higher level of competence results in greater warmth perception (Rosenberg, Nelson, and Vivekananthan 1968; Suitner and Maass 2008), while other studies

showed that a lower level of competence leads to greater warmth perception (Judd et al. 2005; Yzerbyt, Provost, and Corneille 2005).

Extending the existing literature, the current research examines the *attributions* of competence as a new dimension of competence influencing warmth perception, holding the objective level of competence constant. Research in social psychology has corroborated *dedicated effort* and *natural talent* as two internal sources of people's performance (Brown et al. 2018; Tsay and Banaji 2011). In the case of dedicated effort, competent performance is believed to be the result of commitment, perseverance, and hard work. In the case of natural talent, competent performance is believed to be the result of innate aptitude. This typology is also in line with implicit theories which suggest that people's performance can be attributed to malleable traits such as effort, or to fixed traits such as natural talent (Dweck 2000; Murphy and Dweck 2016). Also, prior work on attribution theory has made it clear that competence can be attained through either dedicated effort or natural talent. Weiner (2005) suggested that "when associated with aptitude [natural talent], the concept of competence is conceived as mainly uncontrollable, whereas when associated with effort expended, the attainment of competence is conceived as controllable" (p. 79). Thus, conceptually, effort and talent are two different *attributions* of competence. Bridging these two streams of research on the warmth-competence framework and performance attributions, we examine how information on different attributions of competent performance changes warmth judgments and, in turn, relationship expectations.

Employee Performance Attributions and Relationship Expectations

We posit that attributing a service employee's competent performance primarily to dedicated effort (vs. natural talent) makes consumers perceive the employee as warmer. Earlier work indirectly supports this proposition. Prior work has found that when a person's

performance is attributed to effort, that person is more likely to be seen as *one of us* (Hong and Lin-Siegler 2012), because most people generally believe that they also need to exert high effort to succeed (Klein and O'Brien 2017). Indeed, when students learn about successful scientists' hard work in their scientific discoveries, they are more likely to see the scientists as ordinary people (Lin-Siegler et al. 2016). Prior work also has indicated that those who are socially close are perceived to be warmer than those who are socially distant (Leyens et al. 2000). For instance, compared to outgroup members, ingroup members are rated as having a greater capacity to experience emotions and being higher in warmth (Harris and Fiske 2006). Therefore, we propose that compared to talent attribution, effort attribution will make the customer perceive the service employee as warmer.

In contrast, since most people tend to believe that only a few individuals possess natural talent (Emerson and Murphy 2015), talent attribution can increase perceived social distance. Geniuses and exceptionally talented individuals are typically perceived to "have" something that most people do not have and thus are seen as different (Fuchs 2001). Also, Lin-Siegler et al. (2016) noted that viewing scientists as individuals with a special aptitude for science discourages students from feeling connected with the scientists. When one feels disconnected from another individual, one is less likely to attribute the ability to feel to that person (Leyens et al. 2000). For instance, compared to ingroup members, outgroup members are rated as lacking emotional capacity and as more self-centered (Harris and Fiske 2006). Furthermore, people tend to see naturally talented others as disconnected from human experiences and emotionally inert (Klein and O'Brien 2017), and gifted intellectuals are considered to be more antisocial than others (Persson 2007). Teachers often view gifted and talented students as emotionless, antisocial, and insensitive to the feelings of others (Baudson and Preckel 2013; Geake and Gross 2008).

Therefore, compared to effort attribution, talent attribution that can increase perceived social distance between a customer and an employee will make customers perceive a service employee as less warm.

Our research further posits that the perceived warmth of service employees is the basis for consumers' relationship expectations with those employees. Consumers in a communal relationship expect a service employee to take care of them and consider their needs (Aggarwal 2004; Clark and Mills 1993). In contrast, in an exchange relationship, parties understand that the benefits received should correspond to the benefits given, focusing on self-interest (Clark and Mills 1993; Kwak, Puzakova, and Rocereto 2015). Although commercial relationships always involve elements of exchange relationships, such as monetary exchange, consumers' relationship expectations can vary on the communal–exchange continuum, because consumers can expect different degrees of communality in commercial relationships depending on the situation (Aggarwal and Law 2005; Aggarwal and Zhang 2006).

When consumers perceive a service employee to be warm, they will likely expect that the employee will be cooperative, have other-profitable (rather than self-profitable) intentions, and show genuine concern for consumers' needs (Aggarwal and Zhang 2006; Kervyn, Fiske, and Malone 2012). Such expectations are consistent with the norms of communal relationships. In contrast, people tend to expect a cold person to show less empathy for others and care more about him/herself than about others (Kervyn, Fiske, and Malone 2012). Also, when people see others as low in warmth and lacking emotional responsiveness, they can more readily perceive those others as instruments for their own goals (Haslam 2006). For example, viewing others as emotionless helps managers to make hard decisions in difficult situations (e.g., layoff decisions) by seeing those individuals as objects or instruments to achieve their goals (Haslam and

Loughnan 2014). Perceiving others' self-centered intentions and focusing on the instrumentality of others are in line with the characteristics of exchange relationships. Thus, when customers perceive an employee as warmer (less warm), they will expect a more (less) communal-oriented relationship with him or her along the communal–exchange continuum. Thus, we hypothesize:

H₁: Consumers expect a more communal-oriented (or, less exchange-oriented) relationship when a service employee's competent performance is attributed to dedicated effort rather than to natural talent.

H₂: The effect of service employees' performance attributions on consumers' relationship expectations is mediated by warmth judgments regarding the service employees.

Figure 2 depicts our conceptual framework and the flow of the studies. We first present five studies providing empirical evidence for the link between performance attributions and relationship expectations. Study 1A shows that when a service employee's competent performance is attributed to dedicated effort rather than to natural talent, consumers expect a more communal- and less exchange-oriented relationship with the employee. In Study 1B, we examine simultaneous attribution to both effort and talent. Study 2 tests whether perceived warmth underlies the effect of performance attributions on relationship expectations by directly measuring the variable (Study 2A) and by manipulating the perceived warmth of the service employee (Study 2B). Study 3 uses eye-tracking technology to show that effort attribution leads consumers to pay more attention to person- than to job-related information about the service employee. We then develop our hypothesis for customer helping behaviors as downstream consequences of relationship expectations, and present two studies, one using a real firm context (Study 4) and the other in a field experiment (Study 5), to support the hypothesis.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

Study 1A: Service Employee Performance Attribution

In Study 1A, we attribute a service employee's competent performance either to dedicated effort or to natural talent and test whether effort attribution leads participants to expect a more communal-oriented relationship with the employee. We also examine a control condition in which no information about performance attribution is provided.

Method

Two hundred seventy participants (106 female, mean age = 37.59) were recruited online from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) in exchange for monetary compensation.

Performance attribution manipulation. Participants were told that the medical society in a U.S. city periodically featured the city's top physicians and were asked to provide feedback on an article. All participants read the identical information on performance that the physician had received a peer review rating in the top 10% of general physicians in the city. Then, in the effort attribution condition, participants read statements attributing the physician's performance to effort (e.g., "[He/she] puts a lot of effort into the work"), whereas in the talent attribution condition, they read statements attributing the physician's performance to talent (e.g., "[He/she] is naturally skillful at the work"; see Web Appendix W2). The control condition article only stated the physician's performance without any information on performance attribution. As a manipulation check, participants indicated the extent to which they thought the physician had achieved his or her level of performance because of effort or talent with three items (e.g., "Put a lot of effort into his or her work/Was naturally talented at his or her work"; $\alpha = .96$).

Dependent variable. Next, participants rated the degree to which they would expect their relationship with the physician to be communal- or exchange-oriented using eight items adapted from Aggarwal (2004). Five items tapped into communal relationship expectation (e.g., "a

person with whom I would want to interact outside of business”) and three tapped into exchange relationship expectation (e.g., “a person with whom I would interact only for business purposes”; 1 = “not at all,” to 7 = “very much”). In all studies, we followed prior works (Aggarwal 2004; Scott, Mende, and Bolton 2013) and combined the reverse-coded items on exchange relationship expectation with the items on communal relationship expectation ($\alpha = .89$). Measurement items for all studies are listed in Web Appendix W3.

Control variables. Participants responded to questions related to the design (“I like the design of the article”), credibility (“I think the content is credible;”), and understandability (“I think the content is easy to understand”) of the article (1 = “strongly disagree,” to 7 = “strongly agree”), as well as their knowledge of healthcare services (“How much do you know about healthcare services in general?” 1 = “not at all,” to 7 = “very much”), attention to the study (1 = “paid little attention,” to 7 = “paid a lot of attention”), and mood (1 = “feel bad,” to 7 = “feel good”) as control variables. The control variables did not differ across the conditions ($ps > .10$).

Results

Manipulation check. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a significant effect of performance attributions among the conditions ($F(2, 267) = 42.85, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .24$). Participants in the effort attribution condition ($M = 2.35, SD = 1.71$) were more likely to attribute the physician’s performance to dedicated effort than were those in the talent attribution condition ($M = 4.83, SD = 2.05; t(267) = -8.70, p < .001, d = -1.31$). Moreover, performance attribution in the control condition ($M = 2.94, SD = 1.89$) scored in the middle and was significantly different from that in the effort attribution condition ($M = 2.35, SD = 1.71; t(267) = 2.03, p < .05, d = .33$) and that in the talent attribution condition ($M = 4.83, SD = 2.05; t(267) = -6.85, p < .001, d =$

-96). Therefore, neither effort nor talent attribution seems to be a default attribution in the absence of attribution information.

Relationship expectations. A one-way ANOVA revealed that performance attributions had a significant effect on relationship expectations ($F(2, 267) = 8.50, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .06$). Planned contrasts revealed that participants expected their relationship with the physician to be more communal when the physician's performance was attributed to effort ($M = 3.62, SD = 1.15$) than when it was attributed to talent ($M = 2.88, SD = 1.18; t(267) = 4.12, p < .001, d = .64$), supporting H_1 . In addition, participants' relationship expectations in the control condition ($M = 3.24, SD = 1.25$) was significantly lower than that in the effort attribution condition ($M = 3.62, SD = 1.15; t(267) = -2.08, p < .05, d = -.32$) and higher than that in the talent attribution condition ($M = 2.88, SD = 1.18; t(267) = 2.07, p < .05, d = .30$).

Discussion

Study 1A offers preliminary evidence for our primary proposition that individuals expect a more communal-oriented relationship with a service employee whose performance is attributed to effort rather than to talent. The findings also show that either effort or talent attribution changes relationship expectations, compared to when there is no attribution, which indicates that neither of the performance attributions may be the default attribution in consumers' minds. Rather, firms can strategically create communication messages to highlight effort or talent, which can move customers' relationship expectations with their service employees along the communal–exchange continuum. Some might argue that there may be other more direct ways to develop communal relationships, such as by treating customers well and satisfying them. However, these tactics require actual interactions with customers. The current research suggests that communication messages that do not involve interactions with customers can still create a

certain type of relationship expectation. In the next study, we additionally examine a situation in which the performance is simultaneously attributed to both effort and talent.

Study 1B: Performance Attribution to Both Dedicated Effort and Natural Talent

Although researchers have agreed that effort and talent attributions are on opposite ends of a continuum (Hong et al. 1999) and our research focuses on the relative emphasis on effort or talent, firms might communicate both effort and talent, as Figure 1 illustrates. Thus, in Study 1B, we examine simultaneous attribution to both effort and talent. Prior work on attribution theory shows that people tend to perceive that naturally talented people's achievements come without effort (Tsay 2016; Tsay and Banaji 2011). Therefore, providing information about a service employee's natural talent without any information about his or her effort can increase social distance (Lin-Siegler et al. 2016) and lower warmth perception. However, prior work also shows that learning that even talented people (e.g., great scientists like Einstein) had to exert high effort to succeed can increase people's sense of relatedness with those talented people (Hong and Lin-Siegler 2012; Lin-Siegler et al. 2016). Thus, we argue that, compared to talent attribution only, simultaneous attribution to dedicated effort and natural talent can allow consumers to understand that even a talented employee is someone like them—that is, someone who needs to put in a lot of effort to achieve good performance—which will enhance warmth judgments of and a communal relationship expectation toward the employee.

Method

One hundred twenty-five undergraduate students (81 female, mean age = 20.38) from a large university in Hong Kong participated in this laboratory experiment in exchange for monetary compensation. Effort and talent attribution was similar to that in Study 1A. Participants read an article about an accountant whose competent performance (e.g., "...has ranked Jesse in

the top 15% among CPAs in Hong Kong”) was attributed to either effort (e.g., “Jesse puts a lot of effort into the work”) or talent (e.g., “Jesse is naturally skillful at the work”). In the effort-and-talent attribution condition, participants read statements attributing the accountant’s performance to both effort and talent (e.g., “Jesse puts a lot of effort and is naturally skillful at the work,” see Web Appendix W4). After reading the article, participants indicated their relationship expectations with the accountant as in Study 1A.

Results

A one-way ANOVA revealed that performance attributions had a significant effect on relationship expectations ($F(2, 122) = 3.08, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .05$). Replicating the previous findings, effort attribution ($M = 3.47, SD = 1.00$) induced a more communal relationship expectation than talent attribution did ($M = 2.99, SD = .96; t(122) = 2.22, p < .05, d = .49$), further supporting H_1 . Also, effort-and-talent attribution ($M = 3.43, SD = .92$) induced a more communal relationship expectation than talent attribution did ($M = 2.99, SD = .96; t(122) = 2.11, p < .05, d = .47$), but it was not different from effort attribution ($M = 3.47, SD = 1.00; t(122) = -.18, p = .86, d = -.04$).

Discussion

Study 1B reveals that simultaneously attributing a service employee’s performance to both dedicated effort and natural talent yields an effect similar to that of effort attribution only. As long as effort is made salient, consumers perceive a more communal (or less exchange-oriented) relationship with the service employee compared to a situation in which effort information is not salient. It should be noted, however, that our findings do not imply that highlighting both effort and talent is always preferable to highlighting only one or the other. For example, compared to talent attribution only, attribution to both effort and talent can create expectations of a more communal relationship, and such expectations may not align with the

service propositions of a firm that tends to engage in exchange-oriented relationships. In the next study, we test the mechanism for the effect of performance attributions on relationship expectations by directly measuring the perceived warmth of a service employee.

Study 2A: Mediating Role of Perceived Warmth

In Study 2A, we investigate the mechanism underlying the effect of performance attributions on consumers' relationship expectations. We predict that attributing a service employee's performance to effort (vs. talent) leads participants to perceive the employee as warmer and therefore to expect a more communal-oriented relationship with that employee.

Method

Two hundred thirty-five undergraduates (150 female, mean age = 19.98) from a large university in Hong Kong participated in this laboratory experiment in exchange for monetary compensation. Participants were told that a bank on campus was promoting an investment program for university students. They then read an advertisement featuring an investment manager whose competent performance (e.g., "winner of best employee of the year award and ranked in the top 1% in performance") was attributed to either effort (e.g., "I work very hard to pick my investments...") or talent (e.g., "I am talented at picking my investments...", see Web Appendix W5). In this study, we used "top 1%" to reduce the range of the performance level in participants' mind to control competence perceptions.

Manipulation check. Participants indicated the extent to which they thought the investment manager had achieved his or her level of performance because of effort or talent, using a semantic differential scale with three items (e.g., "Put a lot of effort into his or her work/Was naturally talented at his or her work"; $\alpha = .97$).

Measures. Participants then indicated their relationship expectations with the investment manager as in Studies 1A and 1B ($\alpha = .89$). We also measured the extent to which participants perceived the investment manager to be warm with six items (e.g., “friendly”, “warm”; 1 = “not at all,” to 7 = “very much”; Gershon and Cryder 2018; $\alpha = .89$).

Control variables. To ensure that the performance attribution manipulation did not induce different competence perceptions, we measured perceived competence of the investment manager with six items (e.g., “competent”, “capable”; 1 = “not at all,” to 7 = “very much”; Gershon and Cryder 2018; $\alpha = .89$). We also measured perceived attractiveness of the investment manager to check whether the performance attribution manipulation affects attractiveness perceptions. Neither of the variables differed across conditions (all $ps > .20$).

Results

Manipulation check. Participants in the effort attribution condition ($M = 2.10$, $SD = 1.22$) were more likely to attribute the investment manager’s performance to effort than were those in the talent attribution condition ($M = 5.53$, $SD = 1.53$; $t(233) = -18.99$, $p < .001$, $d = -2.48$).

Relationship expectations. Again supporting H_1 , participants expected a more communal relationship when the investment manager’s performance was attributed to effort ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.21$) rather than to talent ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.14$; $t(233) = 2.98$, $p < .01$, $d = .39$).

Perceived warmth. Participants perceived the investment manager as warmer when his performance was attributed to effort ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 1.05$) rather than to talent ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 1.17$; $t(233) = 4.15$, $p < .001$, $d = .54$), supporting H_2 . To establish discriminant validity between perceived warmth and relationship expectations, we performed a confirmatory factor analysis.

For each construct, the average variance extracted (AVE) exceeded .50 (perceived warmth = .51,

relationship expectations = .57). Fornell and Larcker's (1981) test also revealed that both AVEs were higher than the shared variance of .15, confirming that they represent distinct constructs.

Mediation analyses. We tested perceived warmth as a possible mediator with a bootstrapping analysis using PROCESS Model 4 (Preacher and Hayes 2008; see Figure 3). Results revealed that the indirect effect of performance attributions on relationship expectations through perceived warmth was significant (indirect effect = .20, SE = .07, 95% CI = [.09, .36]).

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

Discussion

Study 2A shows that consumers expect a more communal relationship with a service employee when the employee's performance is attributed to effort rather than to talent, because they perceive such an employee to be warmer. This study also established discriminant validity between perceived warmth and relationship expectations. Although correlated, warmth judgment and communal relationship expectation are conceptually distinct constructs. Gershon and Cryder (2018) conceptually and empirically separated warmth perceptions (perceptions of a trait) and inferred communal intent (perceptions of a motive behind a trait or action). Perceived warmth of a service employee is a perceived trait of that employee, which is not specific to a given service context, whereas a communal relationship expectation involves the predicted norms in the relationship with a service employee in a specific service context. This study also shows that performance attributions do not necessarily change perceived competence of the service employee, which is in line with prior work suggesting that effort and talent are two different types of attribution of competence (Weiner 1972, 2005). In the next study, we test our proposed mechanism by directly manipulating the warmth of the employee.

Study 2B: Manipulating Service Employee Warmth

Study 2B uses a moderation-of-process strategy (Spencer, Zanna, and Fong 2005) to manipulate the warmth of a service employee to provide further evidence for warmth as a mediator for the effect of performance attributions on relationship expectations. If effort (vs. talent) attribution leads consumers to expect a more communal (or less exchange-oriented) relationship because the employee is perceived as warmer, information signaling that the employee is warm should attenuate the proposed effect. We employ a 2 (performance attribution: effort vs. talent) \times 2 (warmth: yes vs. no) between-subjects design.

Method

Three hundred seventy-one undergraduate students (233 female, mean age = 20.30) from a large university in Hong Kong participated in this laboratory experiment. Participants read website information about a physician whose competent performance (e.g., "...Dr. Lee received a peer review rating in the top 5% among general practitioners in Hong Kong...") was attributed to either his effort (e.g., "Dr. Lee spends a lot of time.....works really hard to develop personalized health improvement programs...") or talent (e.g., "Dr. Lee has a sharp instinct....naturally skillful at developing personalized health improvement programs...," see Web Appendix W6).

Warmth manipulation. To manipulate the warmth of the physician, we provided additional information that can increase warmth perceptions but is not directly related to the employee's behavior toward his or her customers. Warmth is particularly relevant to the prosocial domain, because people rely on warmth judgments to predict whether or not a person is well-intentioned toward other people (Fiske et al. 2002). Thus, we manipulated the warmth of a service employee by informing participants that the employee donates a part of his earnings to various charity organizations. No such information was mentioned in the control condition.

To test the effectiveness of the warmth manipulation, we conducted an independent pretest ($n = 170$; 106 female; mean age = 20.88). After reading the website information (excluding information on performance attributions), participants indicated the extent to which they perceived the physician to be warm and competent, as in Study 2A. A t test revealed that participants perceived the physician as warmer in the warmth condition ($M = 5.11$, $SD = .77$) than in the no-warmth condition ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 1.13$; $t(168) = 4.45$, $p < .001$, $d = .69$). However, perceived competence did not differ across the two conditions ($p = .22$).

Measures. We measured relationship expectations with the physician as in the previous studies. We also measured participants' expectations about the employee's service process quality with four items (e.g., "unfavorable/favorable", "bad/good"; $\alpha = .93$) and service outcome quality with four items (e.g., "unfavorable/favorable", "bad/good"; $\alpha = .92$). Performance attribution manipulation did not change these expectations (all $ps > .30$).

Results

We ran a 2 (performance attributions: effort vs. talent) \times 2 (warmth: yes vs. no) ANOVA on relationship expectations. The results revealed a significant main effect of performance attributions ($F(1, 367) = 8.07$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$), no significant effect of warmth ($F(1, 367) = .49$, $p = .48$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$), and a significant interaction ($F(1, 367) = 4.07$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$). Planned contrasts revealed that our previous findings were replicated in the no-warmth condition; specifically, effort attribution ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.15$) induced more of a communal relationship expectation than did talent attribution ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 1.05$; $t(367) = 3.41$, $p = .001$, $d = .51$), supporting H₁. In contrast, this effect was attenuated in the warmth condition ($M_{\text{effort}} = 3.88$, $SD_{\text{effort}} = 1.09$ vs. $M_{\text{talent}} = 3.79$, $SD_{\text{talent}} = 1.14$; $t(367) = .59$, $p = .56$, $d = .08$), supporting H₂.

Discussion

In this study, we directly manipulated the mediating variable (i.e., warmth of a service employee). The results support our mechanism that effort (vs. talent) attribution leads consumers to perceive a service employee to be warmer by showing that information signaling that the employee is warm attenuates the effect of performance attributions on relationship expectations. This study also shows that performance attributions do not change participants' expectations about the employee's service process quality and service outcome quality, thus ruling these out as possible alternative explanations for our proposed effects. In the next study, we examine the effect of performance attributions on customer attention.

Study 3: Customer Attention to Service Employee Information

To enhance the validity of our findings, this study provides further evidence for the effect of performance attributions by using an alternative, more objective measure of relationship expectations—consumers' attention to service employee information. We argue that consumers' relationship expectations can be manifested in their attention while reading advertisements. Prior work has shown that under an exchange relationship, individuals focus on their counterparts' instrumental function to ensure that the benefits they are to receive fulfill their own goals (Abele and Wojciszke 2014; Aggarwal 2004). Furthermore, Schroeder and Fishbach (2015) argued that when individuals focus on others' instrumental function, they tend to overlook the facts relating to the personal lives and experiences of those others. Therefore, we predict that if talent attribution leads to greater expectation of an exchange relationship, consumers will pay more attention to information pertaining to the service employee's instrumental function (e.g., what the service employee can do for them) than to personal information about the employee (e.g., personal background information). We use an eye-tracking technique to capture participants'

attention towards service employee information, which allows us to measure a subconscious or preconscious reflection of relationship expectations (Plassman and Mormann 2017).

Method

One hundred forty-seven undergraduate students (110 female, mean age = 20.82) from a large university in Hong Kong participated in this laboratory experiment. We used an eye-tracking device, The Eye Tribe, powered by the software GazeLab™ (30 Hz), which collects raw eye movement data points every 33.3 milliseconds. This eye-tracker was integrated into a 15.4-inch monitor at a resolution of $1,680 \times 1,050$ pixels. As participants viewed the stimuli shown on the screen, a discreet infrared camera located below the screen unobtrusively recorded participants' attention.

Performance attribution manipulation. Participants were told that their university's medical society was editing a newsletter, and they were asked to read an article featuring an interview with a physician from the university's health clinic. On the first page of the article, we manipulated performance attributions as in Study 2B. When we defined the performance attribution information as an area of interest (AOI) (i.e., a selected region of the stimulus of which eye-movement metrics are extracted), participants in the two conditions did not differ in terms of the attention they paid to the manipulation stimuli ($M_{\text{effort}} = 4.58$ seconds, $SD_{\text{effort}} = 3.70$; $M_{\text{talent}} = 4.23$ seconds, $SD_{\text{talent}} = 3.02$; $t(145) = .61$, $p = .54$, $d = .10$). We excluded any participants who did not fix their attention on the performance attribution information because they were neither exposed to the effort nor the talent attribution manipulation.

To test the effectiveness of our manipulation, we conducted an independent pretest ($n = 92$; 67 female; mean age = 20.60). After reading an article about the physician, participants indicated the extent to which they thought the physician had achieved his level of performance

because of effort or talent, using a semantic differential scale as in previous studies. Participants in the effort attribution condition ($M = 2.41$, $SD = 1.37$) were more likely to attribute the physician's performance to effort than were those in the talent attribution condition ($M = 4.60$, $SD = 1.53$; $t(90) = -7.26$, $p < .001$, $d = -1.51$). Participants also indicated the extent to which they perceived the physician to be warm and competent, as in Study 2A. We also measured participants' expectations about the overall quality of the physician (1 = "very bad," to 7 = "very good"). A t test revealed that participants perceived the physician as warmer when his performance was attributed to effort ($M = 5.42$, $SD = .82$) rather than to talent ($M = 5.07$, $SD = .83$; $t(90) = 2.04$, $p < .05$, $d = .42$). However, perceived competence and expected overall quality did not differ across the two conditions ($ps > .30$).

Dependent variable and control variables. Participants were then presented with two columns of additional information about the physician (see Web Appendix W7). One column presented person-related information about the physician, such as the physician's background (e.g., "Dr. Lam is 32 years old and was born and raised in Hong Kong"). The other presented job-related information, such as information about what the physician could do for the participants (e.g., "Dr. Lam investigates [students'] current health states and conducts physical examinations to establish risk factor levels"). We counterbalanced the presentation of each column. Each of the two columns of service employee information was defined as a separate AOI. For each participant, we calculated the ratio of time spent fixating on person-related information to the time spent fixating on job-related information. Because this ratio was positively skewed (skewness = 8.55; $SE = .20$; Shapiro-Wilk's $W = .32$, $p < .001$), we used the log-transformed ratio as the dependent measure. Moreover, we measured participants'

knowledge of healthcare services, mood, and arousal as control variables, and found that these variables did not differ across conditions (all p s > .40).

Results

A 2 (performance attributions: effort vs. talent) \times 2 (presentation order: person-related information on the left vs. right) ANOVA revealed that the log-transformed ratio of fixation time was higher when the physician's performance was attributed to effort ($M = .26$, $SD = 1.12$) rather than to talent ($M = -.05$, $SD = 1.24$; $F(1, 143) = 4.00$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$), supporting H₁. Thus, when the performance was attributed to effort (vs. talent), participants spent a relatively greater proportion of time attending to the physician's person-related information than to the physician's job-related information. The main effect of the presentation order was significant; the log-transformed ratio of fixation time was higher when person-related information was presented on the left ($M = .63$, $SD = 1.23$) than on the right ($M = -.44$, $SD = .85$; $F(1, 143) = 38.53$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .21$), consistent with the tendency to read English text from left to right (Spalek and Hammad 2005). However, the interaction between performance attributions and presentation order was not significant ($F(1, 143) = .02$, $p = .90$, $\eta_p^2 < .001$).

Discussion

This study validates the theoretical and managerial importance of relationship expectations by showing that it can be reflected in consumers' attention to advertisements, not just in self-reported relationship expectation measures. Specifically, effort attribution leads consumers to spend a greater proportion of time attending to person-related information compared to job-related information about the service employee, consistent with the norms of communal relationships. This study provides practical insights on how to utilize performance attributions in communication messages. For instance, firms often communicate their service

employees' personal background information to enhance consumers' connection with the employees (Wang, Hsu, and Fang 2009). Our findings suggest that in such a situation, firms can attribute their employees' performance to effort rather than to talent. We also showed that the observed effects cannot be attributed to changes in competence or quality perceptions. In the next section, we develop a hypothesis regarding downstream consequences of relationship expectations and present two studies to provide empirical evidence supporting the hypothesis.

Service Employee Performance Attributions and Customer Helping Behaviors

To demonstrate the managerial and practical importance of service employee performance attributions, we examine downstream consumer behaviors resulting from relationship expectations. Specifically, we examine customer helping behaviors for firms as a result of relationship expectations. Based on prior work, we define customer helping behaviors as voluntary and discretionary behaviors toward firms that aid the firms beyond those required in the purchase of products and services (Bettencourt 1997; Bove et al. 2009), which can include spreading WOM (e.g., sharing product/service information on one's social networks), providing suggestions for product and service improvements, participating in firm activities, and helping other customers (Bettencourt 1997; Garma and Bove 2011; Groth 2005). Although the link between relationship expectations and customer helping behaviors has not been directly tested, prior research has suggested that customers are more likely to engage in helping behaviors when they believe a service employee places the welfare of the customers above the employee's own immediate self-interest (Bove et al. 2009), which is consistent with characteristics in communal relationships (Aggarwal 2004). Therefore, we predict that when an employee's performance is attributed to effort, thus inducing more of a communal relationship expectation, consumers will have a higher likelihood of engaging in helpful behaviors. We formally hypothesize:

H₃: Consumers are more likely to engage in customer helping behaviors toward a firm when its service employees' competent performance is attributed to dedicated effort rather than to natural talent.

Prior research has identified both WOM and idea provision as important customer helping behaviors that can promote firm interests. WOM can influence the way consumers make purchase decisions and impact sales (Babić Rosario et al. 2016), while customers' participation in idea provision can enhance new product financial performance (Chang and Taylor 2016). In the next two studies, we test the effect of performance attributions on these two customer helping behaviors. In Study 4, we used a real firm context and measured individuals' WOM behaviors. We show that customers are more likely to help a firm to share information on social networks when the employees' performance is attributed to effort than to talent. In Study 5, we conducted a field experiment to examine customers' provision of new product ideas. The findings indicate that effort attribution makes customers more likely to provide new product ideas.

Study 4: Performance Attributions and Word-of-Mouth Behaviors

In Study 4, we explore WOM behaviors as a downstream consequence of relationship expectations. We predict that when a firm highlights its service employees' dedicated effort (vs. natural talent), thus inducing a more communal-oriented relationship expectation, customers will be more likely to share the firm's information on social networks.

Method

One hundred fifty-five undergraduate students (98 female, mean age = 20.21) from a large university in Hong Kong participated in this laboratory study for monetary compensation. To increase realism of the experimental context, we used a real fitness center in Hong Kong,

which operates in multiple locations and offers two types of classes with trainers: one combining yoga and fitness training, and the other combining Thai boxing and fitness training.

Performance attribution manipulation. Participants were given website information about this fitness center and its trainers. They were told that the fitness classes were instructed by a team of highly qualified fitness trainers who have won awards and championships in Hong Kong and overseas. We attributed these performances to either effort (e.g., “A group of hardworking trainers...will dedicate their efforts...”) or talent (e.g., “A group of talented trainers...have good natural skills...”; see Web Appendix W8).

We also conducted an independent pretest ($n = 80$; 55 female; mean age = 20.69). Participants in the effort attribution condition ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.37$) were more likely to attribute the fitness trainers’ performance to effort than were those in the talent attribution condition ($M = 4.89$, $SD = 1.36$; $t(78) = -6.97$, $p < .001$, $d = -1.57$), indicating our manipulation was successful. Participants also indicated the extent to which they perceived the fitness trainers to be warm and competent, as in Studies 2A and 3. They also indicated how experienced the trainers seemed to be (1 = “not at all,” to 7 = “very much”). A t test revealed that participants perceived the fitness trainers as warmer when their performance was attributed to effort ($M = 4.85$, $SD = .92$) than to talent ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.25$; $t(78) = 2.44$, $p < .05$, $d = .54$). However, perceived competence and experience did not differ across the two conditions ($ps > .10$).

Sharing of website on social networks (WOM behaviors). Participants then read a message from the fitness trainers asking participants for their help to share the fitness center’s website on social networks. Following Consiglio, De Angelis, and Costabile’s (2018) measure of WOM behaviors, participants were led to believe that by clicking a share button, they would share the website on a social network of their choice. After choosing their favored social

network(s), participants were informed that they would not actually share the website. As an incentive, customers who chose to share the website could enter a lucky draw for a chance to win a free trial class at the fitness center (worth HK\$200 or US\$25).

Measures. We measured relationship expectations with the fitness trainers as in the previous studies. We also measured participants' general tendency to share information on social media (1 = "never," to 7 = "very frequently"), which did not differ across conditions ($p > .50$).

Results

Sharing of website on social networks (WOM behaviors). A cross-tabulation analysis revealed that participants in the effort attribution condition (58.97%) were more likely to share the fitness center's website on social networks than were those in the talent attribution condition (42.86%, $\chi^2(1) = 4.03, p < .05$), in support of H₃.

Relationship expectations. A *t* test analysis revealed that participants expected a more communal relationship when the fitness trainers' performance was attributed to effort ($M = 3.93, SD = 1.30$) than to talent ($M = 3.31, SD = 1.30; t(153) = 2.95, p < .01, d = .48$), supporting H₁.

Mediation analyses. We tested relationship expectations as a mediator for the effect of performance attributions on sharing behavior with a bootstrapping analysis using PROCESS Model 4 (Preacher and Hayes 2008). Results revealed that the indirect effect of performance attributions on sharing behavior through relationship expectations was significant (indirect effect = $-.41, SE = .19, 95\% CI = [-.85, -.13]$).

Discussion

Using a real firm context, Study 4 offers important marketing implications by examining WOM behaviors as a customer outcome of relationship expectations. The findings support our prediction that when a firm highlights its service employees' dedicated effort as opposed to their

natural talent, thus inducing a more communal relationship expectation, customers are more likely to engage in helpful behaviors by sharing the firm's information on social networks. Instead of providing an exact performance level as in previous studies, we offered a description of the fitness trainers' achievements (i.e., a team of highly qualified fitness trainers who have won awards and championships) to generalize our findings. In this study, we also showed that the trainers described as hardworking were perceived to be warmer, but not more competent nor more experienced, than those described as talented. In the next study, we examine the effect of performance attributions on another type of customer helping behaviors.

Study 5: A Field Experiment on Customer New Product Idea Provision

In Study 5, we conducted a field experiment at the coffee shops of an international coffee chain to test the effect of performance attributions on customers' provision of new product ideas. This coffee chain employs user-design philosophies to generate new product ideas through its website and has implemented many crowdsourced ideas. We predict that customers will be more likely to provide new product ideas when firms highlight their service employees' dedicated effort (vs. natural talent), thus inducing more of a communal relationship expectation.

Method

Procedure. Over a two-week period, we launched a *Share Your Ideas Campaign* (hereinafter "campaign") at two shops of the coffee chain. In the shops, we prominently displayed marketing materials (e.g., posters on walls, poster stands, table stickers) highlighting the baristas' dedicated effort for one week, and those highlighting their natural talent for another week. To control any confounding effects associated with particular dates, we simultaneously ran the campaign at two coffee shops, each located in a different large university in Hong Kong. We counterbalanced the performance attribution conditions between the two shops (i.e., talent

attribution condition in Shop A and effort attribution condition in Shop B in the first week, and vice versa in the second week).

We contracted a professional graphic designer to create the campaign's marketing materials (see Web Appendix W9 for sample materials). The marketing materials in the effort attribution condition highlighted the baristas' effort (e.g., "We are a group of hardworking baristas! Please share your beverage ideas with us. We put a lot of effort into creating perfectly composed drinks"), whereas those in the talent attribution condition highlighted the baristas' talent (e.g., "We are a group of talented baristas! Please share your beverage ideas with us. We are naturally skillful in creating perfectly composed drinks"). We displayed the marketing materials throughout the shops (see Web Appendix W10).

Feedback forms. We placed feedback forms throughout the shops that customers could voluntarily pick up, fill out with their ideas and suggestions, and submit to a collection box. The feedback forms included a performance attribution manipulation (see Web Appendix W11 for samples of the feedback forms). We measured participants' general liking of the coffee chain (1 = "not at all," to 7 = "very much") and frequency of visits (1 = "never," to 7 = "very frequent") as control variables. We also measured perception of the baristas' beverage-making skill level (1 = "not good at all," to 7 = "very good") to ensure that the performance attribution manipulation did not lead to differences in perceived competence of the baristas. As an incentive for their participation, customers who submitted a feedback form could enter a lucky draw for a chance to win a HK\$300 (US\$38) coffee chain coupon.

Results

Submission of feedback forms. To test the effect of performance attributions on customers' likelihood of submitting a feedback form, we examined the number of submitted

feedback forms as a percentage of the total number of sales transactions. We obtained the numbers of weekly sales transactions of the two coffee shops from their managers, and found that the number of total transactions was not significantly different across the two shops.

We conducted three different types of analyses on customers' likelihood of submitting a feedback form. First, a cross-tabulation analysis indicated that customers were more likely to submit a feedback form when they were exposed to effort attribution information than to talent attribution information (5.24% vs. 3.36%, $\chi^2(1) = 40.21, p < .001$), supporting H₃. Also, two separate analyses showed that the finding was consistent for both Shop A (4.38% vs. 2.90%, $\chi^2(1) = 16.99, p < .001$) and Shop B (6.48% vs. 3.99%, $\chi^2(1) = 24.49, p < .001$).

Second, we ran a binary logistic regression of the submission of feedback forms (1 = submitted, 0 = not submitted) on performance attributions (dedicated effort vs. natural talent), shop dummy (Shop A vs. Shop B), and their interaction. There was a significant main effect of performance attributions ($b = -.51, SE = .10, Wald(1) = 24.04, p < .001, Exp(B) = .60$). Thus, customers in the effort attribution condition were more likely to submit a feedback form than were those in the talent attribution condition, in support of H₃. There was a main effect of the shop dummy ($b = -.41, SE = .09, Wald(1) = 20.05, p < .001, Exp(B) = .66$) and a non-significant interaction ($b = .08, SE = .15, Wald(1) = .31, p = .58$). Two separate logistic regression analyses (one for each shop) indicated that customers in the effort attribution condition were more likely to submit a feedback form than were those in the talent attribution condition for both Shop A ($b = -.43, SE = .11, Wald(1) = 16.76, p < .001, Exp(B) = .65$) and Shop B ($b = -.51, SE = .10, Wald(1) = 24.04, p < .001, Exp(B) = .60$).

To further enhance the robustness of our findings, we adopted the rare events logistic regression method (ReLogit; King and Zeng 2001). Given that our binary event of interest (i.e.,

submission of feedback forms) was relatively rare (4.31% of the sample), ReLogit corrects for rare event biases and standard error inconsistency, thus providing more accurate estimates than traditional logistic regression models. The ReLogit results were consistent with those from the logistic regression models.

Number of suggestions provided. We further tested the effect of performance attributions on the number of suggestions provided. Two research assistants blind to the research hypotheses independently counted the number of suggestions provided on the submitted feedback forms (Cohen's kappa = .71, $p < .001$), and disagreements were resolved through discussion. They were instructed to count only the related suggestions and exclude suggestions unrelated to the given question on the coffee chain's beverage offerings (e.g., "I love you [the name of the coffee chain]").

We used a Poisson regression, because the dependent variable was count data (Coxe, West, and Aiken 2009). We regressed the number of suggestions on performance attributions, shop dummy, and their interaction. The results revealed a significant main effect of performance attributions ($b = .28$, $SE = .10$, $z = 2.91$, $p < .01$), in support of H₃. There was also a significant main effect of shop dummy ($b = -.23$, $SE = .11$, $z = -2.07$, $p < .05$) and a significant interaction ($b = -.41$, $SE = .15$, $z = -2.73$, $p < .01$). Split group Poisson regressions showed that participants at Shop A provided a greater number of suggestions in the effort attribution condition ($M = 1.62$, $SD = 1.33$) than in the talent attribution condition ($M = 1.23$, $SD = 1.21$; $b = .28$, $SE = .10$, $z = 2.91$, $p < .01$). However, the effect was not significant at Shop B ($M_{\text{effort}} = .86$, $SD_{\text{effort}} = 1.14$; $M_{\text{talent}} = .97$, $SD_{\text{talent}} = .95$; $b = -.13$, $SE = .11$, $z = -1.13$, $p = .26$).

The effects reported above persisted after controlling for participants' liking of the coffee chain and frequency of visits. Therefore, the effects could not be attributed to individual

differences in these factors. Moreover, performance attributions did not change the extent to which participants perceived the baristas to be skillful ($p = .44$).

Discussion

In a natural field setting, Study 5 shows that when a firm highlights its service employees' dedicated effort (vs. natural talent), customers (1) are more likely to submit feedback forms and (2) provide a greater number of suggestions, though the latter effect was only significant at one shop. Moreover, in this study we did not provide the exact performance level so as to generalize our findings, although we believe that customers consider the coffee chain's baristas to be a competent group among coffee shop employees in general (especially among our participants who actually visited the coffee chain). Also, our performance attribution manipulation did not change perceptions of the baristas' beverage-making skill level. Thus, our effect cannot be attributed to participants' perception that baristas depicted as naturally talented (vs. hardworking) were more skillful and competent and, thus, were less likely to need suggestions from customers. We replicated the findings in a laboratory experiment, in which we also measured relationship expectations (see Web Appendix W12 for details).

General Discussion

The current research demonstrates that message cues that attribute a service employee's competent performance to dedicated effort (vs. natural talent) lead consumers to expect a more communal and less exchange-oriented relationship due to an increase in the perceived warmth of the employee. Study 1A showed that participants expected a more communal relationship with a service employee whose competent performance was attributed to effort rather than to talent, while Study 1B revealed that simultaneous attribution to both effort and talent yields an effect similar to that of effort attribution only. In directly measuring the perceived warmth of an

employee, Study 2A showed that the effect of performance attributions on relationship expectations is mediated by this construct. We manipulated the perceived warmth of an employee in Study 2B and showed further support for the mediating role of warmth. In Study 3, we used eye-tracking technology and found that effort attribution led participants to pay more attention to person- than job-related information about the service employee, reflecting expectation of a more communal-oriented relationship.

Studies 4 and 5 explored customer helping behaviors as downstream consumer outcomes of relationship expectations. In Study 4, we used a real firm context (i.e., fitness center) and showed that participants were more likely to spread WOM for a firm when its service employees' performance was attributed to effort than to talent. Finally, in Study 5, we conducted a field experiment and showed that effort attribution, which induced a more communal relationship expectation, made participants more likely to provide new product ideas.

Theoretical Contributions

The marketing literature has focused on attributions of one's own performance, and demonstrated their impact on brand or product evaluations (Mathur, Block, Yucel-Aybat 2014; Murphy and Dweck 2016). The current research highlights the importance of studying attributions of others' performance, because even for the same level of performance, people's beliefs about performance attribution can change judgments of those others (Brown et al. 2018; Tsay 2016). For instance, people expect hardworking others to perform better on novel tasks (Brown et al. 2018). We suggest that it is also important to understand the role of attributions of others' performance in consumer outcomes in service relationships, because how a customer views a service employee's performance can determine the customer's relationship with the employee (Bitner 1995). Therefore, this study fills the gap in prior work by examining how

attributions of service employees' performance influence consumers' relationship expectations with and behaviors toward the service employees.

The current research also augments existing knowledge on the two fundamental dimensions of social judgment—competence and warmth—by linking the warmth–competence framework (Fiske et al. 2002) with the literature on performance attribution (Dweck 2000; Weiner 2005). Prior work has investigated relationships between judgments of competence and warmth (Judd et al. 2005; Yzerbyt, Kervyn, and Judd 2008), mainly by examining how a certain level of competence is related to warmth perception. Extending the existing literature, the current research examines the *attributions* of competence as a new dimension of competence influencing warmth perception, holding the objective level of competence constant.

The current research also enriches the existing literature by identifying performance attributions as an antecedent of relationship expectations. The marketing literature has focused mainly on the downstream consequences of a communal versus exchange relationship with consumers. For example, whether consumers' perceptions of a communal versus exchange relationship influences their evaluation of brands (Aggarwal 2004; Aggarwal and Law 2005), loss aversion tendency (Aggarwal and Zhang 2006), and responses to service failures (Wan, Hui, and Wyer 2011). However, due to the lack of research on the antecedents of relationship expectations, marketers may have little practical guidance on how they can shape expectations about a particular type of relationship in the minds of consumers. Addressing this gap, we find that the attributions of service employees' competence can alter consumers' expectations about their relationships with the employees along the communal-exchange continuum. In addition, the current research suggests that relationship expectations can be reflected in consumers' attention,

not just in self-reported relationship expectation measures. Our use of eye-tracking technology allowed us to measure the subconscious or preconscious reflection of relationship expectations.

In addition, the current research contributes to the literature on customer helping behaviors by identifying performance attributions as a new antecedent of such behaviors (Bettencourt 1997; Garma and Bove 2011; Groth 2005). As customer helping behaviors (e.g., spreading WOM, providing new product ideas) are becoming notable marketing goals for brands and firms, factors that encourage such behaviors are both theoretically and managerially important. We have shown that effort attribution, as opposed to talent attribution, increases the likelihood of customer helping behaviors.

Marketing Implications

Our findings offer practical implications, because firms can highlight either effort or talent as the primary source of service employees' competent performance to induce a relationship expectation that corresponds to their service propositions. For instance, firms that emphasize communality in their services (e.g., Disneyland, Starbucks) can attribute their employees' performance to effort, leading consumers to expect a more communal relationship with their employees. In contrast, if these firms attribute employee performance to talent, thus inducing a more exchange relationship expectation, the discrepancy between consumers' relationship expectations and their actual service experience may hurt service satisfaction.

Our findings also demonstrate that, depending on whether a firm attributes its service employees' performance to effort or talent, consumers will pay attention to different types of service employee information, reflecting their expected relationships with the employees. This helps to guide firms in designing their marketing materials. For example, when firms want their

consumers to pay attention to a service employee's personal (job-related) information, they might want to attribute the employee's performance to effort (talent).

Moreover, this research shows that the effect of performance attributions on relationship expectations has consequences for customer helping behaviors that offer managerial insights. Specifically, we gathered empirical evidence suggesting that marketers can implement effort or talent attributions in their communication messages to influence customers' actual WOM and idea provision behaviors. Marketers regard WOM, electronic WOM in particular, as "one of the most significant developments in contemporary consumer behavior" due to its ability to influence the way consumers make purchase decisions and impact sales (Babić Rosario et al. 2016, p. 297). Marketers are also increasingly involving customers in idea generation for new products, because such a tactic can enhance new product financial performance (Chang and Taylor 2016). As firms strive to achieve these marketing goals, our research findings offer insights into how firms can motivate these customer helping behaviors using their communications messages. Based on our findings, firms are advised to attribute their employees' performance to effort, rather than talent, when they want to encourage customers to share firm information on social networks or to suggest new products or services. We believe our proposed effect of performance attributions on relationship expectations can also influence other types of customer helping behaviors, such as participating in firm activities and helping other customers.

What factors shape consumers' expectations about their relationship with a service employee is an important practical question, because it can have significant consequences on consumer outcomes (Aggarwal 2004; Aggarwal and Law 2005; Wan, Hui, and Wyer 2011). While it is true that firms can develop communal relationships through other methods—for example, by generally treating customers well and satisfying them—these tactics require actual

interactions with customers. The current research suggests that communication messages that do not involve interactions with customers also can move customers' relationship expectations along the communal-exchange continuum, in turn influencing consumer behaviors. Marketing practitioners can utilize this knowledge about highlighting effort and/or talent to design their website communications, print advertisements, and social media strategy going forward, or to re-evaluate the effectiveness of their current communication strategies.

Future Research

This research offers several fruitful directions for future research. First, future studies can examine whether the performance attribution effects can be extended to other contexts. For instance, our proposed effects may not be limited to person perception. Since people tend to view a relationship with a brand, product, or firm similarly to a relationship with a person (Fournier 1998; MacInnis and Folkes 2017), the attributions of brands' or firms' competent performance might influence consumers' perceived relationships with those brands or firms. Future studies can also explore service failure contexts. For example, researchers can investigate whether attributing poor service performance or negative service outcomes to an employee's lack of effort (or natural talent) can lead to differences in a consumer's willingness to forgive. In addition, future studies can explore how consumers might interpret information on performance attributions of firms whose performance is uncertain (e.g., startups).

Even though our last two studies show that effort (vs. talent) attribution is more likely to increase customer helping behaviors, we do not argue that effort attribution is always more beneficial to firms than talent attribution. In a supplementary study (Web Appendix W13), we measured membership sign up behavior as a different downstream behavior in the same fitness training context. The findings show that because customers who generally do not want to

proactively interact with service employees during a service process (e.g., suggesting one's own opinions about the training program) prefer a more exchange-oriented (or, less communal-oriented) relationship with a service employee, firms are more likely to acquire them if the service employee's performance is attributed to talent rather than effort. Future studies can explore other consequences of service employees' performance attributions for consumer behaviors, such as loyalty to the same service employee and reactions to service recovery, as well as other individual and situational factors that influence customers' relationship preferences.

In addition, future research can explore how relationship expectations may interact with actual service experience to impact customer satisfaction. For instance, customers who experienced an exchange-oriented relationship with a service employee in digital interactions may be less satisfied with the same experience when they are exposed to effort attribution that induces a more communal relationship expectation, than when they are exposed to talent attribution. Future research can also explore consumer heterogeneity in terms of their attributions of service employee performance. As the focal point of this research was to delineate the effects of service firms' performance attributions, we did not directly explore consumers' heterogeneity in their attributions, which might depend on the industry or context. This heterogeneity may be presumed to interact with service firms' endogenous attribution decisions.

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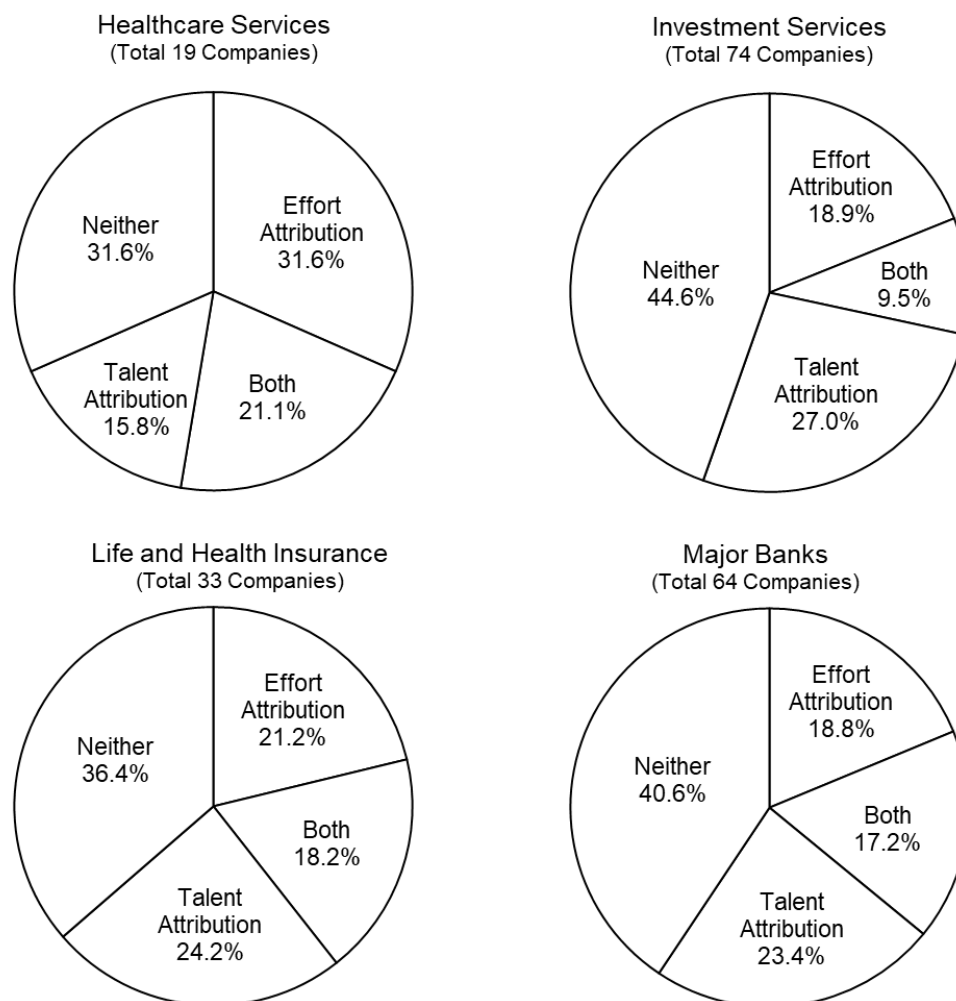
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FIGURE 1
PREVALENCE OF SERVICE EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE ATTRIBUTIONS
AMONG TOP SERVICE FIRMS



Notes: The figures represent the percentages of top service firms on the 2018 Forbes Global 2000 list that explicitly communicate either dedicated effort or natural talent (or both) or that do not provide performance attribution information on the company websites. Two independent coders were instructed to code performance attributions on the web pages in which firms deliver communication messages toward their customers. Agreement between the coders was high (83%), and disagreements were resolved by discussion.

FIGURE 2
A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE CURRENT RESEARCH

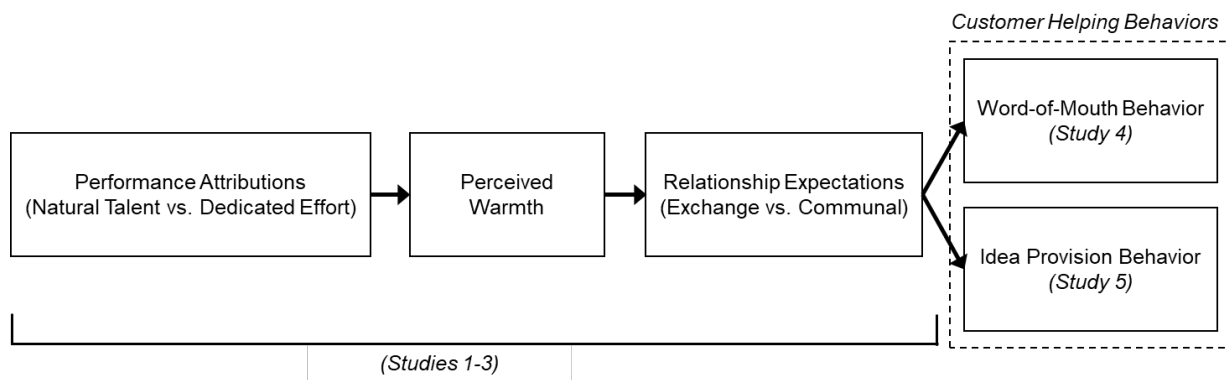


FIGURE 3
MEDIATION ANALYSIS (STUDY 2A)

