

Employees as Machines: Positive Perceptions of Dehumanized Service Providers

Abstract

Dehumanization refers to a phenomenon when a person is denied of full humanness and is compared to non-human entity such as a machine or animal. Based on prior literature on mechanistic dehumanization, we aim to address the research question; *how and when will mechanistic dehumanization lead to better service evaluations?* Three studies using different service contexts showed that people perceive a dehumanized agent as being more competent but less warm than a humanized agent (Study 1), that this leads to more positive attitudes towards the dehumanized service provider with perceived warmth and competence serving as mediators (Study 2), and that the effect is observed when people focus on finding a highly instrumental service provider (Study 3).

Introduction

Dehumanization refers to the denial of full humanness in a person, comparing them to non-human entities such as animals or machines (Haslam, 2006). While dehumanization is often viewed in a negative light, prior literature in marketing shows how in certain instances, dehumanization can result in positive behavioral consequences such as how consumers react more positively to a mechanistically dehumanized service provider when making embarrassing purchases (Sun et al., 2023).

Extending this line of research, we aim to address whether mechanistic dehumanization of a service provider can lead to positive perceptions from consumers. According to Haslam (2006), mechanistic dehumanization, or viewing humans as object-like, is associated with the denial of human nature traits (emotional responsiveness, interpersonal warmth, cognitive openness, agency, and depth). Prior research shows that physicians who appear to lack personal emotions are preferred by patients high in need of care because they are seen as more instrumental to them (Schroeder and Fishbach 2015). Furthermore, people high in power are more likely to objectify other people and prefer them when they are considered instrumental to their goals (Gruenfeld et al. 2008). Similarly, we predict that when a consumer is seeking a specific goal (e.g., becoming fit), they will prefer a service provider that is described in mechanistic terms (e.g., power machine) over one described in human terms (e.g., great employee).

Building on research on mind perception (Gray et al. 2012) which associates machine-like objects with high agency and competence (but low warmth), we predict that dehumanized service agents may be seen as more competent than human agents which leads to more favorable evaluations.

Method & Results

Study 1 (N=332): The effects of dehumanization on perceived warmth and competence of a service provider

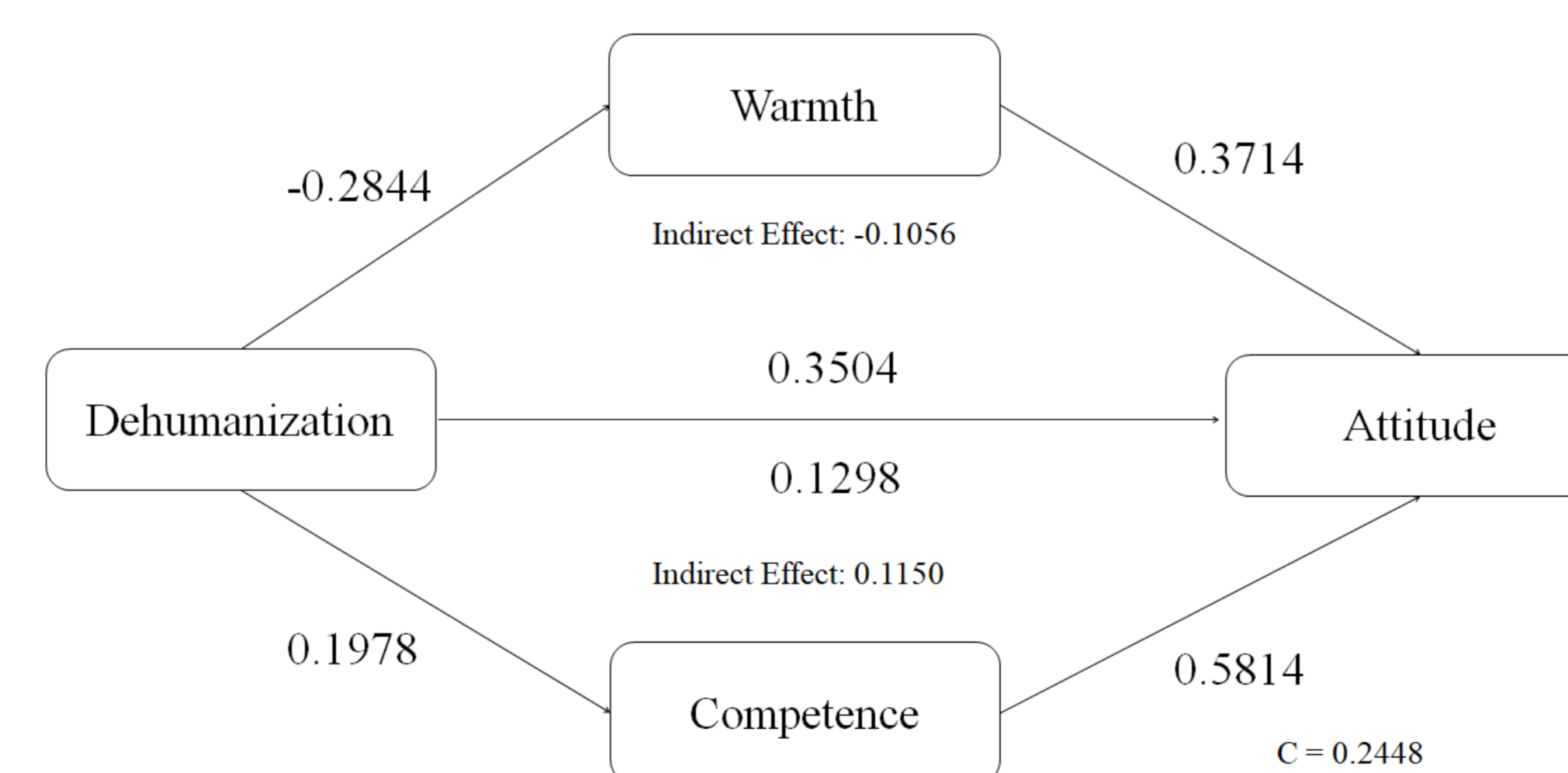
Design: Humanized and dehumanized online reviews of hair salon employees

Results: People perceive mechanistically dehumanized agents as being more competent but less warm than human agents.

Study 2 (N=255): The effects of dehumanization on attitudes toward the service provider

Design: Humanized and dehumanized testimonials of a personal trainer
Variables: Attitude (DV), Warmth (Mediator), Competence (Mediator)

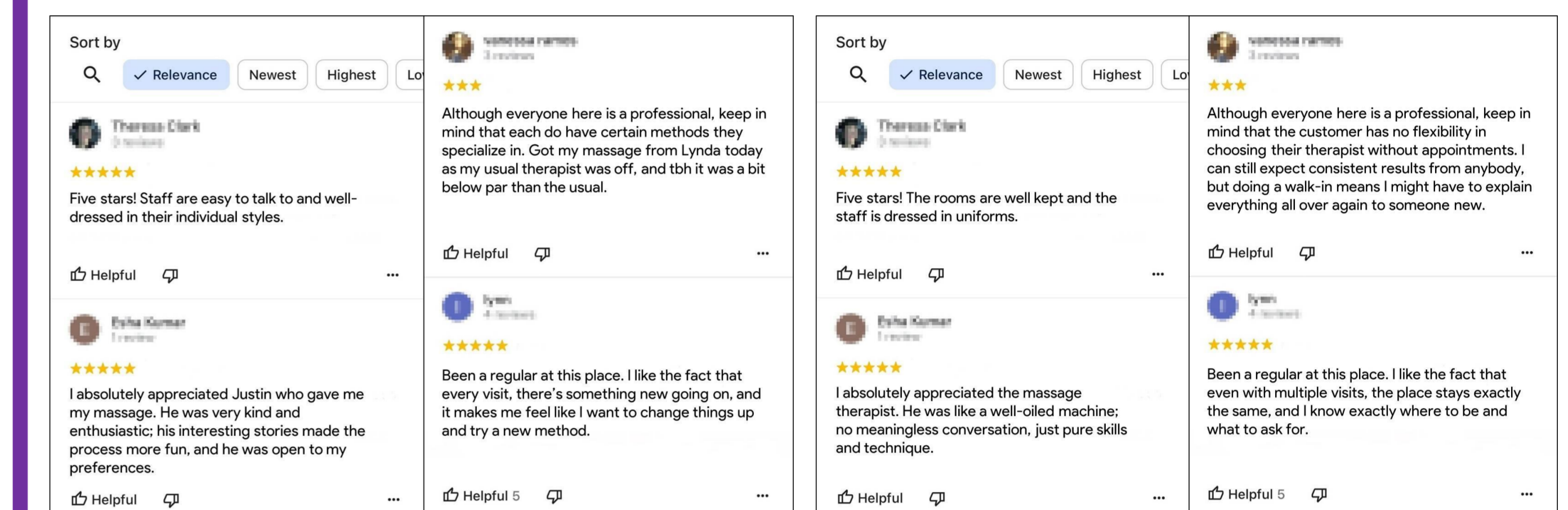
Results: People display more positive attitudes towards a mechanistically dehumanized agent compared to a human agent, with perceived competence and warmth serving as mediators.



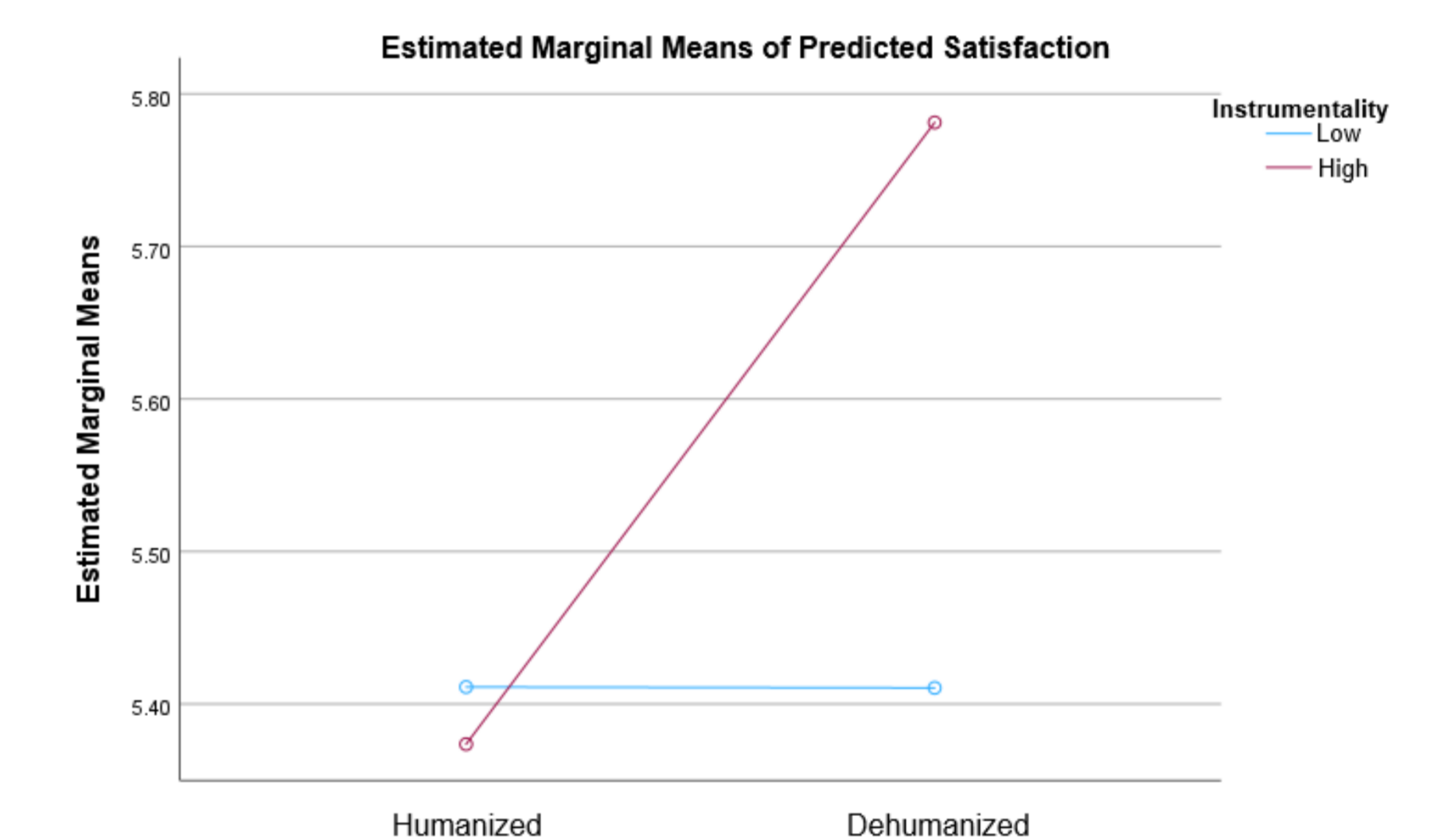
Study 3 (N=372): The effects of dehumanization under high vs low instrumentality mindsets

Design: 2 (humanized vs. dehumanized) X 2 (high vs low instrumentality mindset) online reviews of a massage therapist
Dependent Variable: Predicted satisfaction (DV)

Methods & Results cont.



Results: People show favorable attitudes towards the mechanistically dehumanized agent relative to the humanized agent under a high instrumentality mindset, but not under a low instrumentality mindset.



Conclusions

When consumers are focused on finding a highly instrumental service provider, it may be more effective to portray the service provider in a more dehumanized manner, as this will increase perceptions of competence and lead to more positive evaluations.

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Correspondence to:
Jee Hyuk Wi <wixx3290@mylaurier.ca>