Codifying Brand Practices in Service Encounters

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In response to the pandemic, service providers, such as restaurants, retailers, grocery stores, beauty services, and gyms, radically changed their servicescapes, processes, protocols and scripts (Benach 2020). Customers wondered what services were available and how to safely interact with service providers. To help customers understand service availability and protocols, brand-related messages were sent out through digital communications and signs were posted on almost any surface possible (doors, walkways, chairs, tables, walls, and elevators). As safety standards evolve, it is difficult for service providers to ensure customers continue to know protocols regarding decreased/increased capacity, mask wearing, vaccine mandates and social distancing protocols - all of which have direct impact on service experiences.

The context of this study is global disruption (Campbell et al 2020) of a service encounter that inspires (re)codification of brand practices (Akaka, Schau and Vargo 2021). Brand practices are doings, sayings, and understandings (Schatzki 1996) that emerge as materials, meanings, and competences (Shove, Pantzar and Watson 2012) associated with a brand are linked together. Practice codification is required for customers, as carriers of brand practices, to link competences and meanings, which enable adaptation of new practices, such as mask-wearing, social distancing, and online ordering (Akaka et al., 2021). Our research questions are: 1) how are brand practices codified for customers in service encounters? And 2) what are the roles of service providers and beneficiaries in codifying brand practices?

Our empirical analysis focuses on a global coffeehouse, known for a complicated menu, with multiple ordering and fulfillment modalities (coffeehouses, drive-thrus, kiosks, and branded mobile app): Starbucks. We are interested in understanding interactions that involve specialized product knowledge, occur all or in part within physical servicescapes, and engage a variety of actors (e.g., customers, employees, consuming and non-consuming bystanders) in multi-sided interactions that contribute to the shaping of distinct brand experiences. We apply a service ecosystems lens (Vargo and Lusch 2011; 2017) to investigate service encounters across multiple levels of social phenomena by studying: practices and roles. A social role is "a particular set of practices that connects one actor to one or more other actors" (Akaka and Chandler 2011). At the practice level, we study the codification of particular practices that distinguish a brand and make it unique. At the role level, we examine the uses and meanings of interactional service roles and their associated scripts, which draws on the dramaturgical metaphor of service-as-theater (Grove and Fisk 2001), but also considers roles as collections of practices that can be enacted by different actors or by the same actors in different ways (Akaka and Chandler 2011).

Our data are comprised of firm, third party media and consumer data. They contain corporate websites, press releases, marketing communications, store signage, and interviews with Starbucks corporate employees, local store managers, baristas, and three focus groups centered on consumer responses to pandemic era service changes, e.g., masking, social distancing, and plexiglass barriers.

Our findings reveal that codification of brand practices in a service encounter requires encoding the service script and associated props for clear role expectations within the servicescape. We find that at the corporate level, Starbucks fashioned policies, protocols, and signage needed to conduct service encounters in the pandemic. The codification process requires the service provider and beneficiary to take on roles of both encoder and decoder and associated practices, such as scripting, signaling and storytelling (encoder) and observing, trying and

interpreting (decoder), respectively. We find that brand practice codification is a recursive and dynamic process that involves multiple actors who take on different roles and are able to switch back and forth within a given service encounter. Our findings contribute to the understanding of how brand practices support service encounters by identifying multiple avenues for communication of associated competences and meanings. We contribute to understanding of roles by providing empirical evidence for the dynamics of roles, embedded with sets of practices, and how roles change depending on the practices that are enacted in different contexts. We learn that as contexts evolve so too do the practices, and thereby roles, needed for interaction and, ultimately, value cocreation.