

## Automation vs Authenticity in Services

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to answer the question of 'whether automation and/or authenticity should be a priority in service industries'. Furthermore, it develops a framework explaining the decision process of authentic vs automated services for the service industries. The framework includes three stages (evaluating critical factors, determining the pros and cons of each service design, and final decision of service type). It starts with assessing critical factors such as service industry type, service provider type, consumers' profiles, expectations, and desires, the task type (the suitability of tasks with automation/authenticity), types of provided products or services, types of available automation technologies, and the resources of service providers (e.g., financial, physical, human). In the final stage of the proposed framework, service providers can be ready to decide the service type (fully automated, a certain degree of automation/authenticity, fully authentic) that best fit them. Since no study in this context is found in the extant literature, this paper will contribute to the literature in terms of playing a guidance role for service industry practitioners and can be a reference that opens a scholarly debate on the subject.

**Keywords:** Automation, Authenticity, Service industries, Automated service, Authentic service

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## 1. Introduction

The literature underlines the destructive influence of developing technologies, including automation on conversational skills, traditional practices, and peoples' connection to society or nature, which brings up the question of *'Do technologic developments and tools move people and communities away from an authentic life?'* (Su & Stolterman, 2016). In this regard, one more question is arising as *'Does automation damage or enhance authenticity?'*

The conceptualisation of authenticity is based on two perspectives: (i) the objective originality of a product or service, and (ii) the subjective authenticity of these products or services (the way these products or services are perceived) (Özdemir & Seyitoğlu, 2017). Moreover, one of the critical indicators of consumer purchase decisions is the degree to which services or products are perceived as authentic (Matthews et al., 2020). In this regard, all aspects of services should be authentic to provide authentic experiences. For example, for a local restaurant where authentic dishes are cooked by locals, using robots as servers may prevent consumers' authenticity perceptions of the restaurant services.

On the other hand, automation technologies such as artificial intelligence, robots, chatbots, face recognition and voice-controlled technologies, service kiosks, and the internet of things continue to be used at an increasing rate in the service sectors since they have various advantages (i.e., reducing the workload, reducing the labour costs, increasing the service speed and efficiency, enabling contactless service) (Ivanov, 2021) especially during the pandemic (Seyitoğlu & Ivanov, 2020). However, automation technologies may also be disadvantageous for some service industries. For example, service robots may be inefficient in restaurant services because of the lack of human-level communication skills and emotions, not being able to prevent and fix service failures, insufficiency in unpredictable and emergency situations, lack of crisis management skills, not addressing the special requirements of customers, eliminating socialisation, lack of tacit knowledge etc. (Seyitoğlu et al., 2021).

Both authenticity and automation technologies are separately significant concepts that play a role in service industries. Thus, scholarly attention has been given to both concepts in different aspects. However, no study investigating or discussing "whether automation and/or authenticity should be a priority in service industries". In this regard, the attempt in this study was to answer this question. Also, a framework explaining "the decision process of authentic vs automated services" for the service industries was provided.

## 2. Authenticity in services

Although the term authenticity is considered a complicated and ambiguous concept that is hard to be clearly defined (Özdemir & Seyitoğlu, 2017), it is explained as "the quality of being real or true" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021). Moreover, authenticity is associated with identity, nostalgia, and historical roots (Lin et al., 2017). Service authenticity is the extent of the sincerity and authenticity offered by the service provider(s) during the service (Bae, 2020). Authenticity, which has the potential to create value and build relationships in a service context, is connected to the perspective that a thing/subject is real, genuine, true to itself, not an illusion, copy or forgery (Matthews & Eilert, 2021). Hence, as a framework for creating meaning and value, authenticity includes the features of being less industrialised, more local, and more morally correct (Maegaard & Karrebæk, 2019).

In service environments, customers expect genuine and authentic service (Bujisic et al., 2014) together with genuine and enjoyable personal interaction with the employee. From this point, for example, authentic smiles play a significant role in customers' willingness to tip in the foodservice industry because genuine smiles are perceived as warm; in contrast, inauthentic ones are perceived as forced and cool (Bujisic et al., 2014). Besides, in a service environment, the original language linked to the service or product would enable a more authentic sense to consumers, which can also boost the quality of authentic experience (e.g., Spanish at a salsa festival or English in a British pub abroad) (Kraak & Holmqvist, 2017). To support this claim, the Norwegian coffee-chain Fugeln (The Bird), which is opened as a Norwegian café in central Tokyo in 2012, can be an example. The name

of the café and décor (interior design and furniture) are both Norwegian. Further, to provide a more authentic customer experience, management also benefits from the language of service employees with the servicescape. In this aspect, Japanese service employees learn some Norwegian phrases to use with the local customers (Kraak & Holmqvist, 2017).

In the service marketing literature, authenticity has been investigated from two main views mainly focusing on the human aspect: authenticity of the service providers' positive emotional display (Grandey et al., 2005) and the authenticity of the service providers' behaviours (Price et al., 1995). From this angle, the studies focused on the relationships of the authenticity of service experiences and satisfaction with the variables such as employee emotion authenticity (Lechner & Mathmann, 2021), the characteristics of employees (e.g., knowledge, dressing, body language, humour) (Värlander, 2009), and the language use of employees (Kraak & Holmqvist, 2017). Since service employees are in a central position to provide authenticity cues to customers, it is unsurprising that most studies are related to the role of service providers in delivering authentic experiences. However, authenticity can be related to various subjects in the service context depending on the service industry type. For instance, in the foodservice industry, authenticity can be connected to the originality of food, the locality of service employees in restaurants, décor, menus etc., to provide authentic experiences (Özdemir & Seyitoğlu, 2017).

Authenticity and being authentic or being perceived as authentic can be beneficial in services. For instance, high authenticity may lead to high-quality perceptions of consumers that can cause positive behaviours towards the brand or service provider (Matthews & Eilert, 2021). Authenticity is also a crucial strategic element that helps to position and differentiate in the market (Lindsey-Hall et al., 2020) because consumers seek products or services they perceive as authentic (Morhart et al., 2015). Additionally, authenticity has become a significant component of brand identity for service providers eager to form a powerful brand (Lin et al., 2017) because it determines the perceived quality, brand trust, and positive attitudes towards the brand (Matthews et al., 2020). However, in the era of rapid technological development, authenticity has become valuable and almost unattainable. What is more, consumers crave authenticity so that their desires for authenticity and authentic products or services are considered crucial aspects of contemporary marketing (Brown et al., 2003). This might be challenging for service providers because with the help of technology, the development of high tech (e.g., virtual reality, augmented reality, robotics) experiences, which are becoming more common with the pandemic, threaten authenticity.

### **3. Automation technologies in services**

Automation cannot be explained as the simple replacement of human labour by technologies and machines; instead, it integrates technological tools and devices to succeed in work processes without or with limited human assistance (Tussyadiah, 2020). In this vein, service robots are physically present in various service industries, acting as AI service agents. Using data received by multiple sensors to adapt to a specific situation, service robots can make autonomous decisions in delivering customer services together with interacting and communicating with them and the employees (Lu et al., 2019).

Automating a service is related to transferring the necessary knowledge of performing a service into a technological tool (machine) to perform a physical or cognitive task. With the current technological development, though automation of physical tasks has almost become routine in manufacturing, automation of complex cognitive tasks still needs to be developed (Meyer et al., 2020). Additionally, service automation (e.g., service kiosks, artificial intelligence, chatbots, robots, and voice-controlled technologies) is suitable to be used in multiple tasks serially and simultaneously, and even from a remote area, which cannot be possible with the human workforce (Meyer et al., 2020). However, in its current form and development, automation is implemented chiefly for routine service tasks that can be codified because professional service tasks are non-routine, challenging to be codified and program, require expert judgment and include intuition and creativity (Sampson, 2021). In contrast, AI technologies are more suitable to accomplish cognitive and professional tasks

that are more sophisticated; thus, these technologies replace human employees in some service industries (e.g., security, finance, education, and medicine) that require more complex knowledge-intensive efforts (De Keyser et al., 2019). However, in the service industries that require advanced (professional) training, such as hospitality, retail, and tourism, not all the tasks can be automated.

There is consensus in the literature that automation technologies would transform the work environment in service industries because the tasks and skills required by the human workforce could change (Ivanov, 2020). Further, automation technologies would influence various aspects in the work environment such as working hours, employee relationships, tasks profiles, customer-employee relationships, marketing and promoting strategies, managerial styles, business models and policies etc. So, firms or service providers' organisational and adoption processes are crucial to deciding the future of their companies or services in terms of whether benefiting from or adopting technologies. In addition, although automation may be helpful to service firms as it enables to expand production or serving capacity, decrease the production risks, protect the knowledge aspects, companies should not automate their products or services as soon as automation is affordable or available (Meyer et al., 2020). Various factors (e.g., service industry type, tasks, types of products or services, consumers' expectations and desires, resources (i.e., physical, financial, human), types of available automation technologies, and marketing strategies) can play a role in the effectiveness of services. Thus, they should be considered before automating services in the industries.

#### **4. Authentic and/vs automated services**

Automation technologies can play an advantageous role in some respects. For example, thanks to the developing technology, the re-enactment of historical events can be possible to create an authentic experience. In this vein, for instance, in the tourism industry, automation technologies have the potential to contribute to heritage tourism by enabling the replication of historical events to provide a sense of authenticity to the tourists, which can enhance their experiences (Jopp et al., 2019). Moreover, with the help of virtual or augmented reality, offering replication of historical attractions that are highly damaged or deteriorated can ensure the protection of such attractions (Jopp et al., 2019). Consequently, technology will be beneficial for sustainable tourism development in this aspect.

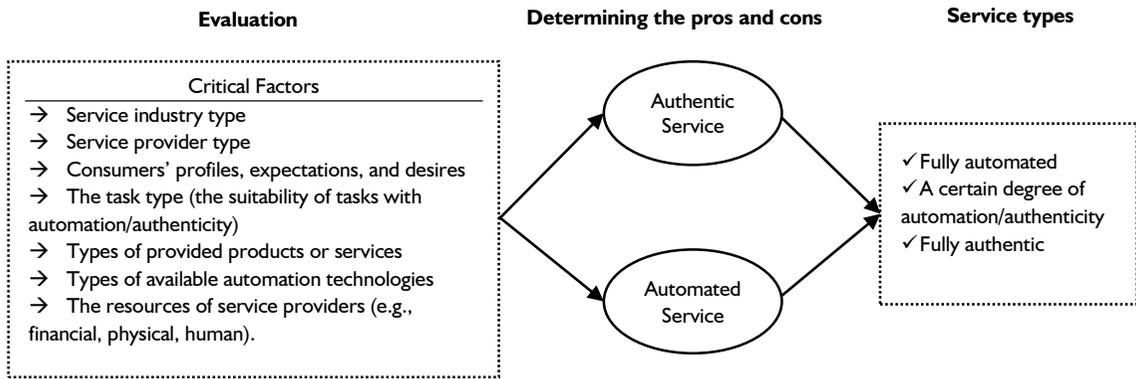
On the other hand, the specialised skills that include tacit knowledge and are passed down from generation to generation are in danger of being displaced by technology (Aporta & Higgs, 2005). Furthermore, in some service industries such as hospitality, tourism and food service, which are highly bound to human interactions in service environments, automation technologies may harm the customer experience as they will prevent interrelationships between service providers and customers. For example, hotel guests may be willing to interact with hotel employees to feel the personalised service, including genuine smiles and eye contact. In this aspect, serving hotel guests by their name with authentic smiles and a sincere communication manner can effectively provide a quality service experience (Kim et al., 2021).

From the marketing and human resource points of view, a study (Chan & Tung, 2019) in the hospitality literature demonstrates that in the hotel service context, human service employees were better than service robots in terms of providing a high-quality experience and making guests feel emotionally attached to the brand. However, the interactions between service employees and customers can also cause negative issues. For instance, negative attitudes towards customers, improper language or other problems may decrease the service and experience quality that can damage the service providers' image in the market (Sirianni et al., 2013).

##### **4.1. Conceptual framework: The decision process of authentic vs automated services**

The proposed framework (see Figure 1) can explain the decision process of service automation and/or the authenticity in service industries. In the framework, first, suppliers should evaluate several critical factors: (i) service industry type, (ii) service provider type, (iii) consumers' profiles, expectations, and desires, (iv) the task

type (the suitability of tasks with automation/authenticity), (v) types of provided products or services, (vi) types of available automation technologies, and (vii) the resources of service providers (e.g., financial, physical, human). Besides, considering the evaluated critical factors, the advantages and disadvantages of both authentic and automated services should be determined. In the final stage, service providers can be ready to decide the service type (fully automated, a certain degree of automation/authenticity, fully authentic) that best fit them.



**Figure 1.** The decision process of authentic vs automated services

To evaluate the critical factors, initially, since each service sector has its characteristics, service industries and service provider types are crucial elements in deciding to benefit from automation technologies or stick to authentic services. From this point, for hospitality companies, retail stores and restaurants, *the interaction between hosts and guests* is the indicator factor in shaping the experiences. For example, for local businesses operated by locals, authenticity is likely to be dominated in service environments because customer profiles mostly want to be served in genuine ways to feel the authentic culture of the hosts (Özdemir & Seyitoğlu, 2017). Hence, to show the hospitableness in a service context based on human interactions, service providers' genuine attitudes are expected; however, service robots may not address this need and might result in negative experiences (Yu & Ngan, 2019).

Conversely, automation technologies can also play an enhancing role in the service experience because people's expectations, desires, and behaviours can vary. Therefore, it is evident that not every individual can favour the same service context (in our context, automated or authentic services) because as their profiles and characteristics differ, people may hold different beliefs or perspectives towards technology or authenticity. From this angle, some individuals may not prefer automated technology due to discomfort with technology or choose the authentic service environment where they feel more engaged and comfortable. Thence, it is critical to understand the consumers' profiles, expectations, and desires before deciding to provide automated or pure authentic services.

For service industries, knowing customer expectations and desires can be extremely helpful in designing the products and services. In this vein, for service providers, positioning in the market with the knowledge of customer expectations is vital for market success and competitiveness (Seyitoğlu & Ivanov, 2020). For example, for the hospitality industry, although implementing automation technologies may contribute to the efficiency and especially with the current pandemic safety of service processes, service providers still need to meet the expectations of guests/customers to be hospitable because the industry is based chiefly on host-guest interactions. However, considering that not every traveller may desire the same aspects in a hotel or a restaurant, both automated and authentic service providers may be desired in the market.

The customer expectations and desires may also vary according to their demographic profiles, such as age. Regarding the relationship between age and behaviours in the marketing literature, a recent study (Wu et al., 2021) revealed that as age increases, consumers show a higher visit likelihood with human servers than self-ordering machines because elderly customers find it more convenient to order from human servers. The findings of this study state that as age rises, individuals are less likely to prefer service providers occupied with new automation technologies such as self-service kiosks in conditions when traditional (more authentic) alternatives exist (Wu et al., 2021). This is clarified by the socio-emotional selectivity theory that older people have fewer social connections and seek a social climate in which others understand their desires (Carstensen et al., 1999). Hence, they value emotional engagement more than technological interactions.

Another critical factor that should be considered and evaluated is the task type (the suitability of tasks with automation/authenticity) because not all the tasks may be suitable for automation in service industries. From a human resource management point of view, each job and its tasks can be more suitable for automation than others. For example, a recent study (Seyitoğlu et al., 2021) demonstrates that in the restaurant service context, according to restaurant managers, service robots are found more suitable for tasks such as cleaning, washing dishes, lifting heavy things, hosting (Host/Hostess), Mise en place: the setup tasks before cooking (i.e. cutting, chopping, slicing, washing and cleaning ingredients), busser/commis waiter tasks (i.e. carrying equipment and food, clearing the tables, wiping cutlery, changing tablecloth). However, by the same restaurant managers, service robots were not found suitable for the tasks requiring communication skills and emotions, more complex tasks such as cooking that require tacit knowledge, jobs that require management skills (Seyitoğlu et al., 2021).

In the hotel services context, on the one hand, service robots are regarded as convenient for the tasks such as housekeeping, processing card payments, issuing payment documents, gardening services, supporting staff at the reception during group arrivals, provision of information, distribution of promotional materials (Ivanov et al., 2020). However, on the other hand, according to hotel managers, service robots are not suitable for the tasks requiring social skills, personalised services to a hotel guest, handling complaints, implementing guests' special requests, understanding guests' emotions (Ivanov et al., 2020).

'Types of provided products or services' is also a critical factor that should be evaluated in the decision of service type (automated vs authentic). In this regard, in the service industries, the product or services can vary according to their characteristics (e.g., a product/service can be intangible/tangible or local/ non-local). For example, for a local restaurant providing locally produced authentic food, customers are likely to expect genuine services instead of automated services because the restaurant's authenticity is a more holistic concept that should also include authentic restaurants' employees and behaviours, serving styles, decor, costumes, music, etc. (Özdemir & Seyitoğlu, 2017).

Additionally, types of available automation technologies can play an important role in automating tasks because not all the tasks can be automated with the current technological development (Hirschi, 2018). Consequently, as mentioned above, the tasks requiring humanoid communication and social skills in the service industries are still hard to be automated. So, companies or service providers should also research available automation technologies for the tasks they are willing to automate. However, they should also evaluate their resources (e.g., financial, physical, human) before automating their tasks. For example, automation of tasks may be expensive depending on the technology needed. In addition, the employees that can manage service automation is also significant because service automation also requires human technological skills to work within an automated service environment.

After evaluating these critical factors, service providers should determine the pros and cons of authentic and automated services for their tasks. For an optimal decision for each task, both service types' possible advantages

and disadvantages must be determined, and the final decision should be made accordingly. A lack of precise determination may result in an improper decision that may harm the service provider financially.

Service types do not have to be purely authentic or fully automated in the final decision. Instead, a service provider may benefit from both authenticity and automation in their services. As noted earlier, automation may be more suitable for some tasks, while for others, authenticity. All the critical factors and determination of the pros and cons of both sides would enable the most appropriate decision of service types for service industries.

## 5. Conclusion

As a first attempt to find the answer to the question of ‘whether automation and/or authenticity should be a priority in service industries’, this study launches a scholarly debate on the subject in the service management literature. A framework that consists of three phases (evaluating critical factors, determining the pros and cons of each service design, and final decision of service type), which explains the decision process of authentic vs automated services for the service industries, was proposed to guide service industry practitioners in the decision of service types (fully automated, a certain degree of automation/authenticity, fully authentic).

From a theoretical perspective, this study demonstrates the decision process of authentic vs automated services for the service industries through the provided knowledge and framework. The framework underlines that the evaluation of several factors such as service industry type, service provider type, consumers’ profiles, expectations, and desires, the task type (the suitability of tasks with automation/authenticity), types of provided products or services, types of available automation technologies, and the resources of service providers (e.g., financial, physical, human) is critical in the decision process. Besides, although authenticity (Lindsey-Hall et al., 2020) and automation (Seyitoğlu & Ivanov, 2020) in services are both strategic subjects that can help to position and differentiate in the market, service providers do not have to stick with only one side; instead, they can combine them in their services (a certain degree of automation/authenticity). Through a well-evaluation of critical factors, service providers can succeed with either fully authentic services, fully automated services or with a certain degree of automation/authenticity because both authentic and automated services may have advantages or disadvantages.

Since this study is conceptual, future research may step on the suggested framework and provide empirical data related to the decision process of authentic vs automated services for the service industries. Furthermore, conceptual and empirical studies for different service industries (e.g., hospitality and tourism, food service, retail) are suggested to provide different perspectives to extend the current knowledge on the subject.

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