



AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE EFFECT OF  
EMPLOYEE-DRIVEN SERVICE ENCOUNTERS ON  
PERCEIVED BRAND AUTHENTICITY: THE CASE OF  
ITALTILE RETAIL (PTY) LTD

By

Jochie Schoeman



Submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree BCom (Hons) in  
Strategic Brand Management

Summative Research Report  
RESE8412w

Word count:  
13162

Supervisor:  
**Michele O'Hara**

Date submitted:  
**04 December 2022**

## **DECLARATION**

I, *Jochie Schoeman*, hereby declare that the Research Report submitted for the BCom Honours in Strategic Brand Management degree to The Independent Institute of Education is my own work and has not previously been submitted to another University or Higher Education Institution for degree purposes.

## ABSTRACT

This study investigated the role of Italtile Retail (Pty) Ltd employees and their effect on the brand's perceived authenticity. In our postmodern market, brand authenticity forges deeper connections with consumers and proves to be a more effective contributor to perceived brand authenticity than impersonal mass marketing.

Building on a comprehensive literature review, the researcher identified specific brand-congruent cues delivered by service employees in the retail environment that affected perceived brand authenticity. In this study, a quantitative methodology was used to capture consumer perceptions of the authenticity of the Italtile brand.

The results demonstrate that perceived brand authenticity can be affected by the identified cues delivered by employees (appearance, rapport, familiarity, motivation, language use, humour, and communication). Moreover, employee-driven service encounters positively affected perceived brand authenticity, which in turn positively influenced consumer advocacy (word-of-mouth and emotional brand attachment).

In sum, the results regarding the effect of employee-driven service encounters on perceived brand authenticity demonstrate the importance of identifying and analysing specific brand-congruent cues in the retail environment. The identified cues can be altered by brand managers to increase brand authenticity and resonance.

**Keywords:** Branding, Perceived Brand Authenticity, Brand-Congruent Cues, Employee-driven Service Encounters, Consumer Advocacy.

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## CHAPTER 1 ~ INTRODUCTION

“We create constructs to understand ourselves, the way we look, how we feel, what we believe - and we telegraph that 'branding' to the world.”

These are the words of former editorial and creative director of Print magazine Debbie Millman (Quote Space, 2022). For brands, it is unsurprising that Gary Vaynerchuk (entrepreneur, author, internet personality and speaker) says, “To get customers, you need to go from the heart to the brain to the wallet” (Peckover, 2019). Creating strong connections through *genuine* experiences will be the most likely event to capture the heart, brain and wallet of a consumer.

### 1.1 Contextualisation

Authenticity has been demanded by consumers for hundreds of years and has been a focal point in the research for several decades (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Fritz, Schoenmueller and Bruhn (2017) stated that authenticity has been researched and attributed to specific subject-related behaviours. In *philosophy*, authenticity relates to moral behaviour (sincere, responsible), in *sociology*, it is linked to expectations and the absence of cognitive understanding, in *anthropology*, it is about safeguarding cultural norms, values and beliefs, in *psychology* it is rooted in “subjective internal experiences” (subjective consistency) (Fritz *et al.*, 2017).

In marketing research, the concept of authenticity only emerged right before the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Södergren, 2021). Authenticity has since evolved into various streams of research within the marketing field (Athwal & Harris, 2018; Grayson & Martinec, 2004). However, multiple recent studies agree on the lack of brand authenticity research and that it still needs to be considered across various cultures, categories, and contexts (Fritz *et al.*, 2017; Oh, Prado, Korelo & Frizzo, 2019; Dwivedi & McDonald, 2018; Hernandez-Fernandez & Lewis, 2019; Portal, Abratt & Bendixen, 2019; Campagna, Donthu & Yoo, 2021; Safeer, He & Abrar, 2021). These studies acknowledge the importance of personal brand experiences and delivering on the brand’s promise across all consumer-brand touchpoints (Hernandez-Fernandez & Lewis, 2019; Portal *et al.*, 2019).

This study investigates how employee-driven service encounters in the retail environment affect a brand's perceived authenticity. This study considers brand authenticity affected by employees to be a more one-on-one approach and an alternative to impersonal mass marketing. This study further forms part of brand authenticity research conducted post-COVID-19.

## **1.2 Rationale**

Brand authenticity has not been researched in the South African ceramic industry and poses an opportunity to fill the gap in research. Within the literature, various authors express the need for brand authenticity research to be conducted in the service and retail environment to forge deeper connections with consumers (Hernandez-Fernandez & Lewis, 2019; Fritz *et al.*, 2017; Napoli, Dickinson-Delaporte & Beverland, 2016). This study is a step towards supporting retail brands in becoming and remaining authentic and meaningful. This study allows researchers and brand practitioners to challenge the assumptions and findings, to continue building upon existing brand knowledge. Brand authenticity, although gaining importance among practitioners and consumer behaviour researchers, has made little contribution to general branding theory (Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin & Grohmann, 2015).

Service/retail employees are at the front-line of the purchase experience creating moments of truth between the brand and the consumer (Escamilla, Segovia-Romo & Terán Cázares, 2022; Sirianni, Bitner, Brown & Mandel, 2013). Firms and brand practitioners within the ceramic industry need more research on the important influence of retail employees and how they affect consumer-brand perception. The research to be undertaken considers the importance of human connection in establishing a bond between consumer and brand. The research is conducted within the ceramics industry in South Africa with a focus on the Italtile brand – Italtile Retail (Pty) Ltd. The findings provide valuable insight, not only for Italtile but for similar retailers and the ceramic industry (e.g., internal brand building).

### **1.3 Problem statement**

Mass marketing is no longer achieving the desired connection between brands and consumers (Kinyongoh, 2019; Oh *et al.*, 2019). Kinyongoh (2019) pointed out that the consumer response to mass marketing tactics has been declining for several years. In our postmodern market, consumers have access to an excessive amount of information that is often meaningless and causes uncertainty in their minds (Oh *et al.*, 2019; Morhart *et al.*, 2015). This overload of information likely becomes too difficult for consumers to connect with.

Brands need to increase their connection with consumers (Kinyongoh, 2019; Oh *et al.*, 2019). The study addresses the scarcity in brand authenticity research by looking at positive service encounters as a solution to improving consumer perception of a brand(s). Some service brands may require more defined structure and discipline in the service climate, whilst others, may relax rules and encourage individuality. After all, people buy from people. Brands, however, know very little about how to promote brand authenticity and how it affects consumer behaviour (Fritz *et al.*, 2017).

### **1.4 Research aim/purpose statement**

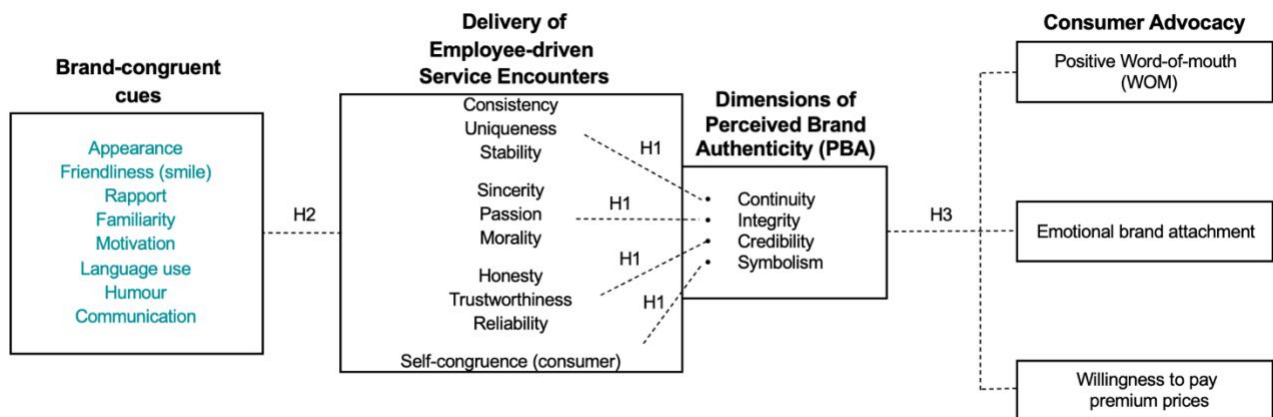
The aim of the study is to investigate how service employee behaviour and attitude affected perceived brand authenticity (PBA). The purpose of the study is to better describe the role of retail employees as a more effective contributor to PBA than mass marketing.

### **1.5 Research questions**

- How do employee-driven service encounters affect perceived brand authenticity?
- How does brand-congruent employee behaviour affect perceived brand authenticity?

## 1.6 Research hypotheses

- H1.** The delivery of employee-driven service encounters has no effect on perceived brand authenticity.
- H2.** Brand-congruent employee behaviour has no effect on perceived brand authenticity.
- H3.** There is no relationship between PBA and consumer advocacy.



**Figure 1:** The hypothesised employee-driven service encounter and PBA model  
(Adapted from Morhart *et al.*, 2015)

## CHAPTER 2 ~ LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Theoretical foundation

#### 2.1.1 Attribution theory

Attribution theory describes the cognitive processes by which people calculate the causes of events and behaviour around them (Mullen & Johnson, 2013). It has been confirmed in recent literature that satisfactory brand experiences have a positive influence on brand authenticity and brand love (Safeer *et al.*, 2021; Kelley, 1973), and subsequently brand loyalty (positive word-of-mouth, emotional brand attachment) (Huang, 2017).

Authenticity can be attributed to either a subject/person (e.g., employee's behaviour, attitude, appearance) or an object/event (e.g., a brand) (Fritz *et al.*, 2017; Hennig-Thurau, Groth, Paul & Gremier, 2006). The world's social pressures and external stimuli or forces will inevitably affect a person's identity (Safeer *et al.*, 2021). When facing external forces, the authenticity of a person is determined by how real or genuine he, she or they are to their identity (Schallehn, Burmann, & Riley, 2014), which will affect their unique perception of a brand (Safeer *et al.*, 2021).

According to attribution theory, each consumer will have unique sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioural experiences with a brand (Safeer *et al.*, 2021; Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009). In other words, each brand experience outcome can be attributed to the individual consumer. Therefore, authentic brand attributes and behaviour, such as consistency (external attribution) lead to positive outcomes of sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioural experiences (Safeer *et al.*, 2021). Consequently, positive experiences motivate brand attachment where consumers experience positive emotions and love (internal attribution) (Safeer *et al.*, 2021; Huang, 2017). Since each consumer has a unique experience and perception of a brand, it is postulated that personalised communication and employee interactions may be more effective than mass marketing tactics. In the context of brand authenticity, the question remains as to which factors influence positive perceptions of a brand, and to what extent.

According to Fritz *et al.* (2017), companies still possess little evidence regarding which influencing factors can be utilised to promote positive perceptions of brand authenticity among consumers. At the same time, companies do not know how brand authenticity affects the bond between consumer and brand to achieve, for example, positive word-of-mouth (WOM) and emotional brand attachment (Fritz *et al.*, 2017).

### **2.1.2 Theoretical frameworks**

Currently, there is no universally accepted scale or theoretical framework upon which to determine or measure brand authenticity (Campagna *et al.*, 2021; Fritz *et al.*, 2017). This study will be based on theoretical models proposed by Fritz *et al.* (2017) and Morhart *et al.* (2015). Fritz *et al.* (2017) and Morhart *et al.* (2015) both discussed similar antecedents to PBA pertaining to the employees of a brand. Fritz *et al.* (2017) proposed that “employee passion” had a significant positive effect on consumer-brand authenticity perceptions. The study by Fritz *et al.* (2017) was conducted in a service and retail setting and has high relevance for this study. Morhart *et al.* (2015) also found that “brand-congruent employee behaviour” had a positive effect on the PBA dimension of credibility.

The four PBA dimensions proposed by Morhart *et al.* (2015) are continuity (related to the past), integrity (related to sincerity), credibility (related to reliability) and symbolism (related to identity construction). These dimensions are critical in the measurement of PBA and are deemed the most inclusive due to conceptual similarities, even within recent literature by Dwivedi and McDonald (2018), Hernandez-Fernandez and Lewis (2019) and Portal *et al.*, (2019).

## 2.2 Review of previous literature

### 2.2.1 Employee-driven service encounters

A limited number of authors have focused on specific brand-congruent behaviours (friendliness, motivation, language use, humour) of frontline employees in the service climate (Grandey, Fisk, Mattila, Jansen & Sideman, 2005; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2006; Escamilla *et al.*, 2022; Holmqvist & Van Vaerenbergh, 2013; Mathies, Chiew & Kleinaltenkamp, 2016; Sirianni *et al.*, 2013). However, few authors have explored the link between the service climate and its effect on perceived brand authenticity (Sirianni *et al.*, 2013; Kinyongoh, 2019; Schepers & Nijssen, 2018). For example, the study by Escamilla *et al.* (2022) quantitatively measured and found that employee motivation has a positive impact on customer service and drives consumer-brand relationships.

Multiple authors allude to a gap in research regarding employee-driven service encounters or how the service climate (various cues or stimuli) relates to brand authenticity (Fritz *et al.*, 2017; Morhart *et al.*, 2015; Napoli, Dickinson, Beverland & Farrelly, 2014; Sirianni *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, it is inferred that brands may benefit by knowing more about how to promote or improve brand authenticity in the service climate and how it affects consumer behaviour (Fritz *et al.*, 2017).

Consumers have increased brand awareness in today's market and authenticity is an ideal vehicle to drive brand growth and sales (Fritz *et al.*, 2017, Fouladi, Ekhlassi & Sakhdari, 2021). However, some authors maintain that employee behaviour or attitude potentially makes no difference or may not always be advantageous in all service encounters (Schepers & Nijssen, 2018; Sirianni *et al.*, 2013). Nevertheless, a recent study by Campagna *et al.* (2021) stated that the impact and importance of brand authenticity will only continue to grow into the future.

Furthermore, this study answers the call to conduct brand authenticity research in different industries and different product categories, in this case within the high-involvement product category (Oh *et al.*, 2019; Dwivedi & McDonald, 2018; Portal *et al.*, 2019; Campagna *et al.*, 2021; Safeer *et al.*, 2021). In this study, Italtile is considered to be operating in the high-involvement product category. In the researcher's experience, tile shopping takes time and in most cases, consumers require assistance from employees to facilitate their decisions.

### **2.2.2 Perceived brand authenticity (PBA)**

The literature shows that brand authenticity is highly complex and must be considered a multidimensional construct that can be viewed from different perspectives (Moulard, Raggio & Folse, 2021; Morhart *et al.*, 2015; Napoli *et al.*, 2014). The importance of brand authenticity is widely accepted among authors, but there is a lack of consensus regarding its meaning (Campagna *et al.*, 2021; Napoli *et al.*, 2016).

Arguably devoid of authenticity, mass marketing tactics are expensive relative to other methods like WOM or creating an emotional brand attachment (Kinyongoh, 2019; Morhart *et al.*, 2015). WOM and emotional brand attachment are noted in the literature to be prevalent outcomes of brand authenticity that build consumer advocacy (Xu, Du, Shahzad & Li, 2021; Morhart *et al.*, 2015). Consumer advocacy increases a consumer's likelihood to choose a brand over another as well as their willingness to pay premium prices (Carsana & Jolibert, 2018; Fritz *et al.*, 2017; Napoli *et al.*, 2014). Mass-marketed brands are perceived as fake, overly commercialised and "profit-hungry" in the minds of consumers (Moulard *et al.*, 2021; Morhart *et al.*, 2015). Although they are credible, they cause consumers to lose faith in marketing and are labelled "inauthentic" (Moulard *et al.*, 2021), lacking in morality and passion (Napoli *et al.*, 2014). Similarly to Dwivedi and McDonald (2018), this study recognises the importance of consumer perception in achieving differentiation and the need to mitigate inauthentic perceptions. In a market (ceramics) where brands are selling relatively undifferentiated products, the researcher believes authentic service encounters to be a key driver of resonance and loyalty.

Going forward, brands will find consumer authenticity perceptions increasingly important to remain competitive and to charge premium prices (Hernandez-Fernandez & Lewis, 2019). The literature on brand authenticity illustrates its positive effect on consumer responses (Fritz *et al.*, 2017; Morhart *et al.*, 2015; Napoli *et al.*, 2014; Schallehn *et al.*, 2014), shifting consumer perception away from a brand's commercial motives (Fouladi *et al.*, 2021; Fritz *et al.*, 2017). Although the most recent studies agree that commercial or mass-marketed brands lack authenticity, research in the past has found some commercial brands to be authentic (Tran & Keng, 2018; Leigh, Peters & Shelton, 2006).

Some of these commercial brands may have attained authenticity perceptions through carefully considered and crafted behaviours. For example, service encounters in retail settings (i.e. between consumers and employees) have been found to be more effective at building meaningful brands and increasing authenticity perceptions compared to mass marketing messages (Fritz *et al.*, 2017; Sirianni *et al.*, 2013). However, research on the effect of these encounters on PBA is scarce.

Brand authenticity literature proposes three perspectives of the construct, namely, the objectivist-, constructivist-, and existentialist perspectives (Morhart *et al.*, 2015; Leigh *et al.*, 2006). These perspectives are the lenses necessary through which to investigate the unique authenticity attributions developed by consumers. They are aligned with the different types of authenticity, its dimensions, and the cues identified throughout the literature. Grayson and Martinec (2004) identified and linked two types of authenticity, namely, “indexical authenticity” and “iconic authenticity”. They are, in essence, the different cues or stimuli influencing consumer perception and benefits obtained from authentic experiences (Ewing, Allen & Ewing, 2012; Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Recent authors have based their understanding of brand authenticity on Grayson and Martinec’s (2004) conceptualisation of indexicality and iconicity in consumer perceptions. Although the philosophical approach of existentialism is not new, another type of authenticity has been identified in recent literature, namely, “existential authenticity” (Morhart *et al.*, 2015). It relates to a consumer’s identity and being “true-to-self” (Moulard *et al.*, 2021; Morhart *et al.*, 2015).

The three types of authenticity are discussed to show the need to study different cues. Firstly, *indexical authenticity* and the need to study physical or evidence-based cues like an employee’s appearance. Secondly, *iconic authenticity* and the need to consider that both genuine and fake employee behaviour can increase authenticity as long as it is perceived as genuine by consumers. Lastly, *existential authenticity* and the need to consider how an authentic brand can enhance a consumer’s own identity. This, once again, leads to a positive outcome such as emotional brand attachment.

### 2.2.3 Types of authenticity

Authors agree that the different types and cues associated with brand authenticity are not mutually exclusive, but rather interrelated (Athwal & Harris, 2018; Fritz *et al.*, 2017; Morhart *et al.*, 2015; Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Since consumer authenticity perceptions are unique and differ across contexts, it is valuable to research brand authenticity cues (e.g., appearance, language use) in a specific setting like the retail environment.

#### 2.2.3.1 Objectivist perspective

From this perspective, indexical authenticity or indexicality is found in the characteristics of an object through a factual reference point (Fritz *et al.*, 2017; Morhart *et al.*, 2015). Indexical authenticity is evidence-based and refers to a true, real or genuine object/event that is differentiated from a fake or copied object/event (Morhart *et al.*, 2015; Grayson & Martinec, 2004).

Fritz *et al.* (2017) noted that indexicality can be found in the bond between a brand and consumer if a verifiable connection is present. In other words, what the brand does and is claiming to be, resonates with the consumer (Morhart *et al.*, 2015). Morhart *et al.* (2015) gives an example of verifiable evidence of a brand in a product, where a label is physical proof of origin or ownership. Seminal research on indexical authenticity focuses on objects and the verifiable link to their environment (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Ewing *et al.*, 2012). Grayson and Martinec (2004) briefly mention that the links can be “physical” (i.e., a link between a person and their clothing), or “psychic” (i.e., a link between a person and their behaviour), but continued their focus on objects instead of behaviour.

Only recent brand authenticity literature considers brand behaviour, particularly brand-congruent employee behaviour, and its importance in forming positive consumer-brand authenticity perceptions (Carsana & Jolibert, 2018; Fritz *et al.*, 2017; Morhart *et al.*, 2015). However, the literature is broad and only includes brand or employee behaviour as one of many elements. Therefore, research still needs to investigate specific behaviours or cues such as an employee’s appearance and the extent to which it influences consumer-brand authenticity perceptions.

### 2.2.3.2 Constructivist perspective

From this perspective, iconic authenticity or iconicity is found in what a person expects and believes about an object/event (Fritz *et al.*, 2017; Morhart *et al.*, 2015). It doesn't matter whether the object is real or fake, only what the person expects or believes. This view is consistent with seminal and recent literature portraying brand authenticity as a socially constructed event or phenomenon existing in the minds of consumers (Athwal & Harris, 2018; Morhart *et al.*, 2015; Napoli *et al.*, 2014; Leigh *et al.*, 2006; Grayson & Martinec, 2004).

To differentiate iconicity from indexicality, it is sometimes referred to as 'authentic' reproductions, recreations, or re-enactments of the original or "real" object/event (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). In other words, what the consumer believes a brand should do or how it ought to behave resonates with the consumer, whether it is genuine or not (Fritz *et al.*, 2017). Research must therefore investigate if real or genuine brand/employee behaviour differs from fake or imitated behaviour in influencing consumer-brand authenticity perceptions.

### 2.2.3.3 Existentialist perspective

From this perspective, existential authenticity is found in or closely related to individual identity (Morhart *et al.*, 2015). This perspective stems from *philosophy* and *psychology*, where a person is seen as authentic if their behaviour is sincere, independent, and original, instead of only behaving according to social expectations (Fritz *et al.*, 2017; Morhart *et al.*, 2015).

This perspective is aligned with attribution theory since a consumer's brand authenticity perception will be affected by social forces or other external stimuli (Safeer *et al.*, 2021; Schallehn *et al.*, 2014). Each consumer will experience a brand differently, owing to their unique multidimensional (sensory/intellectual/affective/behavioural) experiences (Safeer *et al.*, 2021; Brakus *et al.*, 2009).

Following this interpretation, a brand is existentially authentic if it functions as a tool that allows a consumer to be 'true' to themselves (Fritz *et al.*, 2017). A brand can therefore be "self-enhancing" (Morhart *et al.*, 2015) and can create a deeper emotional connection with consumers via "humanlike attributes" (Han, Cui & Jin, 2021; Morhart *et al.*, 2015).

The three types of authenticity seem to be the most consistent and agreed-upon concepts among researchers. Therefore, identifying the effect of various cues in all brand touchpoints may be the best starting point to improve positive perceptions of brand authenticity.

#### **2.2.4 Perceived brand authenticity (PBA) dimensions**

In this study, the dimensions of Italtile's PBA will be affected by the consistent, sincere and reliable behaviour of employees and how much consumers connect to them. Brand authenticity requires employee behaviour and attitude to align with the brand values and attitudes. Employees are therefore brand ambassadors and authenticity will be attributed to the brand based on their behaviour and attitudes.

##### **2.2.4.1 Continuity**

The continuity dimension is strongly related to a brand's past (Carsana & Jolibert, 2018; Morhart *et al.*, 2015). This dimension measures a consumer's perception of a brand pertaining to its history (nostalgic quality, heritage) and whether it survives times and trends (Carsana & Jolibert, 2018; Fritz *et al.*, 2017; Morhart *et al.*, 2015). The continuity dimension is determined by a brand's consistency, its stability over time and its uniqueness (Fritz *et al.*, 2017).

Continuity is consistent with the conceptualisation by Bruhn, Schoenmüller, Schäfer and Heinrich (2012) where a brand must be "consistent over time" and "true to itself". The *longevity* dimension proposed by Campagna *et al.* (2021) shows strong similarity, measuring PBA through a brand's history, tradition, and timelessness. Campagna *et al.* (2021) pointed out that consumers value a brand that can adapt to their evolving tastes. However, this presents contradictory branding principles as a brand is expected to be consistent, and at the same time, relevant (Moulard *et al.*, 2021). In this study, to forge a deeper connection with consumers, the continuity dimension will be affected by an employee's consistent, unique and stable behaviour in line with the employer's brand values and identity.

#### 2.2.4.2 Integrity

The integrity dimensions relate to sincerity in a brand's intentions (Fritz *et al.*, 2017; Morhart *et al.*, 2015). This dimension measures authenticity based on passionate employee behaviour, their values and whether they are perceived to care for consumers (Fritz *et al.*, 2017; Morhart *et al.*, 2015). This dimension directly affects the research problem, given that economically motivated (mass-marketed) brands are seen as less virtuous (Fritz *et al.*, 2017; Morhart *et al.*, 2015). Sales employees that are only motivated by money (or perceived to be) will then decrease the integrity dimension.

The *conscious* dimension identified by Campagna *et al.* (2021) is reinforced by the integrity dimension and is based on morality and values of a brand/employee when measuring consumer-brand authenticity perceptions.

#### 2.2.4.3 Credibility

The credibility dimension relates to the reliability and honesty of a brand, and in this study specifically pertaining to employees (Fritz *et al.*, 2017; Morhart *et al.*, 2015). Seminal studies by Bruhn *et al.* (2012) and Napoli *et al.* (2014) found positive correlations between credibility and a brand's trustworthiness. This dimension measures authenticity perceptions based on a brand's transparency and ability to deliver on its promises (e.g., quality commitment) (Fritz *et al.*, 2017; Morhart *et al.*, 2015; Napoli *et al.*, 2014). The credibility dimension correlates with the *conscious* dimension by Campagna *et al.* (2021) pertaining to a brand's "openness" and "honesty".

#### 2.2.4.4 Symbolism

The symbolism dimension relates to identity construction (Campagna *et al.*, 2021; Morhart *et al.*, 2015). This dimension measures authenticity perceptions based on a brand's ability to enable consumers to be their true selves (Morhart *et al.*, 2015). In this study, how much a consumer sees themselves in an employee or relates to the employee will affect the brand's authenticity perception.

Moulard *et al.* (2021) disagree with the use of symbolism as it does not “easily match” with elements from other models. This is possibly due to some similarity in its conceptualisation by Morhart *et al.* (2015) to the historicity of a brand (continuity). Morhart *et al.* (2015) include the example of a contractor who grew up on a farm and strongly associates with the ‘John Deere’ brand. However, symbolism in this case is meant to measure authenticity perception through an emotional connection where a brand serves as a “symbolic resource” (Campagna *et al.*, 2021; Morhart *et al.*, 2015). In other words, the brand can be true to itself (continuity), but it can also be enhancing the consumer’s personal identity (symbolism) (Campagna *et al.*, 2021; Morhart *et al.*, 2015).

It is evident from the literature that the different types of authenticity are interrelated, as well as the PBA dimensions. For this reason, the researcher does not categorise the cues identified as only indexical, iconic, or existential. Service encounter cues can therefore affect multiple authenticity types and dimensions at once. For example, while a brand’s history and tradition can affect its continuity dimension, it can also affect its symbolism dimension by appealing to a consumer’s ‘personal’ identity. An honest and trustworthy brand and employee (credibility) would be expected to have high moral standards (integrity). Similarly, an employee’s communication style can be consistent (continuity) and can deliver on a brand’s promise (credibility) (Morhart *et al.*, 2015).

Given the literature, is evident that building/maintaining strong consumer relationships is one of the most difficult challenges in current strategic brand management (Oh *et al.*, 2019). The literature presents the disconnect between consumers and employees/brands caused by economically motivated or mass-marketed ideologies. Although authenticity is highly subjective, the literature reveals a rising consumer demand for authenticity that brands can capitalise on. It is therefore becoming increasingly important for brands to understand individual consumer perceptions to remain competitive and relevant.

The study may be narrowly-focused as it only investigates one brand, but contributes towards bridging the gap in brand authenticity literature within the service/retail climate. Personal human encounters in a service climate require additional investigation where positive brand authenticity perception poses as a key differentiator.

## **2.3 Conceptualisation/operationalisation**

### **2.3.1 Employee-driven service encounters**

In the context of the research, the encounters between employees and consumers are referring to interactions between the sales consultants of Italtile Retail (Pty) Ltd and their clients. This study will refer to these interactions as “service encounters” or “employee-driven service encounters”. The research will focus on consumer perceptions of Italtile sales consultants (behaviour and attitudes). Perceived brand authenticity would be based on what consumers expect from the Italtile brand and whether the service encounter delivers against the brand’s values and identity.

The most relevant cues identified in the literature include friendliness (smile), brand-aligned appearance, language use, and other behavioural characteristics specifically relevant to the study (rapport, familiarity, motivation, humour, communication style) (Grandey *et al.*, 2005; Morhart, Herzog & Tomczak, 2009; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2006; Escamilla *et al.*, 2022; Holmqvist & Van Vaerenbergh, 2013; Mathies *et al.*, 2016; Sirianni *et al.*, 2013).

### **2.3.2 Brand authenticity**

Currently, there is no universally accepted definition of brand authenticity due to its complexity and multidimensionality (Campagna *et al.*, 2021; Fritz *et al.*, 2017). The meaning of authenticity takes on different forms across various disciplines and contexts (Fritz *et al.*, 2017; Grayson & Martinec, 2004). In this study, brand authenticity is defined as the perceived sincerity and consistency in a brand’s behaviour, where the brand remains true to itself and its consumers (Moulard *et al.*, 2021; Fritz *et al.*, 2017). Brand authenticity is viewed as a constantly evolving socially constructed concept existing solely in the minds of consumers and service encounters are therefore critical brand contact points (Athwal & Harris, 2018; Napoli *et al.*, 2014).

### **2.3.3 Measurement of perceived brand authenticity (PBA)**

The cues identified in the literature are expected to influence the PBA dimensions of Italtile. Consumer perceptions of service encounter cues must be measured on a continuum of “more authentic” to “less authentic” due to the subjective quality of authenticity and its multidimensionality (Schepers & Nijssen, 2018; Napoli *et al.*, 2016). This avoids the dichotomy of a brand being either authentic or inauthentic.

To measure PBA quantitatively, for example, a respondent will rate the cue (e.g., employee’s appearance) to the extent that it is brand-congruent (continuity) and in line with their ‘personal’ appearance (symbolism).

## CHAPTER 3 ~ RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Research paradigm

The research was conducted following the paradigmatic approach of positivism. The researcher believed it best, in terms of epistemology, to follow a quantifiable and objective point of view. Most of the literature reviewed took on quantitative methodologies using surveys and experiments. By conducting the research objectively, no bias was present as the findings could be communicated through numbers and statistics.

This paradigm was adopted to avoid projecting the opinions and values of the researcher onto the findings. The researcher turned to reason and empirical verification to investigate brand authenticity as a social phenomenon (Maree, 2020; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). In other words, positivism could account for specific human and social behaviour when investigating consumer responses to particular constructs. Positivism maintains that a quantitative or scientific approach brings forth the clearest ideal of knowledge (Cohen *et al.*, 2018).

According to a general doctrine of positivism, sensory experience leads to genuine knowledge that can only be advanced through experimentation and observation (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). In this case, the research relied on the observations and unique perceptions of others in the quest to advance brand knowledge. The research took into consideration criticism mentioned by Cohen *et al.* (2018) regarding the approach's shortfall when studying human behaviour. The approach continues to be criticised due to the intangible characteristic of social phenomena and the overall complexity of human nature (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). For example, an employee's motivation or intrinsic processes tend to be more difficult to measure quantitatively (Escamilla *et al.*, 2022).

The researcher further acknowledged criticism around objectivity regarding its “manipulable” or “detached” qualities by retaining subjectivity and humanisation in the approach (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). The researcher believes that the insight gained from the study could be utilised to alter elements to improve consumer-brand perception in favour of a business. From a commerce perspective and according to common knowledge, the main goal of any business is profit maximization, a positive outcome. Since the study investigated the human perception of a brand to achieve positive outcomes and not behaviour per se, the paradigm was deemed relevant.

In terms of ontology and axiology, the research took a realist stance that was guided by an outside-in approach to creating value (Dwivedi & McDonald, 2018). The researcher believed in the value of investigating consumer perception to improve their experiences with a brand and saw it as a key success factor. The truth to be uncovered was meant to positively contribute to a business and its consumers. In other words, both consumer-derived value (e.g., love, pleasure) and brand-derived value (business growth, brand equity) can be obtained through brand authenticity research (Napoli *et al.*, 2016).

### **3.2 Research design/approach**

The research conducted could enable a retail brand to pinpoint which cues lead to positive brand perceptions, and which cues should be improved or which cues don't matter. A quantitative approach was found the most applicable for this study. The research aimed at quantifying and empirically testing the information about consumer perceptions of a brand based on their experiences with retail employees.

Secondary research was done to obtain the relevant literature that guided the study and its approach. The literature was obtained by making use of the Independent Institute of Education (IIE) Library, Google Scholar and EBSCOhost. Primary research was done through an online self-administered survey that was sent to the final sample and was based on statistical data (Morris & Khan, 2021). The research was descriptive in nature and aimed at systematically providing information regarding the population as it attempted to measure consumer-brand authenticity perceptions (Morris & Khan, 2021).

The research approach was highly feasible and realistic in scope since it required little time and resources to conduct (Morris & Khan, 2021). The research was inexpensive as it only required the researcher and the respondents to have a computer or mobile device with internet access. The respondents only needed access to their email and a web browser.

The approach followed deductive reasoning when putting existing theories/models to the test. The literature reviewed considered authenticity from a broad perspective and was systematically narrowed down to brand authenticity and employee-driven service encounters to address the problem and gap. Similarly, the approach allowed the researcher to confirm the main dimensions of PBA first while narrowing down towards the specific cues and the PBA dimensions/outcomes they affected.

Only the study by Fritz *et al.* (2017) was solely conducted in a retail setting and the majority of brand authenticity researchers took a broader approach considering multiple elements of a brand(s). Therefore, most survey items/statements in the questionnaire were adapted from literature to represent the purpose of the research whilst including new items.

The research approach took on a cross-sectional survey design. A cross-sectional study was relatively quick to conduct, did not hinder the operations of the company and the variables were not influenced by the researcher. The research required measuring consumer-brand authenticity perceptions as influenced by retail sales consultants. The data was only collected at one point in time (July 2022) without repetition, and only within one province. No repetition and a limited geographical area posed limitations to the study. However, this was done to remain within the time limit set for the research and was in line with the permission that was obtained from the company – Italtile Retail (Pty) Ltd.

### **3.3 Population**

The population parameters were defined as clients of Italtile Retail (Pty) Ltd within the Gauteng province of South Africa, that are over the age of 18 and who have at least done a quotation (therefore provided their contact details) within the last 2 years.

The population was narrowed down to the Gauteng province in line with permission obtained from Italtile and the accessibility that was available to the researcher. The geographical limitation may have lowered the researcher's ability to generalise the findings. However, the researcher believed that the final sample accurately represented the population and industry's market. For ethical purposes and to lower the risk of research, the population did not include minors (younger than 18 years). Minors would have required the researcher to obtain additional permission from parents or legal guardians according to the law, thus, lowering its feasibility.

The population further only included clients who have requested a quotation or who have purchased from an Italtile showroom. It was therefore confirmed that they have previously dealt with a sales consultant. By requesting a quotation or purchasing from a showroom, clients consent to being contacted in the future, if the reason for contact furthers the interest of the company. The researcher, therefore, explained the study's purpose and its potential benefit to Italtile.

The research focused on clients after the initial three-week COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa, therefore within the last 2 years. The perceptions of these consumers may have been different from consumer perceptions before the pandemic. For example, the researcher believed that these consumers would be more understanding of a sales consultant keeping their distance. Before the pandemic, this behaviour may have been perceived as strange or offensive.

### 3.4 Sampling

The research was conducted using the probability sampling method, namely, simple random sampling. This method provided equal opportunity for all members of the population to be included in the study since they were randomly and systematically chosen (Pascoe, 2021). This method required little to no influence from the researcher, therefore, removing human bias to avoid a sample that is not representative of the population (Pascoe, 2021). Simple random sampling increased the sample validity and generalisability of the research (Pascoe, 2021).

To determine the appropriate sample size, the SurveyMonkey sample size calculator was consulted. With a population size greater than 50, at a confidence level of 90% and allowing for a margin of error of 20%, this study had to at least gather between 13-15 responses (SurveyMonkey, 2022). Therefore, this study aimed to collect at least 15 completed responses.

The unit of analysis in this study was individuals. It is possible for a target population to include too many elements (i.e. individuals) for a researcher to reach or analyse (Pascoe, 2021). A target population may also potentially take up too much time and resources available to finish the research (Pascoe, 2021). Therefore, reducing the target population (i.e. South African market) to a more accessible population (i.e. only the Gauteng province) was considered acceptable for the final sample (Pascoe, 2021).

Within the characteristics of the population, a sampling frame was identified. The sampling frame only included clients who voluntarily provided their email addresses to Italtile (who met the population requirements). However, from this list, the researcher was not able to identify whether or not these clients were over the age of 18. The list also did not contain any indication as to whether or not past quotations/purchases were conducted via a showroom or the Italtile website. Some clients reserve their right not to be contacted and therefore do not provide their contact details.

From the sampling frame, the researcher used Microsoft Excel® to randomly order/allocate numbers to each name and the corresponding email address. The final sample was chosen from a randomly ordered list by using the first 20 names, therefore removing bias. The researcher chose to send the survey to more than 15 members (20) within the sampling frame to mitigate non-response.

The sampling method enabled the researcher to use a representative sample as they were still considered to be sharing the same set of characteristics as the larger population (Pascoe, 2021). Due to the diversity (e.g., languages) within the South African market, a small sample size increased the likelihood of the final sample not accurately representing the population (Maree, 2020). The random selection of the method held the same disadvantage if the final sample chosen did not accurately represent South Africa's diversity (Maree, 2020). From the completed questionnaires only 4 out of the 11 official languages in South Africa (as home/first languages) were represented. However, the researcher believed that the method provided an acceptable and representative sample of Italtile's client base and the findings are therefore still generalisable to the broader population (Pascoe, 2021).

### **3.5 Data collection**

Data for the research was collected through an online self-administered survey. This method gave respondents the ability to complete the questionnaire in their own space and time without interference from the researcher collecting the data. The questionnaire was created through an online survey tool, namely, Google Forms. A hyperlink to the questionnaire was sent via email to the randomly chosen final sample in July of 2022 (standardised process).

As previously mentioned, the survey link was sent to 20 members of the population. The survey accepted responses for 6 days. Out of 20, only 17 responses were recorded in the first 3 days where one respondent was not able to complete the survey as they were not over the age of 18. No other responses were recorded after day 3. The final sample size (completed surveys) was therefore established at  $N = 16$ .

With Italtile's permission, the contact details (names, email addresses) of the randomly chosen sample were obtained from its client database (SAP® system). The database extracted from the SAP® system was easily converted into a Microsoft Excel® spreadsheet (already within the population parameters). Italtile allowed clients to be contacted if it furthered the interest of the business, was not against the law and protected human rights.

An online self-administered survey was inexpensive and was deemed the most appropriate for this study. Relative to other data collection methods it required fewer resources and was less time-consuming (du Plooy-Cilliers & Cronje, 2021). The introduction of the survey communicated who was doing the survey, for what purpose, and the time needed to complete the questionnaire (The IIE, 2022). The introduction further stated why it was worth their while and that it was completely voluntary and any information shared would remain confidential (The IIE, 2022). Respondents had the option to withdraw consent at any time (The IIE, 2022). The instructions were clear and simple with no disrespectful language (The IIE, 2022). The questionnaire contained demographic questions about respondents' home language and shopping preference (showroom, website, both) for analysis and generalisability.

Since respondents were able to complete the survey in their own space and time while remaining anonymous, the researcher believes that more candid responses were received (du Plooy-Cilliers & Cronje, 2021). The researcher further saw added benefits to this instrument as it provided ease of analysis and avoided unnecessary monetary costs.

On the other hand, the researcher was unable to assist respondents if questions/statements were misinterpreted or difficult to understand (du Plooy-Cilliers & Cronje, 2021). For this reason, the survey was pre-tested with a smaller sample to find any errors or areas that can be improved in terms of instruction clarity, wording, flow and length. The pre-test was conducted using convenience sampling and the survey link was sent via email. This sample consisted of 10 clients from Italtile's Waterfall showroom in Midrand (Gauteng) with whom the sales consultants had existing professional relationships (e.g., designers, contractors), and thus did not mind being contacted. The respondents were asked to point out any errors or concerns. Given the feedback received, only minor grammatical and typographical errors had to be changed in the introduction of the survey. No other changes were made to the final survey.

To further mitigate a potential low response or completion rate, the researcher introduced a lucky draw for completing the survey. Respondents who wished to be part of the lucky draw could provide their email addresses at the end of the survey. Those respondents stood a chance of winning one of three R250 'takealot.com' vouchers. Three lucky winners, also randomly chosen using Excel<sup>®</sup>, received their electronic vouchers via email.

The consumers' authenticity perceptions were captured using a seven-point Likert scale. It is the preferred scale used by the majority of brand authenticity studies. A few recent examples of these studies are Campagna *et al.* (2021), Xu *et al.* (2021), Han *et al.* (2021), Hernandez-Fernandez and Lewis (2019), Oh *et al.* (2019), Carsana and Jolibert (2018), Dwivedi and McDonald (2018) and Fritz *et al.* (2017). A few of the seminal studies that used Likert scales are Napoli *et al.* (2016), Morhart *et al.* (2015), Schallehn *et al.* (2014) and Bruhn *et al.* (2012).

As mentioned previously, authenticity must be measured on a continuum. For example, when a sales consultant successfully or timeously completes a transaction, the integrity dimension of perceived brand authenticity (PBA) is measured. The consumer's response on the scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 7 = Strongly Agree) therefore shows to what extent the employee behaviour affects their authenticity perception of Italtile. The employee behaviour might increase, decrease or have no effect on PBA. A seven-point Likert scale was found reliable for this study to score how respondents feel, as some respondents may find it difficult to express what they think in their own words (du Plooy-Cilliers & Cronje, 2021).

### **3.6 Data analysis method(s)**

The quantitative data in this study were analysed based on numerical and descriptive analysis. The online survey using Google Forms generated 16 data sets. The data file (.csv) was downloaded from Google Forms and transferred into an Excel® file (.exe). The Excel® file was then imported into statistical analysis software, namely, SPSS®. The raw data generated via SPSS® was exported back into an Excel® file. To test the strength and direction (positive or negative) of the relationships or connections between variables, a Spearman correlation coefficient test was conducted. Excel® was deemed the most efficient method of creating visual presentations of the data like tables and figures.

### 3.6.1 Descriptive statistics

For this study, descriptive analysis was used for the demographic data. The scale of measurement was nominal using closed-ended questions, e.g., Yes/No (Morris & Khan, 2021). A nominal scale is the lowest level of measurement but it was important as it verified that respondents met the unique characteristics set for the population. The demographic data made generalisability possible and provided further insight, for example, which retail channels (showroom, website, both) are preferred by consumers.

### 3.6.2 Inferential statistics

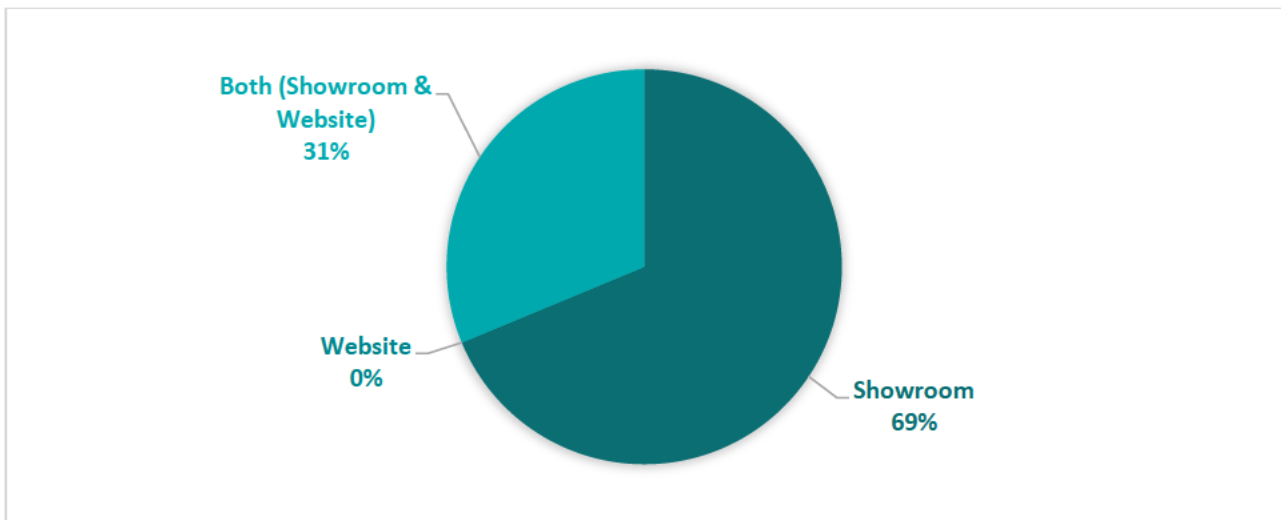
The Likert scale used, had an interval level of scale measurement, a higher level of measurement than a nominal scale (du Plooy-Cilliers & Cronje, 2021). This allowed the researcher to obtain a numerical measure of respondents' perceptions towards the Italtile brand (du Plooy-Cilliers & Cronje, 2021). The inferential analysis was based on statistics where SPSS® was used to conduct a Spearman correlation analysis (Spearman's *rho* and p-value). Using statistics, percentages were used, and visual representations were created like a frequency distribution, a pie chart and tables summarising the Spearman's correlation analysis (du Plooy-Cilliers & Cronje, 2021; Morris & Khan, 2021).

Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha$ ) was used to measure the reliability or internal consistency of the scale. Dr Matt C. Howard (2015) noted that Cronbach's Alpha is one of the most used and cited statistics in the social sciences. Cronbach's Alpha should theoretically provide a number between 0 and 1 (Howard, 2015). The questionnaire consisted of 44 scale items, where the first 2 identified a respondent's home language and shopping preference (showroom, website, both). The remaining 42 items were employed to measure the dimensions and potential outcomes of PBA. In most social science research, a reliability coefficient of 0.7 or above is considered "acceptable" (UCLA, 2021; Howard, 2015). The scale was deemed reliable with a relatively high level of internal consistency, as determined by a Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha$ ) of 0.9 (N of items = 42).

## CHAPTER 4 ~ FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

The following section provides a presentation and interpretation of the data gathered in the context of the research. The findings are in support of brand authenticity in the retail environment as a viable alternative to impersonal mass marketing. In other words, the findings show how important it is for retail brands to create positive service encounters and how it can improve consumer-brand perception.

All respondents answered screening questions at the beginning of the survey to ensure they fall within the population parameters. The final sample ( $N = 16$ ) were all 18 years of age or older and confirmed that they have received an Italtile quotation in the last 2 years. Furthermore, all 16 respondents answered “Yes” to “I have previously visited an Italtile showroom and have interacted with a sales consultant”. However, this question was not a requirement as the population also included consumers who may have previously only shopped via the website. Hence, the survey only gathered data on respondents’ retail channel *preferences* and not their actual retail channel choice within the last 2 years.

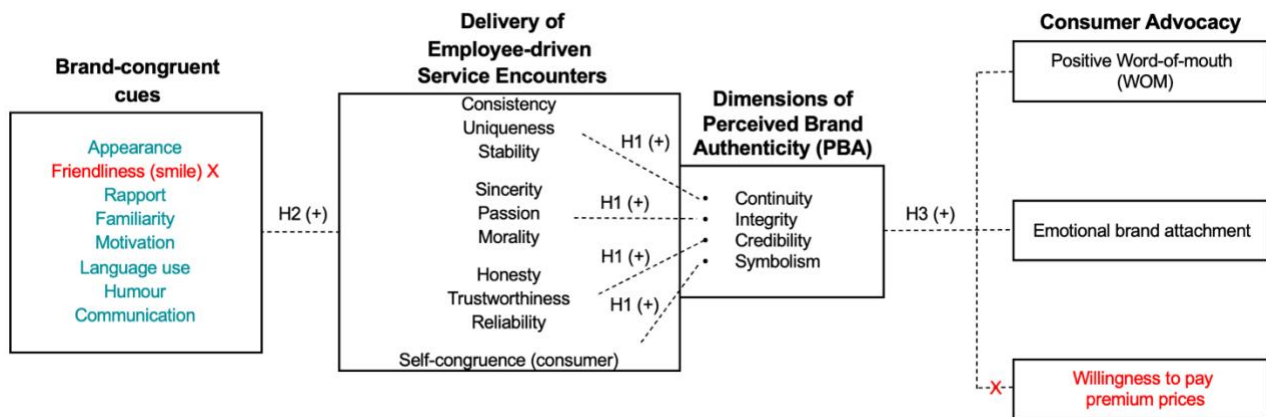


**Figure 2:** Shopping Preference (retail channels)

The data (as per Figure 2) shows the importance of face-to-face employee-driven service encounters as 11 out of 16 respondents (69%) preferred shopping for tiles, sanitaryware or brassware via a showroom. No respondents preferred only shopping via the website, but 5 out of 16 respondents (31%) preferred shopping via both the showroom and the website. This indicated that those who also shop via the website, also prefer visiting a showroom for assistance from a sales consultant.

The above data was the first evidence in the study that supports the role of retail employees and their potential to affect brand authenticity as an alternative to impersonal mass marketing.

A Spearman rank-order correlation was run to assess the relationship between the drivers of employee-driven service encounters and PBA and between PBA and the potential outcomes (benefits to the brand).



**Figure 3:** Proposed relationship between employee-driven service encounters and PBA

(Adapted from Morhart *et al.*, 2015)

In terms of the direction (negative or positive) of the variable relationships, it was found that for every increase in the survey scale from 1-7 (1 = Strongly Disagree; 7 = Strongly Agree), there was a decrease in the shopping preference scale (1= Showroom; 2= Website; 3 = Both). This explained the negative correlation between an item such as “I am more comfortable being attended by the same employee” and their shopping preference (showroom, website, both). Since there were no “website” answers, respondents who answered higher on the Likert scale (5-7 in agreeance), preferred going to a showroom (lower on the shopping preference scale at 1). Therefore, other items that were agreed to (5-7) with a negative correlation (moderate statistical significance) to shopping preference, all preferred shopping via a showroom. These include “I do not mind the employee speaking my second language” ( $r_s = -0.505^*$ ;  $p = 0,046$ ), “I feel passion towards the brand if the employee’s behaviour is aligned with the brand” ( $r_s = -0.519^*$ ;  $p = 0,039$ ), “The employee provides a unique shopping experience” ( $r_s = -0.619^*$ ;  $p = 0,011$ ) and “The personal appearance of the employees of this brand is in line with my personal appearance” ( $r_s = -0.584^*$ ;  $p = 0,017$ ).

Table 1 is a summary of the Spearman correlation analysis containing the statistically significant relationships between variables, all of which had construct validity. Items that were found “not valid” and with no statistically significant relationships were not included in the summary. All relationships (Annexure C) and variables (Annexure B) are highlighted and numbered (V1-V44) for a full evaluation. There was however overwhelming support for the hypothesised relationships (Figure 3) amongst the remaining variables (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Summary of Spearman's correlation analysis

| Item               | PBA Dimension            | Correlation Coefficient ( $r_s$ ) | Sig. (2-tailed) ( $p$ -value) |
|--------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Appearance 1 (V42) | Continuity (Consistency) | 0.524*                            | 0,037                         |
|                    | Continuity (Uniqueness)  | 0.713**                           | 0,002                         |
|                    | Continuity (Stability)   | 0.591*                            | 0,016                         |
|                    |                          |                                   |                               |
| Appearance 2 (V41) | Continuity (Consistency) | 0.538*                            | 0,031                         |
|                    | Continuity (Uniqueness)  | 0.629**                           | 0,009                         |
|                    |                          |                                   |                               |
| Rapport 1 (V21)    | Continuity (Consistency) | 0.583*                            | 0,018                         |
|                    | Continuity (Uniqueness)  | 0.643**                           | 0,007                         |
|                    | Continuity (Stability)   | 0.564*                            | 0,023                         |
|                    |                          |                                   |                               |
|                    | Credibility (Honesty)    | 0.569*                            | 0,021                         |
| Rapport 2 (V44)    | Continuity (Uniqueness)  | 0.738**                           | 0,001                         |
|                    | Continuity (Stability)   | 0.682**                           | 0,004                         |
|                    |                          |                                   |                               |
| Familiarity 1 (V5) | Continuity (Uniqueness)  | 0.712**                           | 0,002                         |
|                    | Continuity (Stability)   | 0.682**                           | 0,004                         |
|                    |                          |                                   |                               |
| Motivation 1 (V30) | Continuity (Uniqueness)  | 0.575**                           | 0,020                         |
|                    | Continuity (Stability)   | <b>0.992**</b>                    | 0,000                         |
|                    |                          |                                   |                               |
|                    | Integrity (Sincerity)    | 0.535*                            | 0,033                         |
|                    |                          |                                   |                               |
| Motivation 2 (V23) | Continuity (Uniqueness)  | 0.709**                           | 0,002                         |
|                    | Continuity (Stability)   | <b>0.877**</b>                    | 0,000                         |
|                    |                          |                                   |                               |
|                    | Integrity (Sincerity)    | 0.566**                           | 0,022                         |
|                    |                          |                                   |                               |
|                    | Credibility (Honesty)    | 0.514*                            | 0,042                         |
|                    |                          |                                   |                               |
| Motivation 4 (V24) | Continuity (Stability)   | 0.785**                           | 0,000                         |
|                    |                          |                                   |                               |
|                    | Integrity (Sincerity)    | 0.618**                           | 0,011                         |

| Item                           | PBA Dimension                           | Correlation Coefficient ( $r_s$ ) | Sig. (2-tailed) ( $p$ -value) |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
|                                | Credibility (Honesty)                   | 0.555*                            | 0,026                         |
|                                |                                         |                                   |                               |
| Language use 2 (V9)            | Continuity (Uniqueness)                 | 0.676**                           | 0,004                         |
|                                | Continuity (Stability)                  | 0.577**                           | 0,019                         |
|                                |                                         |                                   |                               |
| Humour 2 (V11)                 | Continuity (Consistency)                | 0.570*                            | 0,021                         |
|                                | Continuity (Uniqueness)                 | 0.707**                           | 0,002                         |
|                                | Continuity (Stability)                  | 0.790**                           | 0,000                         |
|                                |                                         |                                   |                               |
| Humour 3 (V18)                 | Continuity (Uniqueness)                 | 0.681**                           | 0,004                         |
|                                | Continuity (Stability)                  | <b>0.823**</b>                    | 0,000                         |
|                                |                                         |                                   |                               |
|                                | Integrity (Sincerity)                   | 0.687**                           | 0,003                         |
|                                |                                         |                                   |                               |
|                                | Credibility (Honesty)                   | 0.660**                           | 0,005                         |
|                                |                                         |                                   |                               |
| Communication 1 (V38)          | Integrity (Sincerity)                   | 0.571*                            | 0,021                         |
|                                |                                         |                                   |                               |
| Communication 4 (V40)          | Continuity (Uniqueness)                 | 0.626**                           | 0,010                         |
|                                |                                         |                                   |                               |
|                                | Symbolism (Self-congruence)             | 0.535*                            | 0,033                         |
| PBA Dimension                  | Outcome of PBA                          | Correlation Coefficient ( $r_s$ ) | Sig. (2-tailed) ( $p$ -value) |
| Continuity (Consistency) (V22) | Emotional brand attachment (Passion)    | 0.504*                            | 0,047                         |
|                                |                                         |                                   |                               |
| Continuity (Uniqueness) (V35)  | Emotional brand attachment (Connection) | 0.718**                           | 0,002                         |
|                                | Emotional brand attachment (Passion)    | 0.732**                           | 0,001                         |
|                                |                                         |                                   |                               |
| Continuity (Stability) (V28)   | Emotional brand attachment (Connection) | 0.697**                           | 0,003                         |
|                                | Emotional brand attachment (Passion)    | 0.780**                           | 0,000                         |
|                                |                                         |                                   |                               |
|                                | Word-of-mouth (WOM 3)                   | 0.529*                            | 0,034                         |
|                                | Word-of-mouth (WOM 1)                   | 0.609*                            | 0,012                         |
|                                |                                         |                                   |                               |
| Integrity (Sincerity) (V25)    | Emotional brand attachment (Connection) | 0.698**                           | 0,003                         |
|                                | Emotional brand attachment (Passion)    | 0.585**                           | 0,017                         |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |                                            |         |       |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|---------|-------|
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |                                            |         |       |
| Credibility<br>(Honesty) (V36)                                                                                                                                                                                          | Emotional brand attachment<br>(Connection) | 0.567*  | 0,022 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Emotional brand attachment<br>(Passion)    | 0.690** | 0,003 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |                                            |         |       |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Word-of-mouth<br>(WOM 1)                   | 0.514*  | 0,042 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |                                            |         |       |
| Credibility<br>(Reliability) (V27)                                                                                                                                                                                      | Emotional brand attachment<br>(Passion)    | 0.506*  | 0,046 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |                                            |         |       |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Word-of-mouth<br>(WOM 3)                   | 0.532*  | 0,034 |
| Note: $\alpha = 0.9$ ; N = 16;<br>* Correlation is significant at the $p < 0,05$ level (2-tailed).<br>** Correlation is significant at the $p < 0,01$ level (2-tailed).<br>Full Spearman correlation table = Annexure C |                                            |         |       |

#### 4.1 Delivery of employee-driven service encounters & Brand-congruent employee behaviour

##### 4.1.1 Appearance

Overall, employee appearance had a statistically significant, moderate and strong positive correlation to all 3 underlying variables of the continuity dimension (consistency, uniqueness, stability). It was therefore important that employees maintained a consistent and minimum semi-formal appearance in line with the premium quality and general brand identity of Italtile.

There was a statistically significant, strong positive correlation between *Appearance 1* (“The personal appearance of the employees of this brand is in line with the appearance of the brand.”) and continuity (uniqueness: “The employee provides a unique shopping experience.”),  $r_s = 0.713^{**}$ ,  $p = 0,002$ . This finding is supported by the study of Morhart *et al.* (2009) where service employees were found to be a key factor in “brand-building”.

*Appearance 2* was expected to influence symbolism (self-congruence) but had little to no effect. Instead, there was a statistically significant, strong positive correlation between *Appearance 2* (“The personal appearance of the employees of this brand is in line with my personal appearance.”) and continuity (uniqueness),  $r_s = 0.629^{**}$ ,  $p = 0,009$ . The data provides evidence that employee’s in a showroom who maintain a consistent appearance, one unique to the brand, is vital in improving an authentic perception. In the case of a premium brand like Italtile, a semi-formal appearance with attention to detail would be expected from employees whilst remaining relatable (credible) to its clientele.

#### **4.1.2 Friendliness**

The items measuring the effect of friendliness (*smile*) on PBA, had no statistically significant relationships with other variables in this study ( $p < n.s.$ ) and were therefore “not valid”. The data indicated that an employee’s perceived friendliness had little to no effect on Italtile’s PBA. Hence, in this study, friendliness was not found as a key variable affecting brand authenticity. This is contradictory to the research by Grandey *et al.* (2005) where positive facial expressions (e.g., smiles) during service encounters were found to increase authenticity.

#### **4.1.3 Rapport**

*Rapport 1* (“In thinking about my relationship with this person, I enjoyed interacting with this employee.”) and *Rapport 2* (“This employee related well to me.”) had the strongest positive correlations to continuity (uniqueness),  $r_s = 0.643^{**}$ ,  $p = 0,007$  and  $r_s = 0.629^{**}$ ,  $p = 0,009$  respectively. *Rapport 1* also had a statistically significant, moderate positive correlation to credibility (honesty: “The employee will not deceive/betray me.”),  $r_s = 0.569^*$ ,  $p = 0,021$ . For Italtile’s PBA, this indicated the importance of enjoyable and honest service encounters with employees whom consumers can relate to.

#### **4.1.4 Familiarity**

There were statistically significant, strong positive correlations between *Familiarity 1* (“I am more comfortable being attended by the same employee.”) and continuity (uniqueness) and continuity (stability: “The employee delivers the same service every time”),  $r_s = 0.712^{**}$ ,  $p = 0,002$  and  $r_s = 0.684^{**}$ ,  $p = 0,004$  respectively. This indicated that consumers feel more at ease when consulting with the same employee in a showroom as they are more likely to receive the same service every time. These consumers simultaneously value a unique experience and receiving good service.

#### **4.1.5 Motivation**

Motivation had the majority of moderate and strong positive correlations to continuity, integrity and credibility. The strongest relationship to PBA in the data was found between *Motivation 1* (“The employee does their job well”) and continuity (stability),  $r_s = 0.992^{**}$ ,  $p = 0,000$  ( $p < 0,01$ ). The second strongest relationship was found between *Motivation 2* (“The employee accepts their responsibilities.”) and continuity (stability),  $r_s = 0.877^{**}$ ,  $p = 0,000$  ( $p < 0,01$ ). This indicated that employees who do their job well are perceived to be well-trained with high product knowledge and are therefore able to consistently deliver good service (homogeneity of service delivery).

There was a statistically significant, moderate positive correlation between *Motivation 1/2* and integrity (sincerity: “The employee cares about my wants/needs.”),  $r_s = 0.535^*$ ,  $p = 0,033$  and  $r_s = 0.566^{**}$ ,  $p = 0,022$  respectively. This indicated that well-trained or experienced employees who accept their responsibilities are perceived to be more sincere in their service delivery. There was a statistically significant, moderate positive correlation between *Motivation 2* and credibility (honesty),  $r_s = 0.514^*$ ,  $p = 0,042$ . This further provided support for the importance of employees who accept their responsibilities as they are perceived to be more honest which increases the credibility of the Italtile brand.

There was a statistically significant, strong positive correlation between *Motivation 4* (“The employee assists me in a timely and conscientious manner.”) and continuity (stability),  $r_s = 0.785^{**}$ ,  $p = 0,000$  ( $p < 0,01$ ), as well as between *Motivation 4* and integrity (sincerity),  $r_s = 0.618^{**}$ ,  $p = 0,011$ . Furthermore, there was a statistically significant, moderate positive correlation between *Motivation 4* credibility (honesty),  $r_s = 0.555^*$ ,  $p = 0,026$ . These findings indicated that employees who are motivated in delivering service within a consumer’s expected timeframe increased Italtile’s PBA. This is consistent with the findings of Escamilla *et al.* (2022) where motivated employees (those showing high commitment to their job) generated a positive influence on a consumer’s overall service experience.

#### 4.1.6 Language use

There was a statistically significant, strong positive correlation between *Language use 2* (“I do not mind the employee speaking my second language.”) and continuity (uniqueness),  $r_s = 0.676^{**}$ ,  $p = 0,004$ . Furthermore, there was a statistically significant, moderate positive correlation between *Language use 2* and continuity (stability),  $r_s = 0.577^{**}$ ,  $p = 0,019$ . This indicated that consumers who believe that employees create a unique shopping experience are not as adamant about speaking their home/first language but still prefer consistent service delivery. This finding is contradictory to that of Holmqvist and Van Vaerenbergh (2013) where the researchers found consumers to prefer speaking their “native” or home language in high-involvement services (such as Italtile). This finding is expected to differ with a larger sample as one could assume that consumers would be more comfortable/fluent in their home language. However, since the majority of the sample (62.5%) indicated “English” as their home language (Table 2), a larger sample would be required to provide more detailed results.

**Table 2:** Frequency distribution of respondents' home language

| Home Language | Frequency (f) | Percentage (%) |
|---------------|---------------|----------------|
| English       | 10            | 62.5%          |
| Afrikaans     | 2             | 12.5%          |
| isiXhosa      | 2             | 12.5%          |
| isiZulu       | 2             | 12.5%          |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>16</b>     | <b>100%</b>    |

#### **4.1.7 Humour**

Humour had moderate and strong positive correlations to continuity, integrity and credibility. There were statistically significant, strong positive correlations between *Humour 2* (“I feel closer to the employee when humour is used.”) and continuity (uniqueness and stability),  $r_s = 0.707^{**}$ ,  $p = 0,002$  ( $p < 0,01$ ) and  $r_s = 0.790^{**}$ ,  $p = 0,000$  ( $p < 0,01$ ) respectively. There were statistically significant, strong positive correlations between *Humour 3* (“I see humour as a self-enhancing behaviour.”) and continuity (uniqueness and stability),  $r_s = 0.681^{**}$ ,  $p = 0,004$  ( $p < 0,01$ ) and  $r_s = 0.823^{**}$ ,  $p = 0,000$  ( $p < 0,01$ ) respectively. These findings indicated that humour increased Italtile’s PBA as it strengthened the employee-consumer relationship. This is consistent with the study by Mathies *et al.* (2016) where humour was found to strengthen employee-consumer rapport and aid in service recovery.

There was a statistically significant, strong positive correlation between *Humour 3* and integrity (sincerity),  $r_s = 0.687^{**}$ ,  $p = 0,003$  ( $p < 0,01$ ). There was a statistically significant, strong positive correlation between *Humour 3* and credibility (honesty),  $r_s = 0.660^{**}$ ,  $p = 0,005$  ( $p < 0,01$ ). These findings are consistent with Morhart *et al.* (2015) where an employee who is perceived as honest (“will not deceive/betray me”) is also perceived to care more about the consumer’s wants/needs. Humour is therefore a positive behaviour influencing Italtile’s PBA and is of high importance when establishing trustworthy employee-consumer relationships.

#### **4.1.8 Communication**

The Italtile brand has strict guidelines in terms of telephonic, verbal, written and general communication (Italtile Retail, 2022). Overall, the guidelines and general tone of communication can be summarised as formal and respectful. Employees who have direct interaction with Italtile clients have to follow the guideline of “SMILE” (Sincerity, Motivation, Incredible passion, Life and Enthusiasm) (Italtile Retail, 2022).

There was a statistically significant, moderate positive correlation between *Communication 1* (“The employee’s communication style is consistent with the brand’s communication style.”) and integrity (sincerity),  $r_s = 0.571^*$ ,  $p = 0,021$ . This finding supported the value of authentic one-on-one communication between Italtile employees and consumers. It showed that employees whose communication followed the brand’s guidelines are perceived as sincere (“cares about my wants/needs”) and therefore increased brand authenticity and subsequently consumer advocacy.

There was a statistically significant, strong positive correlation between *Communication 4* (“The employee’s communication style is like my own.”) and continuity (uniqueness),  $r_s = 0.626^{**}$ ,  $p = 0,010$ . This finding indicated that consumers who liked or related to the brand appreciate its uniqueness as influenced by employees. This finding is supported by Fritz *et al.* (2017) who found that a unique/original brand (not copying another brand) increased brand authenticity. In the context of this study, it means that unique or personalised communication decreased perceptions of being overly commercialised (perceived as not reliable or sincere) (Morhart *et al.*, 2015). Thus, this finding confirms that retail employees are vital to brand authenticity and a valuable alternative to brand building compared to impersonal mass marketing.

## **4.2 Dimensions of PBA**

### **4.2.1 Continuity, integrity and credibility**

The continuity dimension was found to have the biggest impact on Italtile’s PBA. Employee-driven service encounters affect all of the underlying variables of continuity (consistency, uniqueness and stability). In this study, *continuity* in employee-driven service encounters was therefore found to be the most important dimension affecting Italtile’s PBA. In this study, similar to the findings of Morhart *et al.* (2015), integrity (sincerity) and credibility (honesty, reliability) were found to have almost equal impacts on Italtile’s PBA. These findings indicate that a consistent and original brand delivering on its value promise (credibility) is perceived as more caring and reliable. These PBA dimensions are therefore confirmed as key factors affecting the Italtile brand.

#### **4.2.2 Symbolism**

*Symbolism* was found the least important variable affecting Italtile's PBA and did not lead to any of the expected outcomes of PBA. Only respondents who agreed that an employee's *communication* was in line with their own (*Communication 4*), had a statistically significant, moderate positive correlation to symbolism (self-congruence),  $r_s = 0.535^*$ ;  $p = 0,033$ . This finding is supported by Moulard *et al.* (2021) where the researchers disagreed with the use of symbolism in measuring PBA. However, the same *communication* item showed a statistically significant, strong positive correlation to continuity (uniqueness),  $r_s = 0.626^{**}$ ;  $p = 0,010$ . The data, therefore, remained in support of the findings by Campagna *et al.* (2021) and Morhart *et al.* (2015) where a brand can be true to itself (continuity) whilst enhancing a consumer's 'personal' identity (symbolism). For a comprehensive or more accurate analysis of this dimension, one would have to use a larger sample.

### **4.3 Consumer advocacy (Outcomes of PBA)**

#### **4.3.1 Emotional brand attachment (EBA)**

Emotional brand attachment (passion: "I feel passion towards the brand if the employee's behaviour is aligned with the brand.") had the most correlations to other variables within the data set. In this study, it is therefore confirmed as an outcome of PBA and therefore the most noteworthy benefit to be obtained from PBA. Continuity, integrity and credibility had statistically significant, moderate and strong positive correlations to emotional brand attachment,  $r_s > 0.5$ ;  $p < 0,05$  and  $r_s > 0.6$ ;  $p < 0,01$ . The continuity finding is contradictory to that of Morhart *et al.* (2015) where only integrity, credibility and symbolism were found to affect EBA. Furthermore, direct correlations were found between some brand congruent cues and the outcomes as per Tables 3 and 4.

**Table 3:** Correlation between brand-congruent cues and EBA (passion)

| Item                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Outcome of PBA                       | Correlation Coefficient ( $r_s$ ) | Sig. (2-tailed) ( $p$ -value) |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Appearance 1 (V42)                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Emotional brand attachment (Passion) | 0.548*                            | 0,028                         |
| Appearance 2 (V41)                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Emotional brand attachment (Passion) | 0.502*                            | 0,048                         |
| Rapport 1 (V21)                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Emotional brand attachment (Passion) | 0.734**                           | 0,001                         |
| Rapport 2 (V44)                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Emotional brand attachment (Passion) | 0.746**                           | 0,001                         |
| Motivation 1 (V30)                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Emotional brand attachment (Passion) | 0.775**                           | 0,000                         |
| Motivation 2 (V23)                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Emotional brand attachment (Passion) | <b>0.871**</b>                    | 0,000                         |
| Motivation 4 (V24)                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Emotional brand attachment (Passion) | 0.662**                           | 0,005                         |
| Humour 3 (V18)                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Emotional brand attachment (Passion) | <b>0.812**</b>                    | 0,000                         |
| Note: $\alpha = 0.9$ ; $N = 16$<br>* Correlation is significant at the $p < 0,05$ level (2-tailed).<br>** Correlation is significant at the $p < 0,01$ level (2-tailed).<br>Full Spearman correlation table = Annexure C |                                      |                                   |                               |

Appearance, rapport, motivation and humour were all found to be valuable cues to forge deeper connections that build long-term relationships. This finding provides further evidence of the important effect service employees have on PBA as it creates consumer- and brand-derived value, e.g., a better shopping experience and passion for the brand. Some of the strongest correlations were found between *Humour 3* and EBA (passion),  $r_s = 0.812^{**}$ ;  $p = 0,000$  ( $p < 0,01$ ), and between *Motivation 2* and EBA (passion),  $r_s = 0.871^{**}$ ;  $p = 0,000$  ( $p < 0,01$ ).

#### 4.3.2 Word-of-mouth (WOM)

**Table 4:** Correlation between brand-congruent cues and WOM

| Item                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Outcome of PBA        | Correlation Coefficient ( $r_s$ ) | Sig. (2-tailed) ( $p$ -value) |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Appearance 2 (V41)                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Word-of-mouth (WOM 3) | 0.549*                            | 0,028                         |
| Rapport 1 (V21)                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Word-of-mouth (WOM 3) | 0.677**                           | 0,004                         |
| Rapport 1 (V21)                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Word-of-mouth (WOM 1) | 0.617*                            | 0,011                         |
| Rapport 2 (V44)                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Word-of-mouth (WOM 1) | 0.535*                            | 0,033                         |
| Motivation 1 (V30)                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Word-of-mouth (WOM 1) | 0.577*                            | 0,019                         |
| Motivation 2 (V23)                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Word-of-mouth (WOM 3) | 0.572*                            | 0,021                         |
| Motivation 2 (V23)                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Word-of-mouth (WOM 1) | 0.750**                           | 0,001                         |
| Communication 1 (V38)                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Word-of-mouth (WOM 3) | 0.512*                            | 0,043                         |
| Note: $\alpha = 0.9$ ; $N = 16$<br>* Correlation is significant at the $p < 0,05$ level (2-tailed).<br>** Correlation is significant at the $p < 0,01$ level (2-tailed).<br>Full Spearman correlation table = Annexure C |                       |                                   |                               |

Continuity (stability) and credibility (honesty, reliability) had statistically significant, moderate positive correlations to WOM,  $r_s > 0.5$ ;  $p < 0,05$ . WOM is the second most noteworthy benefit to be obtained from PBA in this study.

Appearance, rapport, motivation and communication were all found to be valuable cues that increased Italtile's brand awareness and therefore its ability to differentiate from competitors. Some of the strongest correlations were found between *Rapport 1* and WOM 3 ("I would recommend the brand/employee to someone who seeks my advice."),  $r_s = 0.677^{**}$ ;  $p = 0,004$  ( $p < 0,01$ ), and between *Motivation 2* and WOM 1 ("I would recommend the brand/employee to others."),  $r_s = 0.750^{**}$ ;  $p = 0,001$  ( $p < 0,01$ ).

### 4.3.3 Willingness to pay premium prices

Italtile employee behaviour was not found to affect a consumer's willingness to pay premium prices. This finding is contradictory to the study by Fritz *et al.* (2017) where a quality relationship between a consumer and a brand had a statistically significant, strong correlation with the willingness to pay a premium price ( $\gamma = 0.722^{***}$ ;  $p < 0,001$ ). However, Fritz *et al.* (2017) also stated that a strong behavioural outcome (willingness to pay premium prices) is more likely to be found among consumers who experience high self-congruence with a brand (strongly appreciating the brand). Since this study found symbolism (self-congruence) to have little to no effect on Italtile's PBA, therefore the opposite, the finding is not entirely unexpected.

|    |                                                                                                                                                                                                               |        |
|----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|
| H1 | There was a statistically significant relationship between the delivery of employee-driven service encounters and PBA. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is accepted. | Reject |
| H2 | There was a statistically significant relationship between brand-congruent employee behaviour and PBA. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is accepted.                 | Reject |
| H3 | There was a statistically significant relationship between PBA and consumer advocacy. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is accepted.                                  | Reject |

#### 4.4 Conclusion for Italtile Retail (Pty) Ltd

For the Italtile brand, it is important to maintain *consistency* in communication (formal and respectful) across all consumer touchpoints. The most beneficial employees to the brand's authenticity perception and reputation will be those who have great attention to detail. Employees must be able to communicate well and in an *honest, sincere, and empathetic* manner. Since Italtile is positioned as a premium brand, employees must pay close attention to colour coding and must always commit to a minimum dress code of semi-formal. For example, it would not be appropriate for employees to wear denim, t-shirts, or tight-fitting clothing.

Italtile's *authenticity* and premium quality do not only stem from its products or appearance, but from the service delivered by its employees. The brand's employees provide a *unique* experience for consumers increasing the brand's ability to differentiate and personalise its service. *Humour*, for example, is an important quality in the service climate and must be incorporated when appropriate but in moderation. The use of humour (unique to everyone) must occur naturally in conversation and must therefore not be forced or over the top. In other words, charismatic, but still sincere and respectful.

Above all else, consumers are to be placed at the forefront of service employee actions. Based on this study, it is recommended that Italtile recruit and train employees who can continuously perform their service actions in an eager manner. It is possible that excellent service provided by highly skilled and self-motivated employees could be the key to aiding Italtile's consumer advocacy (e.g., influencing consumers' willingness to pay premium prices).

## CHAPTER 5 ~ CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 Validity, reliability and trustworthiness

To increase reliability and validity, the measuring instrument was pre-tested with a small segment of the population. This enabled the researcher to address errors in the survey and potential difficulties that respondents could have faced when answering certain sections. The pre-test, therefore, determined whether respondents understood all sections and that there was a common understanding of the terminology used.

To further the instrument and construct validity, more than one item was used to measure a single dimension of PBA (Koonin, 2021). Each survey item was subsequently linked to the dimensions it was most likely to affect and to its source (Annexure B). As previously mentioned, some survey items were adapted to accurately reflect the study. However, the changes were minimal and the researcher only replaced the word “brand” with “employee” to retain its content validity (Koonin, 2021).

Relative to other brand authenticity studies, the sample size could be considered small. However, the sampling method increased the sample validity by providing a higher chance of obtaining a representative sample (external validity) than most other methods (Pascoe, 2021). The sampling method increased the probability of generalising the findings and obtaining the same results if the study was to be repeated. It was therefore more reliable for this study relative to another method like convenience sampling.

This study further relied on trusted statistical analyses that removed “guesswork” from the interpretation of data (Morris & Khan, 2021). The analysis was therefore objective (i.e. without bias) and accurate (Morris & Khan, 2021). Given that the researcher was not in contact with respondents beforehand, the findings can be considered more reliable. The findings can further be viewed as reliable since the measurement scale maintained a high level of internal consistency with a Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha$ ) of 0.9.

## 5.2 Implications of findings and future research recommendations

The following section addresses the research questions, problem, and hypotheses and includes recommendations for future brand authenticity research.

*Q1: How do employee-driven service encounters affect perceived brand authenticity?*

*Q2: How does brand-congruent employee behaviour affect perceived brand authenticity?*

The data provides substantial evidence as to how beneficial or important good service delivery within an authentic retail environment can be to a brand. The data shows the strong effect of consistency, uniqueness and stability where a one-on-one approach between employees and consumers can be effective to attain positive brand perception. Personalised communication and employee interactions should therefore be considered a priority to improve a brand's authenticity. Future research could focus on the role authenticity plays in a brand's online activities (website/webstore, blogs, social media).

The effect that service employees have on the relationship between brand and consumer is significant. This study puts these relationships and brand authenticity forward as a viable alternative to mass marketing that requires attention to detail. Brand authenticity in the service climate is expected to be more effective in the long term than mass marketing tactics. However, the brand must retain and attract honest, well-trained employees who can maintain a consistent level of service with charisma. It may be worthwhile for retail brands like Italtile to determine what motivates certain employees (intrinsically or extrinsically) to deliver consistent service.

This study found service employees to be vital brand representatives. Although the list of brand-congruent employee behaviour considered is not exhaustive, it does provide substantial evidence as to the role retail employees play in building brand authenticity. *Future research* may consider a more extensive list of behaviours/cues and should be conducted in different industries or service climates (e.g. online). *Future research* could also be done following a qualitative approach. This might lead researchers to more in-depth findings based on human truths. In other words, qualitative brand authenticity studies could find insight into specific cues or to what extent each cue influences a specific brand's authenticity perception.

The data not only revealed the significant effect of service employees on PBA but also the benefits to be gained from brand authenticity (EBA and WOM). This study proposes that Italtile employees must maintain a certain level of professionalism in their appearance. An example of this is to not wear denim or other informal wear as it does not align with Italtile's premium brand quality. However, for the brand to remain relatable (credible) it must focus its positioning on a consumer's real self-perception instead of unrealistic ideals.

Given the population parameters of this study (only including existing Italtile clients), it was assumed that the final sample was familiar with the products and services provided. As previously stated, 69% of respondents preferred shopping for tiles, sanitaryware or brassware via a showroom, and 31% preferred shopping via both the showroom and the website. Since no respondents preferred shopping via only the website, perhaps clients prefer a physical showroom experience for surprise and serendipity. This, again, supports the significant effect that authentic employee behaviour (face-to-face) can have on a brand's perception.

Brand-congruent behaviour among service employees can act as a bridge between consumers and brands to create more *real* or *genuine* relationships. This could potentially be more true for premium and luxury brands and may lead to brand loyalty, an improved reputation and overall business growth. *Future research* could investigate the effect of service employee behaviour on the PBA of more value-based brands.

In sum, the results demonstrate that retail companies can use brand authenticity to their advantage. As a practical implication, brand managers should identify which behaviours or cues (appearance, rapport, familiarity, motivation, language use, humour, communication) within the service climate would be the most beneficial as they will likely be unique to the brand. Once identified, these behaviours could be a key differentiator, especially among brands that deliver the same service. Brands could consider investing in training programmes that incorporate specific cues to improve authentic service delivery. Since the results highlight key outcome variables (consumer advocacy), perceived brand authenticity seems to be a crucial success factor for retail/service brands.

### **5.3 Ethical considerations**

This study required ethics clearance and permissions by the Independent Institute of Education (IIE) as outlined by the IIE's postgraduate handbook of 2022 (The IIE, 2022). To comply with South Africa's POPI Act, the researcher had to obtain consent from the company (Italtile) to contact the final sample via a Gatekeeper's letter. The purpose of the study was clearly stated. All potential respondents were informed that participation is entirely voluntary and that they would remain anonymous.

The data was processed without risking the privacy of respondents (Protection of Personal Information Act, 2013). Respondents had the right to withdraw their consent to participate at any time (Protection of Personal Information Act, 2013). No personal details were used in this study. Only demographic details were used to make generalisations during data analysis. The data were considered confidential and were not publicly shared (Protection of Personal Information Act, 2013). The data will remain private between the researcher (the IIE) and Italtile.

The researcher ensured that no data was stored longer than necessary to complete the final research report. All files containing contact details were deleted (rendered irretrievable) as soon as practical (Protection of Personal Information Act, 2013). The researcher respected the right of the respondents to request access to their responses and to correct the information provided (Protection of Personal Information Act, 2013).

The researcher sent out the hyperlink from an Italtile email address. Data were analysed using the researcher's computer (Microsoft Excel®) and all software was kept up-to-date. The computer that was used required a fingerprint/password to unlock. The data files gathered from the questionnaire were password protected and backed up on a password-protected external hard drive.

## 5.4 Limitations

Although this study is an extension of similar brand authenticity research, is it not without limitations. The concepts of indexical-, iconic- and existential authenticity were used to conceptualise brand authenticity. However, these concepts were not used in data collection to distinguish between respondents' perceptions. Consequently, this study cannot state how these concepts can be utilised to improve brand authenticity perceptions. Furthermore, the data may have been affected by the research design since the survey was only sent to a relatively small number of potential respondents and only accepted responses for a limited time.

Another limitation was that this study focused on the on-premises service climate. Future studies could include online service platforms or take an omnichannel approach. Moreover, this study was only conducted within the South African ceramic industry and only considered one brand (Italtile). Therefore, it did not account for consumers in other countries, industries, or brands.

This study was not repeated and used a much smaller sample size relative to other brand authenticity studies like Fritz *et al.* (2017) (N = 509), Oh *et al.* (2019) (N = 347), Hernandez-Fernandez and Lewis (2019) (N = 738), Portal *et al.* (2019) (N = 355), or Safeer *et al.* (2021) (N = 390). These factors may have put its validity and reliability into question. However, the researcher believed in the approach of obtaining a representative sample where the findings were generalisable. Additionally, the survey was standardised. In other words, the survey process was conducted in the same manner for all respondents.

## 5.5 Concluding remarks

The findings of this study provide a meaningful contribution to consumer behaviour knowledge within the ceramic industry. The findings are helpful to improve consumer experiences with retail employees and therefore retail brands. The most relevant contribution pertains to the retailers part of the Italtile Ceramics (Pty) Ltd group (Italtile retail, CTM, TopT, Easylife Kitchens, U-light) and retailers with similar showrooms. Further studies on brand authenticity in the retail environment could be the key for brands to increase brand growth and sales. Each brand has the opportunity to gain unique insight into its consumers.

This study forms part of the most recent brand authenticity research conducted during the COVID-19 era and further contributes to general branding theory. By conducting similar research, perhaps on a larger scale, brands will be better able to devise their unique strategies and moments of truth. This will allow them to forge deeper connections with consumers and potentially achieve other outcomes of PBA. Different brands have different benefits to gain. Some brands might find that they need to be more strict in terms of structure and discipline, whilst others need to be less strict. Retail brands have to find the balance between enforcing rules (e.g. appearance) on employees and embracing individuality. Evidently by creating *genuine* experiences to capture the heart, brain and wallet of a consumer.

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## ANNEXURE A ~ RESEARCH INSTRUMENT (ONLINE SELF-ADMINISTERED SURVEY)

Dear respondent,

I, Jochie Schoeman am a student at IIE-Vega (a brand of the Independent Institute of Education). I am currently conducting research for my BComHons in Strategic Brand Management in which I am investigating the effect of employee-driven service encounters on perceived brand authenticity - the case of Italtile Retail (Pty) Ltd.

The study will aim to investigate how service employee behaviour and attitude affect perceived brand authenticity (PBA). The purpose of the study will be to better describe the role of retail employees and how they affect PBA as an alternative to mass marketing.

If you would like to stand a chance to win one of three R250 'takealot.com' vouchers, please provide your email address at the end of the questionnaire. Your email address will only be used for the random selection of three winners, after which they will be deleted. The email address given will not be used to link back to your answers. The questionnaire takes approximately 5 minutes to complete.

- Your inclusion in this study is completely voluntary;
- If you do not wish to participate in this study, you have every right not to do so;
- Even if you agree to participate in this study, you may withdraw at any time without having to provide an explanation for your decision.
- Your participation will be anonymous.

The study has been approved by my supervisor and the IIE-campus ethics committee. I can be contacted at: [REDACTED] if you have any questions or concerns.

I hereby acknowledge and give my full consent to the participation to this study as stipulated above.

|     |  |
|-----|--|
| Yes |  |
|-----|--|

### Questionnaire

1. Please 'click' the most appropriate item below.

|                                                                                             |     |    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|----|
| I am 18 years or older. *                                                                   | Yes | No |
| I have previously visited an Italtile showroom and have interacted with a sales consultant. | Yes | No |
| I have received an Italtile quotation in the last 2 years. *                                | Yes | No |

\* Required: Google forms ended/submitted if a respondent answered "No".

| <b>2. Please 'click' the applicable options below.</b>                                                                                                                                    |                         |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|----------|-------------------|---------|----------------|-------|----------------|
| Home Language                                                                                                                                                                             |                         |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
|                                                                                                                                                                                           | English                 |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
|                                                                                                                                                                                           | Afrikaans               |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
|                                                                                                                                                                                           | Sepedi                  |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
|                                                                                                                                                                                           | Sesotho                 |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
|                                                                                                                                                                                           | Setswana                |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
|                                                                                                                                                                                           | isiSwati                |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
|                                                                                                                                                                                           | Tshivenda               |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
|                                                                                                                                                                                           | isiNdebele              |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
|                                                                                                                                                                                           | isiXhosa                |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
|                                                                                                                                                                                           | isiZulu                 |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
|                                                                                                                                                                                           | isiTsonga               |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
|                                                                                                                                                                                           | Other – Please specify: |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
|                                                                                                                                                                                           |                         |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| <b>3. Please indicate below how you prefer shopping for tiles, sanitaryware or brassware.</b>                                                                                             |                         |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
|                                                                                                                                                                                           | Showroom                |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
|                                                                                                                                                                                           | Website                 |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
|                                                                                                                                                                                           | Both                    |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| <b>4. For the statements to follow, please 'click' the box that best describes how strongly you disagree or agree with the statement based on how you perceive employees of Italtile.</b> |                         |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| Item                                                                                                                                                                                      | Strongly disagree       | Disagree | Somewhat disagree | Neutral | Somewhat agree | Agree | Strongly agree |
| A friendly employee is more sincere than an unfriendly employee.                                                                                                                          |                         |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| I am comfortable switching languages to accommodate the employee.                                                                                                                         |                         |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| I am more comfortable being attended by the same employee.                                                                                                                                |                         |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| I am more satisfied with a friendly employee than an unfriendly employee.                                                                                                                 |                         |          |                   |         |                |       |                |

| Item                                                                                    | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Somewhat disagree | Neutral | Somewhat agree | Agree | Strongly agree |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|----------|-------------------|---------|----------------|-------|----------------|
| I believe the employee is honest when communicating with me.                            |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| I do not mind being assisted by a different employee every time.                        |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| I don't mind the employee speaking my second language.                                  |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| I expect the same level of service every time.                                          |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| I feel closer to the employee when humour is used.                                      |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| I feel more connected to the brand if employee's behaviour is aligned with the brand.   |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| I feel passion towards the brand if the employee's behaviour is aligned with the brand. |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| I find the employee's humour an enjoyable interaction.                                  |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| I like the brand more if the employee's behaviour is aligned with the brand.            |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| I prefer it when the employee speaks my home language.                                  |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| I say positive things about the brand/employee to other people.                         |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| I see humour as a self-enhancing behaviour.                                             |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| I was comfortable interacting with this employee.                                       |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |

| Item                                                                                          | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Somewhat disagree | Neutral | Somewhat agree | Agree | Strongly agree |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|----------|-------------------|---------|----------------|-------|----------------|
| I would recommend the brand/employee to others.                                               |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| I would recommend the brand/employee to someone who seeks my advice.                          |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| In thinking about my relationship with this person, I enjoyed interacting with this employee. |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| The actions of the employees of this brand are not at odds with what the brand promises.      |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| The employee accepts their responsibilities.                                                  |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| The employee assists me in a timely and conscientious manner.                                 |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| The employee cares about my wants/needs.                                                      |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| The employee communicates in a sincere manner.                                                |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| The employee delivers on the brand's value promise.                                           |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| The employee delivers the same service every time.                                            |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| The employee desires excellence.                                                              |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| The employee does their job well.                                                             |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| The employee is passionate when assisting me.                                                 |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| The personality of Italtile employees is consistent with how I see myself.                    |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |

| Item                                                                                                | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Somewhat disagree | Neutral | Somewhat agree | Agree | Strongly agree |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|----------|-------------------|---------|----------------|-------|----------------|
| The employee is pretending to be someone they aren't.                                               |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| The employee is true to a set of moral values.                                                      |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| The employee provides a unique shopping experience.                                                 |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| The employee will not deceive/betray me.                                                            |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| The employee's brand-aligned behaviour influences my willingness to pay a premium price.            |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| The employee's communication style is consistent with the brand's communication style.              |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| The personality of Italtile employees is a mirror image of me.                                      |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| The employee's communication style is like my own.                                                  |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| The personal appearance of the employees of this brand is in line with my personal appearance.      |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| The personal appearance of the employees of this brand is in line with the appearance of the brand. |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| The personality of Italtile employees is close to my own personality.                               |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |
| This employee related well to me.                                                                   |                   |          |                   |         |                |       |                |

You have reached the end of the questionnaire. Thank you for your participation in this study. Rest assured that all answers given will remain confidential and will only be used for academic purposes.

If you do not wish to be part of the lucky draw, please exit the survey by clicking “submit”.

Should you wish to participate in the lucky draw to stand a chance to win one of three R250 ‘takealot.com’ vouchers, please submit your email address in the block below. Email addresses provided will only be used for the random selection of three winners.

|        |  |
|--------|--|
| Email: |  |
|--------|--|

|        |
|--------|
| SUBMIT |
|--------|

## ANNEXURE B ~ PRE-TESTED ITEMS

|    | Construct                                            | Dimensions  | Variable        | Source                                                     | Item                                                                                                           |     |
|----|------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-----------------|------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| H1 | Perceived Brand Authenticity (Continuity)            | Continuity  | Consistency     | (Morhart <i>et al.</i> , 2015)                             | The actions of the employees of this brand are not at odds with what the brand promises. (original)            | V22 |
|    |                                                      |             | Uniqueness      | (Fritz <i>et al.</i> , 2017)                               | The employee provides a unique shopping experience. (new)                                                      | V35 |
|    |                                                      |             | Stability       | (Fritz <i>et al.</i> , 2017)                               | The employee delivers the same service every time. (new)                                                       | V28 |
|    | (Integrity)                                          | Integrity   | Sincerity       | (Morhart <i>et al.</i> , 2015)                             | The employee cares about my wants/needs. (new)                                                                 | V25 |
|    |                                                      |             | Passion         | (Fritz <i>et al.</i> , 2017; Morhart <i>et al.</i> , 2015) | The employee is passionate when assisting me. (new)                                                            | V31 |
|    |                                                      |             | Morality        | (Morhart <i>et al.</i> , 2015)                             | The employee is true to a set of moral values. (adapted)                                                       | V34 |
|    | (Credibility)                                        | Credibility | Honesty         | (Morhart <i>et al.</i> , 2015)                             | The employee will not deceive/betray me. (adapted)                                                             | V36 |
|    |                                                      |             | Reliability     | (Morhart <i>et al.</i> , 2015)                             | The employee delivers on the brand's value promise. (adapted)                                                  | V27 |
|    |                                                      |             | Trustworthiness | (Morhart <i>et al.</i> , 2015)                             | The employee is pretending to be someone they aren't. (adapted)                                                | V33 |
|    | (Symbolism)                                          | Symbolism   | Self-congruence | (Morhart <i>et al.</i> , 2015)                             | The personality of Italtile employees is consistent with how I see myself. (adapted)                           | V32 |
|    |                                                      |             |                 | (Morhart <i>et al.</i> , 2015)                             | The personality of employees is a mirror image of me. (adapted)                                                | V39 |
|    |                                                      |             |                 | (Morhart <i>et al.</i> , 2015)                             | The personality of Italtile employees is close to my own personality. (adapted)                                | V43 |
| H2 | Employee-driven Service Encounters (Brand-congruent) | Continuity  | Appearance 1    | (Morhart <i>et al.</i> , 2009)                             | The personal appearance of the employees of this brand is in line with the appearance of the brand. (original) | V42 |
|    |                                                      | Continuity  | Appearance 2    | (Morhart <i>et al.</i> , 2009)                             | The personal appearance of the employees of this                                                               | V41 |

|  |                                    |                        |                                      |  |                                                                                                          |     |
|--|------------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
|  |                                    |                        |                                      |  | brand is in line with my personal appearance. (new)                                                      |     |
|  | X                                  | Friendliness 1 (Smile) | (Grandey <i>et al.</i> , 2005)       |  | A friendly employee is more sincere than an unfriendly employee. (adapted)                               | V3  |
|  | X                                  | Friendliness 2 (Smile) | (Grandey <i>et al.</i> , 2005)       |  | I am more satisfied with a friendly employee than an unfriendly employee. (adapted)                      | V6  |
|  | Continuity, Credibility            | Rapport 1              | (Hennig-Thurau <i>et al.</i> , 2006) |  | In thinking about my relationship with this person, I enjoyed interacting with this employee. (original) | V21 |
|  | Continuity                         | Rapport 2              | (Hennig-Thurau <i>et al.</i> , 2006) |  | This employee related well to me. (original)                                                             | V44 |
|  | Continuity                         | Familiarity 1          | (Sirianni <i>et al.</i> , 2013)      |  | I am more comfortable being attended by the same employee. (new)                                         | V5  |
|  | X                                  | Familiarity 2          | (Sirianni <i>et al.</i> , 2013)      |  | I expect the same level of service every time. (new)                                                     | V10 |
|  | X                                  | Familiarity 3          | (Sirianni <i>et al.</i> , 2013)      |  | I do not mind being assisted by a different employee every time. (new)                                   | V8  |
|  | Continuity, Integrity              | Motivation 1           | (Escamilla <i>et al.</i> , 2022)     |  | The employee does their job well. (adapted)                                                              | V30 |
|  | Continuity, Integrity, Credibility | Motivation 2           | (Escamilla <i>et al.</i> , 2022)     |  | The employee accepts their responsibilities. (adapted)                                                   | V23 |
|  | X                                  | Motivation 3           | (Escamilla <i>et al.</i> , 2022)     |  | The employee desires excellence. (adapted)                                                               | V29 |
|  | Continuity, Integrity, Credibility | Motivation 4           | (Escamilla <i>et al.</i> , 2022)     |  | The employee assists me in a inly and conscientious manner. (new)                                        | V24 |
|  | X                                  | Language use 1         | (Holmqvist & Van Vaerenbergh, 2013)  |  | I prefer it when the employee speaks my home language. (adapted)                                         | V16 |
|  | Continuity                         | Language use 2         | (Holmqvist & Van Vaerenbergh, 2013)  |  | I do not mind the employee speaking my second language. (adapted)                                        | V9  |
|  | X                                  | Language use 3         | (Holmqvist & Van Vaerenbergh, 2013)  |  | I am comfortable switching languages to accommodate the employee. (adapted)                              | V4  |
|  | X                                  | Humour 1               | (Mathies <i>et al.</i> , 2016)       |  | I find the employee's humour an enjoyable interaction. (adapted)                                         | V14 |

|                                                                                                                                       |                                   |                                    |                                   |                                |                                                                                                |     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
|                                                                                                                                       |                                   | Continuity                         | Humour 2                          | (Mathies <i>et al.</i> , 2016) | I feel closer to the employee when humour is used. (adapted)                                   | V11 |
|                                                                                                                                       |                                   | Continuity, Integrity, Credibility | Humour 3                          | (Mathies <i>et al.</i> , 2016) | I see humour as a self-enhancing behaviour. (new)                                              | V18 |
|                                                                                                                                       |                                   | Integrity                          | Communication 1                   | New                            | The employee's communication style is consistent with the brand's communication style. (new)   | V38 |
|                                                                                                                                       |                                   | X                                  | Communication 2                   | New                            | The employee communicates in a sincere manner. (new)                                           | V26 |
|                                                                                                                                       |                                   | X                                  | Communication 3                   | New                            | I believe the employee is honest when communicating with me. (new)                             | V7  |
|                                                                                                                                       |                                   | Continuity, Symbolism              | Communication 4                   | New                            | The employee's communication style is like my own. (new)                                       | V40 |
| H3                                                                                                                                    | Emotional brand attachment        | Outcome of PBA                     | Affection                         | (Morhart <i>et al.</i> , 2015) | I like the brand more if the employee's behaviour is aligned with the brand. (new)             | V15 |
|                                                                                                                                       |                                   |                                    | Passion                           | (Morhart <i>et al.</i> , 2015) | I feel passion towards the brand if the employee's behaviour is aligned with the brand. (new)  | V13 |
|                                                                                                                                       |                                   |                                    | Connection                        | (Morhart <i>et al.</i> , 2015) | I feel more connected to the brand if employee's behaviour is aligned with the brand. (new)    | V12 |
|                                                                                                                                       | Word-of-mouth (WOM)               | Outcome of PBA                     | WOM 1                             | (Morhart <i>et al.</i> , 2015) | I would recommend the brand/employee to someone who seeks my advice. (adapted)                 | V20 |
|                                                                                                                                       |                                   |                                    | WOM 2                             | (Morhart <i>et al.</i> , 2015) | I say positive things about the brand/employee to other people. (adapted)                      | V17 |
|                                                                                                                                       |                                   |                                    | WOM 3                             | (Morhart <i>et al.</i> , 2015) | I would recommend the brand/employee to others. (adapted)                                      | V19 |
|                                                                                                                                       | Willingness to pay premium prices | Outcome of PBA                     | Willingness to pay premium prices | (Fritz <i>et al.</i> , 2017)   | The employee's brand-aligned behaviour influences my willingness to pay a premium price. (new) | V37 |
| Note: Items in green/dark grey were found valid/statistically significant<br>Note: Items in orange/light grey were found "not valid". |                                   |                                    |                                   |                                |                                                                                                |     |

## ANNEXURE C ~ SPEARMAN CORRELATION ANALYSIS (RAW DATA)

|       | V1    | V2    | V3    | V4     | V5     | V6    | V7     | V8     | V9     | V10    | V11    | V12    | V13    | V14    | V15    | V16    | V17    | V18    | V19    | V20    | V21    | V22    |       |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|--------|-------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|
| V1    | 1.000 | 0.303 | .593* | 0.361  | -0.046 | 0.283 | 0.000  | -0.007 | 0.156  | 0.135  | -0.075 | 0.302  | 0.142  | -0.267 | 0.354  | -0.021 | 0.254  | 0.361  | 0.040  | 0.167  | -0.039 | -0.169 | V1    |
| V2    |       | 1.000 | 0.246 | -0.216 | -.533* | 0.255 | -0.485 | .707** | -.505* | 0.166  | -0.407 | -0.407 | -.519* | -0.320 | -0.381 | 0.046  | -0.107 | -0.211 | -0.274 | -0.180 | -0.333 | -0.164 | V2    |
| V3    |       |       | 1.000 | 0.253  | 0.124  | 0.483 | -0.018 | -0.183 | 0.197  | 0.254  | 0.118  | 0.422  | 0.338  | 0.277  | 0.323  | 0.136  | 0.156  | 0.352  | 0.122  | 0.320  | 0.254  | 0.246  | V3    |
| V4    |       |       |       | 1.000  | 0.060  | 0.216 | 0.392  | -0.341 | .659** | -0.079 | 0.258  | 0.298  | 0.375  | 0.031  | .849** | -0.293 | 0.350  | 0.327  | 0.125  | 0.229  | 0.000  | -0.031 | V4    |
| V5    |       |       |       |        | 1.000  | 0.373 | 0.299  | -0.426 | 0.450  | 0.248  | .556*  | .511*  | .629** | .568*  | 0.240  | -0.045 | 0.138  | .615*  | 0.160  | 0.195  | 0.462  | 0.333  | V5    |
| V6    |       |       |       |        |        | 1.000 | 0.151  | -0.132 | 0.283  | 0.233  | .570*  | 0.274  | 0.397  | 0.427  | 0.267  | 0.238  | 0.060  | .592*  | 0.192  | .504*  | 0.233  | 0.255  | V6    |
| V7    |       |       |       |        |        |       | 1.000  | -0.413 | .612*  | 0.339  | 0.395  | 0.407  | .601*  | 0.285  | .707** | 0.006  | .534*  | 0.373  | .652** | .533*  | 0.339  | 0.000  | V7    |
| V8    |       |       |       |        |        |       |        | 1.000  | -0.311 | 0.261  | -0.350 | -0.259 | -0.463 | -0.144 | -.515* | -0.318 | -0.228 | -0.098 | -0.438 | -0.194 | -0.305 | -0.173 | V8    |
| V9    |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        | 1.000  | 0.202  | .678** | .732** | .733** | .552*  | .762** | -0.278 | 0.264  | .707** | 0.426  | .562*  | 0.434  | 0.370  | V9    |
| V10   |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        | 1.000  | 0.172  | 0.461  | .585*  | 0.293  | 0.164  | 0.150  | 0.455  | .520*  | 0.456  | 0.386  | .571*  | 0.333  | V10   |
| V11   |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        |        | 1.000  | .618*  | .660** | .653*  | 0.363  | 0.297  | -0.100 | .699** | 0.464  | .644** | .536*  | .570*  | V11   |
| V12   |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        | 1.000  | .816** | .621*  | .544*  | 0.121  | 0.353  | .779** | 0.475  | .754** | .726** | 0.358  | V12   |
| V13   |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        | 1.000  | .616*  | .619*  | 0.122  | 0.421  | .812** | .588*  | .637** | .734** | .504*  | V13   |
| V14   |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        |        | 1.000  | 0.147  | -0.058 | -0.078 | .640** | 0.188  | .500*  | 0.486  | 0.497  | V14   |
| V15   |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        | 1.000  | -0.071 | .620*  | 0.426  | .506*  | .530*  | 0.327  | 0.000  | V15   |
| V16   |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        | 1.000  | 0.042  | -0.062 | .545*  | 0.382  | 0.429  | 0.201  | V16   |
| V17   |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        | 1.000  | 0.134  | 0.489  | 0.385  | 0.455  | -0.086 | V17   |
| V18   |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        | 1.000  | 0.274  | .582*  | .520*  | 0.373  | V18   |
| V19   |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        | 1.000  | .572*  | .677** | 0.429  | V19   |
| V20   |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        | 1.000  | .617*  | 0.180  | V20   |
| V21   |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        | 1.000  | .583*  | V21   |
| V22   |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        | 1.000  | V22   |
| V23   |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        | V23   |
| V24   |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        | V24   |
| V25   |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        | V25   |
| V26   |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        | V26   |
| V27   |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        | V27   |
| V28   |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        | V28   |
| V29   |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        | V29   |
| V30   |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        | V30   |
| V31   |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        | V31   |
| V32   |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        | V32   |
| V33   |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        | V33   |
| V34   |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        | V34   |
| V35   |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        | V35   |
| V36   |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        | V36   |
| V37   |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        | V37   |
| V38   |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        | V38   |
| V39   |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        | V39   |
| V40   |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        | V40   |
| V41   |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        | V41   |
| V42   |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        | V42   |
| V43   |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        | V43   |
| V44   |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        | V44   |
| Total |       |       |       |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        | Total |

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

N = 16

|       | V23    | V24    | V25    | V26    | V27    | V28    | V29   | V30    | V31    | V32    | V33    | V34    | V35   | V36    | V37    | V38    | V39    | V40    | V41    | V42    | V43    | V44    | Total  |       |
|-------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|
| V1    | 0,167  | 0,238  | 521    | 0,283  | 505    | 0,090  | 0,258 | 0,144  | 0,182  | 0,108  | -0,087 | -0,200 | 0,223 | 0,393  | 0,222  | 0,013  | 0,258  | -0,076 | -0,203 | -0,057 | 0,486  | 0,243  |        | V1    |
| V2    | -0,449 | -0,103 | -0,083 | -0,051 | 0,234  | -0,270 | 0,313 | -0,234 | -0,143 | -545   | -576   | -539   | -619  | 0,171  | 0,016  | -0,216 | -0,111 | -0,404 | -584   | -0,416 | -0,079 | -0,416 |        | V2    |
| V3    | 0,320  | 0,165  | 0,183  | 0,138  | 0,369  | 0,255  | 0,141 | 0,316  | -0,303 | 0,021  | -0,327 | -0,164 | 0,284 | 499    | -0,043 | -0,064 | 0,105  | -0,100 | 0,062  | 0,248  | 0,264  | 0,183  | 0,349  | V3    |
| V4    | 0,314  | 0,044  | 0,348  | 0,288  | 0,248  | 0,135  | 0,030 | 0,198  | 0,246  | 0,114  | -0,479 | 0,466  | 0,322 | 0,328  | 0,407  | 532    | 0,125  | 0,127  | 0,328  | 0,329  | 0,059  | 0,430  | 0,360  | V4    |
| V5    | 535    | 636    | 0,314  | 0,062  | -0,036 | 682    | 0,191 | 695    | 0,249  | 0,461  | -0,417 | 0,349  | 712   | 0,160  | -0,054 | 0,154  | 0,187  | 0,402  | 0,346  | 662    | 0,172  | 525    | 628    | V5    |
| V6    | 504    | 0,432  | 0,233  | -0,048 | 0,218  | 595    | 0,293 | 655    | 0,100  | 0,000  | -0,306 | 0,227  | 0,274 | 0,456  | 0,066  | 0,151  | 0,067  | 0,283  | 0,216  | 0,497  | 0,088  | 537    | 0,492  | V6    |
| V7    | 533    | 0,334  | 0,216  | 0,151  | 0,346  | 501    | 0,207 | 0,462  | 517    | 0,450  | -785   | 0,360  | 0,299 | 0,273  | -0,015 | 0,340  | -0,083 | 0,173  | 0,396  | 0,094  | 0,012  | 531    | 0,423  | V7    |
| V8    | -0,398 | 0,150  | -0,054 | 0,176  | 0,134  | -0,242 | 0,271 | -0,269 | 0,167  | -0,361 | 585    | -504   | -580  | 0,104  | -0,048 | -0,271 | -0,354 | -549   | -705   | -0,377 | -0,359 | -0,455 | -0,433 | V8    |
| V9    | 765    | 0,470  | 0,453  | 598    | 0,360  | 577    | 0,129 | 577    | 0,471  | 532    | -674   | 549    | 576   | 0,480  | 0,237  | 0,450  | 0,096  | 0,279  | 0,476  | 591    | 0,135  | 593    | 669    | V9    |
| V10   | 0,386  | 677    | 0,476  | 0,156  | 713    | 564    | 717   | 535    | 0,389  | 0,053  | -0,356 | -0,262 | 0,112 | 790    | 0,076  | 0,216  | -0,096 | -0,102 | -0,119 | -0,048 | 0,113  | 0,248  | 0,482  | V10   |
| V11   | 840    | 527    | 0,279  | 0,274  | 0,035  | 790    | 0,047 | 784    | 0,315  | 0,211  | -596   | 0,371  | 707   | 0,277  | 0,239  | 0,495  | 0,030  | 687    | 714    | 795    | 0,139  | 770    | 708    | V11   |
| V12   | 845    | 633    | 696    | 548    | 0,488  | 697    | 0,358 | 680    | 0,306  | 0,396  | -659   | 0,145  | 718   | 567    | 0,208  | 0,371  | 0,024  | 0,303  | 0,406  | 561    | 0,475  | 556    | 803    | V12   |
| V13   | 871    | 662    | 585    | 0,206  | 506    | 780    | 0,347 | 775    | 0,356  | 0,423  | -853   | 0,356  | 732   | 690    | 0,220  | 0,441  | 0,163  | 0,372  | 502    | 548    | 0,280  | 746    | 827    | V13   |
| V14   | 708    | 561    | 0,211  | 0,180  | 0,137  | 666    | 0,184 | 652    | 0,107  | 0,132  | -549   | 0,196  | 0,473 | 0,293  | 0,084  | 0,178  | -0,032 | 0,290  | 0,441  | 747    | -0,102 | 0,433  | 0,434  | V14   |
| V15   | 530    | 0,169  | 0,436  | 0,356  | 0,408  | 0,380  | 0,183 | 0,408  | 0,328  | 0,408  | -694   | 0,495  | 0,437 | 0,461  | 0,165  | 0,495  | 0,031  | 0,143  | 0,393  | 0,252  | 0,155  | 0,491  | 566    | V15   |
| V16   | 0,224  | -0,093 | 0,053  | -0,217 | 0,000  | 0,279  | 0,089 | 0,265  | -0,210 | -0,255 | -0,139 | -0,249 | 0,093 | 0,011  | 0,053  | 0,266  | -0,041 | 498    | 0,403  | -0,002 | 0,306  | 0,193  | 0,278  | V16   |
| V17   | 0,106  | 0,122  | 0,455  | 0,161  | 598    | 0,091  | 0,494 | 0,092  | 0,106  | 0,398  | -0,396 | 0,303  | 0,135 | 0,489  | 0,023  | 0,235  | 0,155  | -0,076 | 0,072  | -0,178 | 0,333  | 0,138  | 0,437  | V17   |
| V18   | 853    | 895    | 687    | 0,288  | 0,487  | 823    | 0,466 | 834    | 569    | 0,250  | -598   | 0,175  | 881   | 660    | 0,304  | 0,373  | 0,083  | 0,314  | 0,242  | 626    | 0,176  | 782    | 774    | V18   |
| V19   | 572    | 0,167  | 0,348  | 0,272  | 532    | 529    | 0,345 | 0,495  | 0,257  | 0,297  | -558   | 0,156  | 0,380 | 0,423  | 0,185  | 512    | 0,186  | 0,476  | 549    | 0,061  | 0,475  | 0,381  | 642    | V19   |
| V20   | 750    | 0,413  | 0,411  | 0,336  | 0,385  | 609    | 0,258 | 577    | 0,210  | 0,289  | -654   | 0,233  | 0,377 | 514    | -0,010 | 0,267  | -0,251 | 0,226  | 0,399  | 0,352  | 0,083  | 535    | 597    | V20   |
| V21   | 617    | 0,456  | 0,476  | 0,156  | 0,445  | 564    | 0,478 | 535    | 0,097  | 0,294  | -517   | 0,201  | 643   | 569    | 0,076  | 0,447  | 0,082  | 0,391  | 0,436  | 0,322  | 0,356  | 0,462  | 754    | V21   |
| V22   | 0,449  | 0,257  | 0,083  | 0,221  | 0,234  | 0,386  | 0,035 | 0,389  | -0,143 | 0,171  | -0,296 | 0,216  | 570   | 0,429  | 0,267  | 0,270  | 0,461  | 0,481  | 538    | 524    | 0,442  | 0,333  | 542    | V22   |
| V23   | 1,000  | 652    | 566    | 0,336  | 0,385  | 877    | 0,258 | 866    | 0,442  | 0,289  | -770   | 0,233  | 709   | 514    | 0,282  | 0,467  | 0,044  | 514    | 570    | 666    | 0,214  | 766    | 787    | V23   |
| V24   |        | 1,000  | 618    | 0,192  | 0,440  | 785    | 591   | 771    | 657    | 0,160  | -0,429 | -0,067 | 0,495 | 555    | 0,195  | 0,257  | -0,039 | 0,178  | 0,019  | 0,433  | 0,061  | 636    | 616    | V24   |
| V25   |        |        | 1,000  | 0,389  | 713    | 519    | 717   | 535    | 552    | 0,071  | -0,321 | -0,031 | 0,461 | 569    | 607    | 571    | 0,264  | 0,324  | 0,119  | 0,273  | 0,465  | 0,462  | 729    | V25   |
| V26   |        |        |        | 1,000  | 0,364  | 0,235  | 0,098 | 0,218  | 0,267  | 0,393  | -0,073 | 0,050  | 0,259 | 0,272  | 0,206  | 0,151  | 0,089  | 0,044  | 0,129  | 0,245  | 0,309  | -0,047 | 0,383  | V26   |
| V27   |        |        |        |        | 1,000  | 0,331  | 745   | 0,333  | 0,383  | 0,100  | -0,333 | -0,115 | 0,157 | 807    | 0,421  | 0,346  | 0,269  | -0,017 | -0,049 | -0,099 | 0,456  | 0,232  | 533    | V27   |
| V28   |        |        |        |        |        | 1,000  | 0,444 | 992    | 547    | 0,161  | -812   | 0,039  | 561   | 0,479  | 0,183  | 0,444  | -0,067 | 0,469  | 0,407  | 591    | 0,109  | 682    | 735    | V28   |
| V29   |        |        |        |        |        |        | 1,000 | 0,447  | 514    | -0,179 | -0,089 | -0,258 | 0,062 | 591    | 0,331  | 0,465  | 0,015  | 0,045  | -0,191 | -0,074 | 0,166  | 0,191  | 0,448  | V29   |
| V30   |        |        |        |        |        |        |       | 1,000  | 517    | 0,133  | -600   | 0,058  | 575   | 0,495  | 0,219  | 0,462  | -0,017 | 0,482  | 0,412  | 627    | 0,135  | 695    | 752    | V30   |
| V31   |        |        |        |        |        |        |       |        | 1,000  | 0,094  | -0,241 | -0,033 | 0,177 | 0,278  | 0,299  | 0,451  | -0,165 | 0,128  | -0,086 | 0,033  | -0,095 | 0,440  | 0,336  | V31   |
| V32   |        |        |        |        |        |        |       |        |        | 1,000  | -0,333 | 624    | 0,483 | 0,187  | -0,389 | -0,271 | 0,206  | -0,038 | 0,138  | 0,135  | 0,289  | 0,171  | 0,387  | V32   |
| V33   |        |        |        |        |        |        |       |        |        |        | 1,000  | -0,356 | -585  | -0,437 | -0,162 | -0,393 | -0,054 | -0,342 | -632   | -0,472 | -0,135 | -763   | -611   | V33   |
| V34   |        |        |        |        |        |        |       |        |        |        |        | 1,000  | 0,432 | 0,092  | -0,070 | 0,110  | 0,265  | 0,233  | 0,433  | 0,388  | 0,073  | 0,349  | 0,312  | V34   |
| V35   |        |        |        |        |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        | 1,000 | 0,293  | 0,260  | 0,407  | 0,416  | 626    | 629    | 713    | 515    | 738    | 840    | V35   |
| V36   |        |        |        |        |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |       | 1,000  | 0,185  | 0,273  | 0,075  | -0,092 | -0,030 | 0,121  | 0,224  | 0,381  | 593    | V36   |
| V37   |        |        |        |        |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |       |        | 1,000  | 729    | 538    | 594    | 0,410  | 0,345  | 0,461  | 0,374  | 0,406  | V37   |
| V38   |        |        |        |        |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |       |        |        | 1,000  | 0,153  | 645    | 559    | 0,348  | 0,225  | 531    | 570    | V38   |
| V39   |        |        |        |        |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |       |        |        |        | 1,000  | 498    | 0,376  | 0,259  | 834    | 0,187  | 0,407  | V39   |
| V40   |        |        |        |        |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |       |        |        |        |        | 1,000  | 837    | 823    | 535    | 607    | 626    | V40   |
| V41   |        |        |        |        |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        | 1,000  | 678    | 0,395  | 582    | 569    | V41   |
| V42   |        |        |        |        |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        | 1,000  | 0,169  | 608    | 593    | V42   |
| V43   |        |        |        |        |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        |        | 1,000  | 0,240  | 630    | V43   |
| V44   |        |        |        |        |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        | 1,000  | 736    | V44   |
| Total |        |        |        |        |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |       |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        | 1,000  | Total |

|                                                             |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| No construct validity ("not valid")                         |
| Statistically significant variables with construct validity |

## ANNEXURE D ~ ETHIC'S LETTER APPROVAL



Date: 18/6/2022

**Student name:** Joachim Schoeman

**Student number:** [REDACTED]

**Campus:** Vega School (Online)

**Re: Approval of RESE8419/RMET8429 Proposal and Ethics Clearance**

### HONOURS/PGDip ETHICAL CLEARANCE LETTER

Your research proposal and the ethical implications of your proposed research topic were reviewed by your supervisor and the campus research panel, a subcommittee of The Independent Institute of Education's Research and Postgraduate Studies Committee.

Your research proposal posed no significant ethical concerns and your supporting documents and instruments are in order to proceed. We hereby provide you with permission to proceed with your research.

In the event of you deciding to change your research methodology in any way, kindly consult your supervisor to ensure all ethical considerations are adhered to and pose no risk to any participant or party involved. A revised ethical clearance letter will be issued.

We wish you all the best with your research!

#### GENERAL CONDITIONS TO BE FULFILLED IN RELATION TO RESEARCH

*Permission is granted to proceed with the above study subject to the conditions listed below being met and may be withdrawn should any of these conditions be flouted.*

**Please note:** The panel has not considered the merits, accuracy or ethical soundness of the research. The only merits examined are the use of The IIE as a sample.

Permission is granted subject to the following conditions:

1. The researcher(s) will need to obtain informed consent in writing from all of the participants in his/ her sample if the study is not anonymous.
2. The researcher(s) may only use the data collected for research purposes and in no other way.
3. Photographs of human subjects may only be taken if relevant to the research, informed consent was obtained, and even with informed consent, the photographs may not be published on any online platforms.
4. The researcher is responsible for supplying and utilising his/her own research resources, such as stationery, photocopies, transport, faxes and telephones and should not depend on the goodwill of the institutions and/or the offices visited for supplying such resources.

5. No names or identifying information of participants may be used within the research and the research must be voluntary.
6. Please make it clear that the information will not be used punitively in any way and participants may in no way be counselled/advised based on this.

Supervisor name: Michele O'Hara

Signature:



Campus Postgraduate Coordinator (CPC) name: Dr Tish Taylor

Signature:



## ANNEXURE E ~ UPDATED CONCEPT DOCUMENT (V5)

|                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b><u>Project details</u></b>     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Your Name:</b> Jochie Schoeman | <b>Student Number:</b> [REDACTED]                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>Supervisor:</b> Michele O'Hara | <b>Date:</b> 04 December 2022 <b>Version:</b> 5                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b><u>Proposed Title</u></b>      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Title</b>                      | An investigation into the effect of Employee-driven Service Encounters on Perceived Brand Authenticity: The case of Italtile Retail (Pty) Ltd                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <b><u>Research details</u></b>    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Problem statement</b>          | <p>Mass marketing is no longer achieving the desired connection between brands and consumers (Kinyongoh, 2019; Oh, Prado, Korelo &amp; Frizzo, 2019). Kinyongoh (2019) pointed out that the consumer response to mass marketing tactics has been deteriorating for several years. In our postmodern market, consumers have access to an excessive amount of information that is often meaningless and causes uncertainty in their minds (Oh <i>et al.</i>, 2019; Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin &amp; Grohmann, 2015). This overload of information likely becomes too difficult for consumers to connect with.</p> <p>The study addresses the scarcity in BA research by looking at positive service encounters as a solution to improve consumer perception of a brand(s). Perhaps some service brands require more strict structure and discipline in the service climate. Perhaps others require less strict enforcement of rules where individuality and unique personalities are more important. After all, people buy from people. Regardless, brands know very little about how to promote BA and how it affects consumer behaviour (Fritz, Schoenmueller &amp; Bruhn, 2017).</p> |
| <b>Purpose statement</b>          | The aim of the study was to investigate how service employee behaviour and attitude affect perceived brand authenticity (PBA). The purpose of the study was to better describe the role of retail employees and how they affect PBA as an alternative to mass marketing.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Research question/s</b>        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do employee-driven service encounters affect perceived brand authenticity?</li> <li>• How does brand-congruent employee behaviour affect perceived brand authenticity?</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>Hypotheses/ Objectives</b>     | <p><b>H1.</b> The delivery of employee-driven service encounters has no effect on perceived brand authenticity.</p> <p><b>H2.</b> Brand-congruent employee behaviour has no effect on perceived brand authenticity.</p> <p><b>H3.</b> There is no relationship between PBA and consumer advocacy.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Research rationale</b>         | Brand authenticity has not been researched in the South African ceramic industry and poses an opportunity to fill the gap in research. Within the literature, various authors express the need for brand authenticity research to be conducted in the service and retail environment to forge deeper connections with consumers (Hernandez-Fernandez & Lewis, 2019; Fritz <i>et al.</i> , 2017; Napoli, Dickinson-Delaporte & Beverland, 2016). This study is a step towards supporting retail brands in becoming and remaining authentic and meaningful. This study allows researchers and brand practitioners to challenge the assumptions and findings, to continue building upon existing brand knowledge.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |

|  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|--|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  | <p>Brand authenticity, although gaining importance among practitioners and consumer behaviour researchers, has made little contribution to general branding theory (Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin &amp; Grohmann, 2015).</p> <p>Service/retail employees are at the front-line creating moments of truth between the brand and the consumer (Escamilla, Segovia-Romo &amp; Terán Cázares, 2022; Sirianni, Bitner, Brown &amp; Mandel, 2013). Firms and brand practitioners within the ceramic industry need more research on the importance of retail employees and how they affect consumer-brand perception. The research to undertaken considers the importance of human connection in establishing a bond between consumer and brand. The research is conducted within the ceramics industry in South Africa with a focus on the Italtile brand – Italtile Retail (Pty) Ltd. The findings are providing valuable insight, not only for Italtile but for similar retailers and the ceramic industry (e.g., internal brand building).</p> |
|--|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

### Literature overview

|                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                               |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Key theories            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attribution theory describes the cognitive processes by which people calculate the causes of events and behaviour around them (Mullen &amp; Johnson, 2013). Authenticity can be attributed to either a subject/person (e.g., employee's behaviour, attitude, appearance) or an object/event (e.g., a brand) (Fritz et al., 2017; Hennig-Thurau, Groth, Paul &amp; Gremier, 2006).</li> <li>• Currently, there is no universally accepted scale or theoretical framework upon which to determine or measure BA (Campagna, Donthu &amp; Yoo, 2021; Fritz et al., 2017). This study will be based on theoretical models proposed by Fritz et al. (2017) and Morhart et al. (2015). Fritz et al. (2017) and Morhart et al. (2015) both confirmed similar antecedents to PBA pertaining to the employees of a brand. Fritz et al. (2017) confirmed that "employee passion" had a significant positive effect on consumer-brand authenticity perceptions.</li> <li>• The study by Fritz et al. (2017) was conducted in a service and retail setting and has high relevance for this study. Morhart et al. (2015) confirmed that "brand-congruent employee behaviour" had a positive effect on the PBA dimension of credibility.</li> <li>• The four PBA dimensions proposed by Morhart et al. (2015) are continuity (related to the past), integrity (related to sincerity), credibility (related to reliability) and symbolism (related to identity construction). These dimensions are critical in the measurement of PBA and are deemed the most inclusive due to conceptual similarities, even amongst recent literature by Dwivedi and McDonald (2018), Hernandez-Fernandez and Lewis (2019) and Portal et al., (2019).</li> </ul> |                                                                                                                               |
| Seminal authors/sources | (Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin & Grohmann, 2015)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Brand authenticity: An integrative framework and measurement scale                                                            |
|                         | (Ewing, Allen & Ewing, 2012)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Authenticity as meaning validation: An empirical investigation of iconic and indexical cues in a context of 'green' products. |
|                         | (Grayson & Martinec, 2004)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Consumer Perceptions of Iconicity and Indexicality and Their Influence on Assessments of Authentic Market Offerings           |
|                         | (Napoli, Dickinson-Delaporte & Beverland, 2016)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | The brand authenticity continuum: strategic approaches for building value.                                                    |

|                          |                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                               |                                                              |                                  |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
|                          | (Schallehn, Burmann, & Riley, 2014).                                                              | Brand authenticity: model development and empirical testing                                                                   |                                                              |                                  |
|                          | (Napoli, Dickinson, Beverland & Farrelly, 2014)                                                   | Measuring consumer-based brand authenticity                                                                                   |                                                              |                                  |
|                          | (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009)                                                            | Brand Experience: What Is It? How Is It Measured? Does It Affect Loyalty?                                                     |                                                              |                                  |
|                          | (Kelley, 1973)                                                                                    | The Processes of Causal Attribution                                                                                           |                                                              |                                  |
|                          | (Mullen & Johnson, 2013)                                                                          | The Psychology of Consumer Behavior                                                                                           |                                                              |                                  |
|                          | (Leigh, Peters & Shelton, 2006)                                                                   | The consumer quest for authenticity: The multiplicity of meanings within the MG subculture of consumption                     |                                                              |                                  |
|                          | (Bruhn, Schoenmüller, Schäfer & Heinrich, 2012)                                                   | Brand Authenticity: Towards a Deeper Understanding of Its Conceptualization and Measurement.                                  |                                                              |                                  |
| Literature review themes | <u>Theme 1</u><br>Employee-driven service encounters (the gap in the brand authenticity research) | <u>Theme 2</u><br>Perceived Brand Authenticity (PBA)                                                                          | <u>Theme 3</u><br>Types of Authenticity (three perspectives) | <u>Theme 4</u><br>PBA Dimensions |
| Sources                  | (Fritz, Schoenmueller & Bruhn, 2017)                                                              | Authenticity in branding – exploring antecedents and consequences of brand authenticity                                       |                                                              |                                  |
|                          | (Tran & Keng, 2018)                                                                               | The Brand Authenticity Scale: Development and Validation.                                                                     |                                                              |                                  |
|                          | (Han, Cui & Jin, 2021)                                                                            | The role of human brands in consumer attitude formation: Anthropomorphized messages and brand authenticity                    |                                                              |                                  |
|                          | (Oh, Prado, Korelo & Frizzo, 2019)                                                                | The effect of brand authenticity on consumer–brand relationships                                                              |                                                              |                                  |
|                          | (Dwivedi & McDonald, 2018)                                                                        | Building brand authenticity in fast-moving consumer goods via consumer perceptions of brand marketing communications          |                                                              |                                  |
|                          | (Xu, Du, Shahzad & Li, 2021)                                                                      | Untying the Influence of Green Brand Authenticity on Electronic Word-of-Mouth Intention: A Moderation–Mediation Model         |                                                              |                                  |
|                          | (Hernandez-Fernandez & Lewis, 2019)                                                               | Brand authenticity leads to perceived value and brand trust                                                                   |                                                              |                                  |
|                          | (Athwal & Harris, (2018)                                                                          | Examining how brand authenticity is established and maintained: the case of the Reverso.                                      |                                                              |                                  |
|                          | (Portal, Abratt & Bendixen, 2019)                                                                 | The role of brand authenticity in developing brand trust                                                                      |                                                              |                                  |
|                          | (Campagna, Donthu & Yoo, 2021)                                                                    | Brand authenticity: literature review, comprehensive definition, and an amalgamated scale                                     |                                                              |                                  |
|                          | (Safeer, He & Abrar, 2021)                                                                        | The influence of brand experience on brand authenticity and brand love: an empirical study from Asian consumers' perspective. |                                                              |                                  |
|                          | (Moulard, Raggio & Folse, 2021)                                                                   | Disentangling the meanings of brand authenticity: The entity-referent correspondence framework of authenticity.               |                                                              |                                  |

|              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                           |
|--------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|              | (Fouladi, Ekhlassi & Sakhdari, 2021)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Determining the factors affecting brand authenticity of startups in social media                                          |
|              | (Huang, 2017)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | The impacts of brand experiences on brand loyalty: mediators of brand love and trust                                      |
|              | (Grandey, Fisk, Mattila, Jansen & Sideman, 2005)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | "Is 'service with a smile' enough? Authenticity of positive displays during service encounters"                           |
|              | (Hennig-Thurau, Groth, Paul & Gremier, 2006)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Are All Smiles Created Equal? How Emotional Contagion and Emotional Labor Affect Service Relationships                    |
|              | (Sirianni, Bitner, Brown & Mandel, 2013)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Branded Service Encounters: Strategically Aligning Employee Behavior with the Brand Positioning.                          |
|              | (Escalmilla, Segovia-Romo & Terán Cázares, 2022)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Motivation as a Driver of Customer Service: The Impact on Automobile Dealerships                                          |
|              | (Kinyongoh, 2019)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | The Nexus Between Service Encounter Performance and Brand Evangelism                                                      |
|              | (Holmqvist & Van Vaerenbergh, 2013)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Perceived importance of native language use in service encounters.                                                        |
|              | (Mathies, Chiew & Kleinaltenkamp, 2016)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | The antecedents and consequences of humour for service: A review and directions for research                              |
|              | (Schepers & Nijssen, 2018)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Brand advocacy in the frontline: how does it affect customer satisfaction?                                                |
|              | (Södergren, 2021)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Brand Authenticity: 25 Years of Research                                                                                  |
|              | (Carsana & Jolibert, 2018)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Influence of iconic, indexical cues, and brand schematicity on perceived authenticity dimensions of private-label brands. |
|              | (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Research methods in education                                                                                             |
|              | (Maree, 2020)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | First steps in research                                                                                                   |
| Key concepts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attribution theory (Kelley, 1973; Fritz et al., 2017).</li> <li>• Authenticity as a socially constructed concept (unique consumer perceptions).</li> <li>• Employee-driven Service encounters: Brand-congruent employee behaviour (on-premises behaviour that can be altered, e.g., friendliness, appearance, etc.) as an antecedent to BA.</li> <li>• Dimensions of PBA as identified by Morhart et al. (2015).</li> </ul> |                                                                                                                           |

### **Provisional Research Approach**

| Paradigm | <u>Paradigm</u><br>Positivism - measurable                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | <u>Epistemology</u><br>Realist-stance | <u>Ontology</u><br>Truth/reality | <u>Axiology</u><br>Ethics |
|----------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------|
|          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The research was conducted following the paradigmatic approach of positivism. The researcher believed it best, in terms of epistemology, to follow a quantifiable and objective point of view. Most of the literature reviewed took on quantitative methodologies using surveys and experiments. By conducting the research objectively, no bias was present as the findings could be communicated through numbers and statistics.</li> </ul> |                                       |                                  |                           |

|                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This paradigm was followed to avoid projecting the opinions and values of the researcher onto the findings. The researcher turned to reason and empirical verification to investigate BA as a social phenomenon (Maree, 2020; Cohen, Manion &amp; Morrison, 2018). In other words, positivism could account for specific human and social behaviour when investigating consumer responses to particular constructs. Positivism maintains that a quantitative or scientific approach brings forth the clearest ideal of knowledge (Cohen et al., 2018).</li> <li>• In terms of ontology and axiology, the research took a realist stance that was guided by an outside-in approach to creating value (Dwivedi &amp; McDonald, 2018). The researcher believed in the value of investigating consumer perception to improve their experiences with a brand and saw it as a key success factor. The truth to be uncovered was meant to positively contribute to a business and its consumers. In other words, both consumer-derived value (e.g., love, pleasure) and brand-derived value (business growth, brand equity) could be obtained through brand authenticity research (Napoli et al., 2016).</li> </ul> |
| Approach/<br>design | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The research that was done enabled a retail brand to pinpoint which cues lead to positive brand perceptions, and which cues should be improved or which cues don't matter. A quantitative approach was found the most applicable for this study. The research was aimed at quantifying and empirically testing the information about consumer perceptions of a brand based on their experiences with retail employees.</li> <li>• Secondary research: IIE Library, Google Scholar, and EBSCOhost</li> <li>• Primary research: Online self-administered survey</li> <li>• The research approach was highly feasible and realistic in scope since it required little time and resources to conduct (Morris &amp; Khan, 2021).</li> <li>• The research approach took on a cross-sectional survey design. A cross-sectional study was relatively quick to conduct, did not hinder the operations of the company and the variables were not influenced by the researcher.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |

| <b><u>Provisional Research Plan</u></b> |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|-----------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Population                              | The population parameters were defined as clients of Italtile Retail (Pty) Ltd within the Gauteng province of South Africa, that are over the age of 18 and who have at least done a quotation (therefore provided their contact details) within the last 2 years.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Sampling                                | <p>The research was conducted using the probability sampling method, namely, simple random sampling. This method provided equal opportunity for all members of the population to be included in the study since they were randomly and systematically chosen (Pascoe, 2021). This method required little to no influence from the researcher, therefore, removed human bias to avoid a sample that is not representative of the population (Pascoe, 2021). Simple random sampling increased the sample validity and generalisability of the research (Pascoe, 2021).</p> <p>To determine the appropriate sample size, the 'SurveyMonkey' sample size calculator was consulted. With a population size greater than 50, at a confidence level of 90% and allowing for a margin of error of 20%, this study had to at least gather between 13-15 responses (SurveyMonkey, 2022). Therefore, this study aimed to collect at least 15 completed responses.</p> |

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|---------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                           | <p>Within the characteristics of the population, a sampling frame was identified. The sampling frame only included clients who have voluntarily provided their email addresses to Italtile (who meet the population requirements). However, from this list the researcher was not able to identify whether or not these clients were over the age of 18. The list also did not contain any indication as to whether or not past quotations/purchases were conducted via a showroom or the Italtile website.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Data collection method(s) | <p>Data for the research was collected through an online self-administered survey. This method gave respondents the ability to complete the questionnaire in their own space and time without interference from the researcher collecting the data. The questionnaire was created through an online survey tool, namely, Google Forms. A hyperlink to the questionnaire was sent via email to the randomly chosen final sample during July of 2022.</p> <p>With Italtile's permission, the contact details (names, email addresses) of the randomly chosen sample was obtained from its client database (SAP® system). The database extracted from the SAP® system was easily converted into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet (already within the population parameters). Italtile allowed clients to be contacted if it furthered the interest of the business, was not against the law and protected human rights.</p> <p>To mitigate a potential low response or completion rate, the researcher introduced a lucky draw for completing the survey. Respondents who wished to be part of the lucky draw could provide their email address at the end of the survey. Those respondents stood a chance of winning one of three R250 'takealot.com' vouchers. Three lucky winners, also randomly chosen using Excel, received their electronic vouchers via email.</p> <p>The consumers' authenticity perceptions were captured using a seven-point Likert scale. It is the preferred scale used by the majority of brand authenticity studies. As mentioned previously, authenticity must be measured on a continuum. A seven-point Likert scale was found reliable for this study to score how respondents feel, as some respondents may find it difficult to express what they think in their own words (du Plooy-Cilliers &amp; Cronje, 2021).</p> |
| Data analysis method(s)   | <p>The quantitative data in this study was analysed based on numerical and descriptive analysis. The online survey using Google Forms generated 16 data sets. The data file (.csv) was downloaded from Google Forms and transferred into an Excel file (.exe). The Excel file was then imported into statistical analysis software, namely, SPSS®. To test the strength and direction (positive or negative) of the relationships or connections between variables, a Spearman correlation coefficient test was conducted.</p> <p><u>Descriptive Analysis</u></p> <p>For this study, descriptive analysis was only used for the demographic data. The scale of measurement was nominal using closed-ended questions, e.g., Yes/No (Morris &amp; Khan, 2021). A nominal scale is the lowest level of measurement but it was important as it verified that respondents met the unique characteristics set for the population. The demographic data made generalisability possible and provided further insight to the study, for example, which retail channels are preferred by consumers.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |

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|  | <p><b><u>Inferential Analysis</u></b></p> <p>The Likert scale used, had an interval level of scale measurement, a higher level of measurement than a nominal scale (du Plooy-Cilliers &amp; Cronje, 2021). The inferential analysis was based on statistics and SPSS® was used to conduct a Spearman correlation analysis (Spearman's <math>\rho</math> and p-value). Using statistics, percentages were used, and visual representations were created like a frequency distribution, a pie chart and a table summarising the Spearman's correlation analysis (du Plooy-Cilliers &amp; Cronje, 2021; Morris &amp; Khan, 2021).</p> |
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| <b><u>Ethical considerations and limitations</u></b> |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ethics                                               | <p>This study required ethics clearance and permissions by the Independent Institute of Education (IIE) as outlined by the IIE's postgraduate handbook of 2022 (The IIE, 2022). To comply with South Africa's POPI Act, the researcher obtained consent from the company (Italtile) to contact the final sample via a Gatekeeper's letter. The purpose of the study was clearly stated. All potential respondents were informed that participation was entirely voluntary and that they would remain anonymous.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The data was processed without risking the privacy of respondents (Protection of Personal Information Act, 2013).</li> <li>• Respondents were ensured that the researcher would not store data longer than necessary to complete the final research report.</li> <li>• The computer that was used required a fingerprint/password to unlock. The data files gathered from the questionnaire was password protected and was backed up on a password-protected external hard drive.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Limitations                                          | <p>Although this study is an extension of similar brand authenticity research, is it not without limitations. The concepts of indexical-, iconic- and existential authenticity were used to conceptualise brand authenticity. However, these concepts were not used in data collection to distinguish between respondents' perceptions. Consequently, this study cannot state how these concepts can be utilised to improve brand authenticity perceptions. Furthermore, the data may have been affected by the research design since the survey was only sent to a relatively small number of potential respondents and only accepted responses for a limited time.</p> <p>Another limitation was that this study focused on the on-premises service climate. Future studies could include online service platforms or take an omnichannel approach. Moreover, this study was only conducted within the South African ceramic industry and only considered one brand (Italtile). Therefore, it did not account for consumers in other countries, industries, or brands.</p> <p>This study was not repeated and used a much smaller sample size relative to other brand authenticity studies like Fritz <i>et al.</i> (2017) (N = 509), Oh <i>et al.</i> (2019) (N = 347), Hernandez-Fernandez and Lewis (2019) (N = 738), Portal <i>et al.</i> (2019) (N = 355), or Safeer <i>et al.</i> (2021) (N = 390). These factors may have put its validity and reliability into question. However, the researcher believed in the approach of obtaining a representative sample where the findings were generalisable. Additionally, the survey was standardised. In other words, the survey process was conducted in the same manner for all respondents.</p> |

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