This research examines the effect of processing fluency on judgments of agent competence. In the context of service relationships, four studies reveal that the experience of processing difficulty, or disfluency, enhances expectations of agent-exerted effort and competence, which in turn increase expected service value. When reading information about a target service, consumers interpret the difficulty of processing information as a signal of the level of skill required to execute the task, which highlights the agent's expected utility. The authors explore several moderators of this positive effect of disfluency, showing that it is attenuated under conditions that decrease the relevance of consumers' subjective experiences and it may be reversed on measures of experienced (vs. expected) service value.

**Keywords:** processing fluency, subjective effort, consumer lay theories, competence perceptions, services

When Disfluency Signals Competence: The Effect of Processing Difficulty on Perceptions of Service Agents

Advertisers typically strive to provide consumers with simple, easy-to-process information about their offerings. Research in psychology and marketing supports the intuition that information that is easily processed is evaluated more positively. This stream of work shows that the experience of subjective ease, such as the perceived ease with which content can be brought to mind and the ease with which new information can be processed (i.e., processing fluency), elicits positive affect and transfers to judgments of overall liking (for a review, see Winkielman et al. 2003).

Notably, recent research has revealed that the experience of processing difficulty also affects inferences of effort. People misinterpret the difficulty of processing information about a target behavior as indicative of the amount of effort and skill actually required to perform the behavior and therefore become less willing to complete it (Song and Schwarz 2008). This finding has potential implications for marketers and consumers. In many marketing domains, consumers contract agents to perform specific tasks they are unable or unwilling to perform themselves. In these contexts, do consumers interpret the experience of processing difficulty (i.e., disfluency) as indicative of greater effort and competence provided by a target agent? Our research explores this question, examining whether a moderate level of disfluency may be desirable when consumers consider the value of service agents.

Our key proposition is that disfluency can be used to signal a higher level of competence, which in turn can enhance consumers' motivation to hire target agents. The lay belief underlying consumers' inferences is that people who perform more challenging tasks are expected to be more skilled, and, consequently, worth more. We test this prediction in a series of four studies, using different manipulations of processing fluency across several service contexts. Taken together, our findings offer three key contributions. First, we provide evidence that processing difficulty can affect value perceptions through attributions of agent competence. Second, we examine conditions that moderate the disfluency-competence link. We show that factors that decrease consumers' reliance on their subjective experiences, such as the availability of more diagnostic inputs to judge competence and consumers' state of low power, mitigate the positive
When Disfluency Signals Competence

effect of disfluency on expected service value. Finally, we explore the effects of disfluency interventions on value perceptions after a service encounter, suggesting that disfluency may lower ratings of experienced value by providing a higher standard for outcome evaluation.

In the next section, we provide the conceptual background for our predictions. We then report the results of four studies and conclude with a discussion of our results and their theoretical and practical implications.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

The Malleable Meaning of Effort

Extensive research suggests that processing fluency can affect judgments in two ways. First, processing fluency is hedonically marked and cues judgments of liking (for a review, see Schwarz 2004). According to this hedonic marking hypothesis, processing fluency generates a positive affective response that can be detected with psychophysiological measures (Winkielman et al. 2003) and serves as input for liking judgments. Processing fluency’s positive effect on judgments of liking has been demonstrated using different operationalizations, such as repeated exposure, visual primes, figure–ground contrast, and presentation duration (Lee and Labroo 2004; Reber, Winkielman, and Schwarz 1998; Zajonc 1968).

In addition to this spontaneous affective response, processing fluency can shape judgments through specific attributions people draw from their metacognitive experiences (Jacoby, Woloshy, and Kelley 1989; Whittles, Jacoby, and Girard 1999). These attributions are context dependent and vary according to the application of naive theories. Briñol, Petty, and Tormala (2006) argue that it is important to distinguish two aspects of metacognition: its content, such as whether thoughts are easy or difficult to process or generate, and its evaluative meaning, such as whether feelings of effort imply something good or bad. Recent empirical evidence provides support for the malleability of the evaluative meaning of processing fluency. For example, in the domain of special occasion products, Pocheptsova, Labroo, and Dhar (2010) show that decreasing processing fluency can increase preference for a target product by signaling positive characteristics. In their studies, metacognitive difficulty cued a perception of scarcity and uniqueness, which translated to greater value when consumers were seeking something special. In contrast, for everyday products, metacognitive difficulty signaled perceptions of unfamiliarity and led to more negative evaluations.

Labroo and Kim (2009) provide another example of how naive theories can moderate the effect of processing fluency on evaluative responses, demonstrating that when consumers have highly accessible goals, metacognitive difficulty improves product evaluation. For example, when participants were primed with a feel-good goal, they were willing to pay significantly more for a box of gourmet chocolate when the advertisement for the chocolate was difficult to process than when it was easy to process. In this context, effort signaled the instrumentality of the target product to fulfill a consumer’s goal, enhancing evaluation. However, when the product was not a means to fulfill an accessible goal (i.e., when participants were primed with a self-control goal or not primed with any specific goal), metacognitive effort decreased product evaluations.

Taken together, these findings show that processing difficulty can influence judgments not only through a direct affective route but also through the specific attributions consumers give to subjective effort. Importantly, these attributions depend on the naive theory associated with the subjective feeling of effort.

The Effect of Disfluency on Perceptions of Agent Competence

In service relationships, consumers use agents to move toward goal attainment, and inferences of competence are an important evaluative dimension of these agents (Kirmani and Campbell 2004). Competence encompasses traits such as cleverness, capability, and skillfulness, indicating the ability to bring about one’s intent (Cuddy, Fiske, and Glick 2008). The more difficult and effortful a task appears to be for consumers, the greater is the value of hiring professional agents to perform it.

We predict that the experience of processing difficulty, or disfluency, can increase perceptions of task difficulty, which in turn enhance perceptions of the agent’s competence: the more effortful and demanding the task, the more skilled the agent. Previous work has suggested that people use information about the effort exerted by others as a general heuristic for the quality of the work produced (Cho and Schwarz 2008; Kruger et al. 2004). For example, the greater the objective effort invested by an artist (e.g., the number of hours he or she takes to finish a painting), the more well-crafted the artist’s work is perceived to be. More importantly, recent research has suggested that subjective effort may produce similar effects. Song and Schwarz (2008) show that people transfer the ease of processing information about a target behavior to beliefs about the ease with which the behavior can be performed. Specifically, when instructions for a target behavior, such as an exercise routine or a cooking recipe, were presented in a difficult-to-read rather than easy-to-read font, participants inferred that the behavior would require more time and more skill to be performed.

In line with this previous research, we predict that the experience of disfluency can drive perceptions of an agent’s competence and enhance the agent’s expected value. More formally, we hypothesize that decreasing processing fluency can increase perceptions of task difficulty, which in turn enhances perceptions of the agent’s competence (H1) and that the effect of processing fluency on service valuation is driven by consumers’ inferences of agent-exerted effort and competence (H2).

Moderators of the Disfluency–Competence Effect

We contend that people misread the difficulty with which they process information as a cue for the amount of effort the task requires and for the level of competence the agent has to perform it. In this framework, the attribution of higher competence from the experience of subjective effort is essential for the positive effect of disfluency. Therefore, individual and situational factors that decrease reliance on experiential (vs. declarative) information during the evaluation process should mitigate the proposed effect. We examine the moderating effect of two variables that we expect to influence consumers’ reliance on experiential information.
First, we test the effect of external, competing cues signaling agent incompetence. Processing fluency effects are stronger when little other information about the target is accessible (Schwarz and Clore 2007). Consequently, the presence of information triggering incompetence beliefs may render the experience of subjective effort less pertinent for inferences of agent competence. In addition, the presence of additional cues signaling agent incompetence may change the evaluative meaning of exerted effort. When consumers view the agent as incompetent, inferences of greater effort may be interpreted negatively (i.e., greater effort is exerted because of the agent’s lack of skill or expertise), reinforcing incompetence beliefs. Thus, we predict that the effect of disfluency on competence perceptions is moderated by the availability of cues challenging an agent’s competence, such that the effect of disfluency will be stronger when incompetence associations are not salient (H3).

Second, we explore the role of internal factors—more specifically, the effect of consumers’ psychological states of power. “Power” refers to the ability to control and influence others (Rucker, Galinsky, and Dubois 2012). People frequently experience states of low and high power in everyday activities, arising from several chronic and situational factors, such as socioeconomic status, social roles, clothing, body postures, and advertising messages. Powerful people have greater predictability and control and are less dependent on external circumstances; therefore, they are free to act at will and process information more selectively, in line with their affective states (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, and Magee 2003; Weick and Guinote 2008). In contrast, powerlessness is associated with dependency, constraints, and lack of control, components that encourage people to attend to multiple sources of information to increase perceived predictability and control. A recent stream of research supports the hypothesis that subjective experiences (i.e., bodily feelings, affective states, and experiences that arise during thought processes) become a more central and primary input to decision making under psychological states of high versus low power. For example, powerful people act more on annoying stimuli in the environment (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, and Magee 2003), smile more in line with their affective states (Hecht and LaFrance 1998), and rely more on nourishment feelings such as hunger (Guinote 2010) compared with powerless people. More closely related to our research, high states of power have been shown to increase reliance on metacognitive experiences. For example, Guinote (2007) finds that powerful people are more influenced by experiences that arise during thought suppression and thus show greater rebound effects after suppressing unwanted thoughts, compared with powerless people. In addition, Weick and Guinote (2008) demonstrate that power consistently increases reliance on feelings of ease of information retrieval. Taken together, these findings indicate that momentary changes in subjective experiences are a more central input to cognition for powerful (compared with powerless) people. Thus, we expect that the effect of disfluency on inferences of agent competence will be stronger for consumers with a high (vs. low) sense of power (H4).

Downstream Consequences of Enhancing Competence Perceptions

Prior research documenting processing fluency effects in consumer domains has been largely focused on how fluency interventions affect judgments in the preconsumption stage of decision making. Little is known about whether (and how) the experience of subjective effort before a consumption experience influences judgments in the postconsumption stage. Judgments of value are by nature relative (Mussweiler 2003), and consumers use different comparison standards to evaluate service outcomes, such as expectations, needs, or norms (Spreng and Page 2003). If expectations about agent competence (formed before service delivery) are used as the standard to evaluate service performance, disfluent (vs. fluent) information before consumption may increase the likelihood of expectation disconfirmation. Previous research on consumer satisfaction suggests that the higher the comparison standard, the greater is the likelihood of negative disconfirmation, holding performance constant (Cadotte, Woodruff, and Jenkins 1987). Therefore, judgments of experienced value may suffer when consumers form expectations based on disfluent (vs. fluent) information. We hypothesize that consumers initially exposed to disfluent (vs. fluent) information are more likely to experience negative disconfirmation, reporting a greater decrease in experienced value relative to their expected value (H5). Consistent with our initial theorizing, lowering processing fluency should increase expectations of agent competence and service value prior to consumption, but it may decrease experienced value and agent competence after a consumption experience.

We test our hypotheses in four studies, using different manipulations of processing fluency and service contexts. Study 1 examines the value-enhancing effect of disfluency and tests the mediating role of effort and competence (H1 and H2). Studies 2 and 3 explore boundary conditions of the competence effect by manipulating factors that decrease the relevance of subjective effort (H3 and H4). Finally, Study 4 examines the effects of disfluency on both expected and experienced value (H5).

STUDY 1: PERCEPTIONS OF A GRADUATE SCHOOL COACH

Design and Procedures

In Study 1, we test the effect of processing fluency on expected service value and examine the mediating role of perceived effort and competence (H1 and H2). Seventy-one undergraduate students (59% male) were randomly assigned to either a low- or high-fluency condition. Participants read a description of an online coaching service that helps students apply to graduate school. In a pretest (N = 31), participants indicated that when choosing a coach to help them apply to graduate school, the coach’s expertise and knowledge of the admission process were important dimensions of evaluation (M = 5.8, seven-point scale). All participants were presented with a description (179 words, Arial 12-point font) of a service called Course Advisor that helps prospective students search, prepare, and apply to graduate programs in business and law schools (see the Appendix). They were asked to read the information and provide their opinions about the perceived value of the target service.
We manipulated processing fluency through background contrast. In the low-fluency condition, we presented the information in a light blue font with a white background. In the high-fluency condition, we presented the information in black font with a white background. The only difference between the two conditions was the font color. After reading the information at their own pace, participants reported their willingness to pay for a one-year subscription of the service and rated how much value the service would provide to them (1 = “not much,” and 7 = “a lot”) and how interested they would be in subscribing to a service such as Course Advisor. We averaged these two items (α = .88) to form a composite score of expected service value. Next, participants rated how much effort it takes to apply to graduate school (1 = “not much,” and 7 = “a lot”), and how time-consuming it is to apply for graduate school (1 = “not at all,” and 7 = “very much”). The average of these two items (α = .83) formed a composite score of task effort. We measured perceived agent competence by asking participants how much expertise they think Course Advisor coaches offer to its members (1 = “not much,” and 7 = “a lot”). Participants then rated how easy-to-read the service description was (1 = “very difficult,” and 7 = “very easy”) and answered two true/false questions to test message comprehension. They also indicated whether they had heard about this service before (yes/no) and provided demographic information.

Results

The background contrast manipulation did not affect participants’ responses to the true/false questions about the target message (ps > .46). Similarly, the amount of time participants spent on the page containing the service information did not differ across the fluency manipulation (Mlow fluency = 36 seconds, Mhigh fluency = 34 seconds; p > .58).

Manipulation check. As we expected, participants in the high-fluency condition rated the service description as significantly easier to read (M = 5.06, SD = 1.64) than participants in the low-fluency condition (M = 4.09, SD = 1.81; F(1, 69) = 5.63, p < .05).

Expected value. Consistent with H1, the fluency manipulation significantly affected participants’ willingness to pay and their expected value ratings. Those in the low-fluency condition reported more willingness to pay for a one-year subscription (Mlow fluency = $145.00, SD = 189.55; Mhigh fluency = $70.42, SD = 54.00; F(1, 69) = 5.15, p < .05) and perceived significantly greater value in the target service than those in the high-fluency condition (Mlow fluency = 4.90, SD = 1.19; Mhigh fluency = 3.79, SD = 1.45; F(1, 69) = 12.40, p < .01).

Task effort and agent competence inferences. As we expected, lowering processing fluency influenced participants’ perceptions of how much effort is involved in applying to graduate school and how much expertise Course Advisor coaches provide to students. Those in the low-fluency condition indicated that applying to graduate school takes a greater amount of effort (Mlow fluency = 6.56, SD = .43; Mhigh fluency = 5.90, SD = 1.03; F(1, 69) = 12.11, p < .01) and expected the coaches to provide more expertise than those in the high-fluency condition (Mlow fluency = 5.0, SD = 1.00; Mhigh fluency = 4.14, SD = 1.27; F(1, 69) = 10.1, p < .01). We conducted a sequential mediation analysis to examine whether effort and competence inferences were the mediating link between disfluency and expected value. Regression coefficients appear in Figure 1. In support of H2, the bootstrap test (Preacher and Hayes 2008) revealed that the indirect effect of disfluency on expected value through the two mediators in sequence was significant (.17, 95% confidence interval [CI] = .03 to .38). Perceived effort partially mediated the effect of disfluency on perceived competence, which then mediated the effect of perceived effort on expected service value.

Discussion

Overall, Study 1 results suggest that lowering processing fluency can increase consumers’ valuations of a target service by enhancing perceptions of task effort and agent competence. The context of this study is a professional service relevant for a specific but infrequent consumer need (i.e., applying to graduate school). In a follow-up study, we tested whether the disfluency–competence link is significant in a service domain that consumers more commonly

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1 One participant indicated willingness to pay higher than three standard deviations above the mean. Excluding this observation from the sample does not change the results, and the effect of processing fluency remains significant (p < .05).

Figure 1

**INDIRECT EFFECTS OF DISFLUENCY ON EXPECTED VALUE (STUDY 1)**
use. Forty participants from an online panel were randomly presented with a fluent versus disfluent description of a dry cleaning service. This service was rated as fairly common (M = 4.80, SD = 1.22) and widely used (M = 5.40, SD = .98; both seven-point scales). We manipulated processing fluency through font type (Arial font vs. Imprint MT font), which significantly affected ease of reading according to a pretest (M$_{disfluent}$ = 6.06, SD = 90; M$_{imprint}$ = 4.74, SD = 1.82; F(1, 38) = 7.58, p < .01). Consistent with Study 1, the disfluent (vs. fluent) description significantly enhanced perceptions of employee competence (M$_{low fluency}$ = 6.46, SD = .66; M$_{high fluency}$ = 5.84, SD = .92; F(1, 38) = 5.77, p < .05), which in turn increased expected service value (M$_{low fluency}$ = 5.87, SD = .97; M$_{high fluency}$ = 4.83, SD = 1.61; F(1, 38) = 5.92, p < .05). The indirect effect of disfluency through competence was positive and significant (59, 95% CI = .12, 1.24). These results support the notion that subjective effort can increase perceptions of agent competence even in service categories that consumers more commonly use.

In the next two studies, we provide converging evidence about the nature of the disfluency-competence link by exploring the effect of relevance of a person's subjective experiences. We expect that the competence effect from disfluency will be mitigated under conditions that decrease the importance of subjective effort in the evaluations process. Drawing from previous research, we varied the relevance of subjective effort in two ways: by providing information that activates incompetence associations (Study 2) and by varying consumers' states of power (Study 3).

**STUDY 2: THE MODERATING EFFECT OF INCOMPETENCE CUES**

In Study 2, we test whether the availability of competing cues triggering incompetence associations provides a boundary condition for the positive effect of disfluency on agent perceptions (H$_3$). We manipulate the presence of these incompetence cues through age stereotypes. In addition, in this study, we measure a dependent variable that is more closely tied to participants' behavior.

**Design and Procedures**

One hundred thirty-four undergraduate students (51% male) were randomly assigned to a 2 (fluency: low vs. high) × 2 (competence stereotype: low vs. high) between-subjects design. Participants were told that a student-run organization on campus was organizing an event for business undergraduate students about the importance of social media for corporate strategy. They were given a 175-word description about the event and the speaker being considered (for further information, see the Web Appendix at marketingpower.com/jmr_webappendix). We manipulated processing fluency through font size. In the low-fluency condition, we wrote the event information in a smaller font (Calibri 7-point), whereas in the high-fluency condition, we wrote the information in a larger font (Calibri 16-point).

We manipulated the salience of a negative competence stereotype by varying the age of the speaker. Previous research has shown that people stereotype the elderly as incompetent and that this negative view is pervasive, crossing national and cultural boundaries (Cuddy, Norton, and Fiske 2005). In addition, Cuddy, Norton, and Fiske (2005) demonstrate that competence ratings of elderly targets are insensitive to additional competence information, suggesting that the elderly stereotype is difficult to subvert. In line with these findings, we expect that disfluency will be a less effective competence cue for elderly (vs. young) agents. In our study's low-competence condition, the event speaker was presented as a 71-year-old retired marketing executive, in contrast to a 36-year-old marketing executive in the high-competence condition. We expected that the negative competence stereotype would be particularly salient for the elderly speaker given that the target event was about new developments in social media, a technological tool typically used by younger consumers. Indeed, research shows that younger people report significantly greater confidence in their computer, e-mail, and web skills than older people (Bunz 2009). With the exception of the age of the event speaker, all the remaining information was identical across conditions.

After reading the information at their own pace, participants were asked if they were interested in attending the event (1 = "not interested at all," and 7 = "very interested"), if they would like to receive an e-mail with more information about the event (yes/no), and to provide their e-mail address for future contact. The willingness to provide an e-mail address provided a behavioral measure of expected service value. Next, participants indicated how competent they thought the speaker was (1 = "not competent," and 7 = "very competent") and how knowledgeable he was about social media (1 = "not knowledgeable," and 7 = "very knowledgeable"). We averaged these two items to form a competence score (r = .75). Finally, participants were asked how easy it was to read the event description and speaker information (1 = "not easy at all," and 7 = "very easy"), to answer one true/false question to test message comprehension, and to indicate whether they were a marketing major (yes/no/undecided).

**Results**

Forty participants were marketing majors (30%), 89 participants were nonmarketing majors (66%), and 5 were undecided (4%). Because the topic of the event was more appealing to marketing than nonmarketing majors, we added major as a covariate in the statistical analyses.

**Processing fluency check.** A 2 fluency × 2 stereotype analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) revealed only a significant effect of fluency on ratings of ease of reading the event information (M$_{low fluency}$ = 4.32, SD = 1.60; M$_{high fluency}$ = 5.09, SD = 1.42; F(1, 129) = 8.45, p < .01). There were no significant effects of the fluency and stereotype manipulations on responses to the true/false question testing message comprehension (ps > .15). In addition, there were no significant effects of fluency and stereotype manipulations on the time participants spent reading the scenario (ps > .20).

**Expected value.** We analyzed participants’ interest in attending the event and their willingness to provide their e-mail addresses as indicators of the expected value of the target event. A 2 fluency × 2 stereotype ANCOVA on participants’ interest in attending the event indicated a marginal main effect of major (F(1, 129) = 3.22, p < .08) and a significant fluency by stereotype interaction (F(1, 129) = 5.64, p < .05). Consistent with H$_3$, interest in attending the event featuring the younger speaker was greater when the information was made less fluent (M$_{low fluency}$ = 4.67, SD = 1.28; M$_{high$ fluency
When Disfluency Signals Competence

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Interest in Attending the Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Competence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Model 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stereotype</td>
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<td>Model 2</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Stereotype</td>
<td>1.47</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disfluency x stereotype</td>
<td>0.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competence</td>
<td>4.44</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05.
**p < .001.

Notes: Number of bootstrap resamples = 1,000. Regression coefficients are unstandardized. IV = level of disfluency of event information, DV = interest in attending the target event, mediator = perceived competence of the speaker, and moderator = elderly stereotype.

Discussion

Study 2 shows that the effect of disfluency on expected agent value is moderated by the availability of incompetence cues (H3). Replicating our previous studies, in the absence of information evoking incompetence associations, the reduction of processing fluency increased expected agent value. However, when specific agent characteristics (such as age) activated incompetence associations, disfluency became an ineffective cue for value judgments.

Overall, Study 2 extends our initial findings in two ways. First, it captures the positive effect of disfluency using a measure of consumer interest more closely related to actual behavior. Second, it suggests that disfluency is a more effective mechanism to influence competence perceptions in the early stages of impression formation (i.e., when other competence-related cues are less readily available) than it is a mechanism to change existing competence associations.

STUDY 3: THE MODERATING EFFECT OF POWER

In Study 3, we manipulate a different factor that is expected to decrease consumers’ reliance on subjective effort as an input for evaluations. We test whether states of low (vs. high) power attenuate the effect of disfluency on competence perceptions, which in turn influence expected service value (H4).

Design and Procedure

Seventy-one undergraduate students (41.2% male) were randomly assigned to a 2 fluency (high vs. low) × 2 power (high vs. low) between-subjects design. Participants were told that they would participate in two separate studies. In the first study, participants worked in an anagram task adapted from Smith and Trope (2006), which primes psychological states of low and high power. Participants were given a list of words and had to reconfigure the letters to form an English word. In the low-power condition, the words related to the concept of lacking power: “employee,” “helpless,” “obey,” “subordinate,” “passive,” “servant,” “yield,” and “timid.” In the high-power condition, the words related to having power: “captain,” “control,” “dominant,” “authority,” “command,” “executive,” “leader,” and “boss.” In both conditions, there were two words unrelated to power: “jacket” and “computer.” This anagram task has
been shown to alter psychological states of power without affecting factors that naturally occur in hierarchies, such as physical resources, role expectations, and educational differences (Rucker, Galinsky, and Dubois 2012).

Immediately after completing the priming task, participants were presented with a second study in which they read a description of a financial advisor who works with recent college graduates and young professionals (412 words; see the Web Appendix at marketingpower.com/jmr_webappendix). We manipulated processing fluency through font size. A pretest (N = 53) showed that text presented in Arial 15-point font is significantly easier to read on the computer screen (M = 6.00, SD = 1.09) than text presented in Arial 9-point font (M = 5.11, SD = 1.65; F(1, 51) = 4.87, p < .05). After reading a description of the services the financial advisor provided, participants assessed service value by rating how much value the financial advisor would provide to them (1 = “not much value at all,” and 7 = “a lot of value”) and how interested they would be in hiring the target financial advisor after they got their first job (1 = “not interested at all,” and 7 = “very interested”; α = .84). Next, participants indicated how competent (1 = “not competent at all,” and 7 = “very competent”) and how qualified (1 = “not qualified at all,” and 7 = “very qualified”) the financial advisor was. We averaged these two items to form the competence composite score (α = .80). We measured perceived effort by asking participants how much effort it takes to help people organize their financial affairs (1 = “not much effort at all,” and 7 = “a lot of effort”) and how time-consuming it is to help people develop and implement financial plans (1 = “not time-consuming at all,” and 7 = “very time-consuming”; α = .80). These items reflect participants’ perceptions of the agent’s effort exerted. Last, participants indicated whether they had heard about this financial advisor before (yes/no) and provided demographic information.

Results

Expected value. In support of H4, a 2 fluency × 2 power analysis of variance (ANOVA) on participants’ ratings of expected service value revealed only a significant fluency by power interaction (F(1, 67) = 4.79, p < .05). Participants primed with high power predicted greater value from the financial advisor described with the smaller font (Mlow fluency = 5.32, SD = 1.03) than from the financial advisor described with the larger font (Mhigh fluency = 4.42, SD = 1.25; F(1, 36) = 5.80, p < .05). However, this effect was not present for participants primed with low power (Mlow fluency = 4.59, SD = 1.00; Mhigh fluency = 4.88, SD = 1.23; F(1, 31) = .54, p > .46). No other effects were significant (p > .26).

Perceived agent effort and competence. A 2 fluency × 2 power ANOVA on perceived effort indicated only a main effect of fluency (Mlow fluency = 5.8, Mhigh fluency = 5.4; F(1, 67) = 3.90, p = .05). Those exposed to the description using smaller (vs. larger) font perceived the service the financial advisor provided as requiring more effort. No other effects were significant (p > .34). However, these inferences of effort only served as a competence cue for those primed with high power. A 2 × 2 ANOVA on ratings of the financial advisor’s competence showed only a significant fluency by power interaction (F(1, 67) = 4.31, p < .05). Consistent with our prediction, participants primed with high power perceived the financial advisor to be more competent when he was described with the smaller (vs. larger) font (Mlow fluency = 5.84, SD = .73; Mhigh fluency = 5.37, SD = .68; F(1, 36) = 4.28, p < .05), whereas those primed with low power were unaffected by the font size manipulation (Mlow fluency = 5.62, SD = .60; Mhigh fluency = 5.84, SD = .81; F(1, 31) = .84, p > .36).

As in Study 2, we conducted a moderated mediation analysis (Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes 2007) to test whether the power prime moderated the effect of disfluency on agent competence, which would in turn influence service value. Regression coefficients appear in Table 2. As we expected, the indirect effect through competence (disfluency → competence → value) was positive and significant when participants were primed with high power (.30, 95% CI = .02 to .70), but it was mitigated when participants were primed with low power (−.15, 95% CI = −.53 to .15).

Discussion

Study 3 reveals that power moderates the effect of disfluency on consumers’ expectations of agent competence: the disfluency—competence link is positive and significant for consumers primed with high power but is nonsignificant for consumers primed with low power. Taken together, this study provides three contributions. First, it adds converging evidence about the underlying mechanism of the competence effect, demonstrating moderation by using a different factor that has been shown to reduce reliance on subjective effort. Second, the significant effects obtained with the power priming task point to an individual difference relevant for practitioners using disfluency as a competence cue: Consumers with high (vs. low) socioeconomic status or those occupying managerial (vs. subordinate) roles may be more sensitive to the disfluency effect. Finally, Study 3’s

Notes: Number of bootstrap resamples = 1,000. Regression coefficients are unstandardized. IV = level of disfluency in the agent description, DV = expected service value, mediator = perceived agent competence, and moderator = states of power.

Table 2

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
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<td>Competence</td>
</tr>
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<td>b</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disfluency</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disfluency × power</td>
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<td>Disfluency</td>
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<tr>
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</table>

*p < .05. **p < .001.
findings extend previous research on power by showing that high-(vs. low-) power consumers are not only more likely to weigh competence information when such information is unambiguous and externally provided, as Rucker and Galinsky (2009) indicate, but they are also more likely to draw competence inferences from ambiguous cues, such as processing fluency.

In our final study, we explore downstream consequences of lowering processing fluency for service valuation. We test whether disfluent information viewed before consumption can influence experienced value after a consumption experience.

**STUDY 4: THE EFFECT OF DISFLUENCY BEFORE AND AFTER A SERVICE ENCOUNTER**

Study 4 explores the hypothesis that disfluency may increase the standard of comparison used to evaluate a consumption experience, resulting in judgments of lower experienced value. Holding actual performance constant, we predict a significant fluency $\times$ consumption stage interaction, such that consumers initially exposed to disfluent (vs. fluent) information will be more likely to report a decrease in experienced service value compared with expected value ($H_3$).

**Design and Procedure**

Forty-four undergraduate students (54.5% male) were randomly assigned to a 2 fluency (high vs. low) $\times$ 2 consumption stage (before vs. after) mixed design. We conducted the study in the context of an online preparation course for the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT). Participants were told that they would read a short description about an online course called DominateTheGMAT.com, which helps students prepare for the GMAT, a standardized test that is a common admission requirement for business graduate schools. They were given a 179-word description about the course and the instructor (see the Web Appendix at marketingpower.com/jmr_webappendix). The processing fluency manipulation was identical to that used in Study 3: participants were either exposed to a description using Arial 15-point font (high fluency) or Arial 9-point font (low fluency). We manipulated consumption stage within subjects. After reading the information about the online GMAT preparation course, participants reported expected instructor competence and service value. After a six-minute filler task, participants watched a three-minute video from DominateTheGMAT.com in which an instructor delivers advice on preparing for the exam. The video was identical across all conditions and provided content of moderate quality. We recorded whether participants watched the video in its entirety or stopped the video before the three-minute mark, which served as a behavioral measure of experienced service value. After watching the video, participants provided ratings of experienced service value and instructor's competence.

In addition, we ran two conditions ($n = 41$) in which participants were initially exposed to either the fluent or disfluent information about the service but did not answer questions about their expectations regarding service value and instructor's competence. After the fluency manipulation, these participants took part in the filler task, watched the online video, and then reported experienced value and instructor's competence. These two conditions in which participants were not explicitly asked to report expectations before the service encounter enabled us to test our hypothesis both within and between subjects.

**Measures**

After participants read the information about the online GMAT course, we measured expected service value from the online course using five items ($\alpha = .94$; students' expected value of the GMAT course, we measured expected service value from the online course using four items ($\alpha = .88$; how interested they were in learning more about the online course [1 = "not interested at all," and 7 = "very interested"], how much value the course would provide to them [1 = "not much value at all," and 7 = "a lot of value"], how much they expected to learn from this GMAT course [1 = "learn nothing at all," and 7 = "learn a lot"], and how satisfied they would be with the course [1 = "not satisfied at all," and 7 = "very satisfied"]). Next, participants rated expected instructor competence using three items ($\alpha = .91$; how experienced the instructor is about helping students get into the school of their choice [1 = "not experienced at all," and 7 = "very experienced"], how knowledgeable about the GMAT the instructor is [1 = "not knowledgeable at all," and 7 = "very knowledgeable"], and how qualified the instructor is about helping students succeed on the GMAT [1 = "not qualified at all," and 7 = "very qualified"]). Participants were then told that they would watch a short video by the head instructor of DominateTheGMAT.com, offering tips about the exam, later in the research session. As a filler task between the initial exposure to the service information and the service encounter, all participants took part in an unrelated survey about food consumption that lasted approximately six minutes.

After watching the video, participants rated their experienced service value and instructor competence using the same items described previously, with only minor wording differences to reflect changes in verb tenses (value: $\alpha = .91$; competence: $\alpha = .92$). At the end, participants reported whether they had heard of DominateTheGMAT.com and the GMAT, and how likely they were to apply to graduate school after completing their undergraduate degree (1 = "very unlikely," and 7 = "very likely").

**Results**

Seventy-eight percent of the participants reported having heard of the GMAT before, but only one participant had heard of the target online GMAT course. Approximately half the participants indicated interest in applying to graduate school in the future (cumulative percentage at the scale midpoint or above = 50.6%).

**Within-subject analyses.** We conducted a 2 (fluency: low vs. high) $\times$ 2 (consumption: stage before vs. after) repeated measures ANOVA on perceived service value and instructor competence. The goal was to examine how service valuations changed for each participant before and after a service...
encounter following the initial disfluent versus fluent information. Figure 2 presents the means across conditions.

Consistent with H₅, a 2 x 2 repeated measures ANOVA on ratings of service value indicated only a fluency by consumption stage interaction (F(1, 42) = 7.07, p < .05). When presented with the initial disfluent (vs. fluent) service description, participants reported a greater decrease in their value perceptions after the service experience. Experienced service value was lower than expected in the disfluent condition (Mexpected = 4.90, SD = 1.25; MeXperienced = 4.17, SD = 1.55; F(1, 18) = 5.41, p < .05), whereas it remained constant in the fluent condition (Mexpected = 4.10, SD = 1.03; MeXperienced = 4.27, SD = 1.12; F(1, 24) = .96, p > .33).

Figure 2

PERCEIVED SERVICE VALUE AS A FUNCTION OF CONSUMPTION STAGE AND PROCESSING FLUENCY (STUDY 4)

A: Within-Subject Manipulation of Consumption Stage

B: Between-Subjects Manipulation of Consumption Stage

Notes: Error bars indicate standard error.

Similarly, a 2 x 2 repeated measures ANOVA on competence ratings showed a main effect of consumption stage, indicating that, overall, expected competence ratings were higher than experienced competence ratings (Mexpected = 5.50, SD = 1.15; MeXperienced = 5.14, SD = 1.27; F(1, 42) = 7.43, p < .01). More important, as we predicted, there was a significant fluency by consumption stage interaction (F(1, 42) = 6.89, p < .05). In the disfluent condition, participants reported that the instructor’s competence was lower than they had expected (Mexpected = 5.95, SD = .91; MeXperienced = 5.25, SD = 1.39; F(1, 18) = 9.25, p < .01), whereas it matched their expectations in the fluent condition (Mexpected = 5.05, SD = 1.18; MeXperienced = 5.04, SD = 1.19; F(1, 24) = .01, p > .92).

Between-subjects analyses: A limitation of the within-subject analysis is that asking participants to report their expectations explicitly during the research session may increase their desire to appear consistent, contributing to a consistency bias. Therefore, we also compared ratings of expected and experienced value between-subjects, examining differences between those who reported their expectations before watching the video with those who reported value and competence perceptions only after watching the video (without explicitly reporting expectations during the experiment). Figure 2 displays means across conditions.

A 2 (fluency: high vs. low) x 2 (consumption stage: before vs. after) ANOVA on ratings of service value revealed only a significant fluency by consumption stage interaction (F(1, 81) = 10.37, p < .01). Consistent with H₁, before watching the video, participants perceived greater value when presented with the disfluent versus fluent service description (Mlow fluency = 4.90, SD = 1.25; Mhigh fluency = 4.10, SD = 1.03; F(1, 42) = 5.35, p < .05). In contrast, after watching the video, the pattern reversed, as H₅ predicted. Those initially presented with the disfluent description reported significantly lower perceived value than those presented with the fluent service description (Mlow fluency = 3.77, SD = 1.18; Mhigh fluency = 4.66, SD = 1.18; F(1, 39) = 5.02, p < .05).

We recorded whether participants actually watched the video in its entirety or stopped it before the three-minute mark. We submitted a binary measure of video watching time (ended earlier/did not end earlier) to a logistic regression with processing fluency (high vs. low), a dummy variable reflecting measurement of expectations (ratings given before and after the video vs. ratings given only after video), and the two-way interaction as predictors. There was a significant fluency by expectation measures interaction (Wald statistic (1) = 4.18, p < .05). When participants did not disclose expectations before watching the video, those exposed to the disfluent information were significantly more likely to end the video earlier than those exposed to the fluent information (Mlow fluency = 40.9% vs. Mhigh fluency = 5.3% Wald statistic (1) = 5.12, p < .05). However, reporting expectations before watching the video attenuated this effect, possibly due to a desire for consistency (Mlow fluency = 15.8%, Mhigh fluency = 20.0%; Wald statistic (1) = .13, p > .72). No other effects were significant (ps > .11).

Finally, we ran a 2 (fluency: high vs. low) x 2 (consumption stage: before vs. after) ANOVA on instructor competence ratings. As expected, we found only a significant fluency x consumption interaction effect (F(1, 81) = 9.89, p < .01). In support of our previous findings, before watching the video, participants given the disfluent service information
expected the GMAT instructor to be significantly more competent than those given the fluent information (M\text{low fluency} = 5.95, SD = .91; M\text{high fluency} = 5.05, SD = 1.18; F(1, 42) = 7.52, p < .01). However, after watching the video, the pattern reversed: those initially given the disfluent information perceived the instructor as being marginally less competent than those given the fluent information (M\text{low fluency} = 5.03, SD = 1.05; M\text{high fluency} = 5.54, SD = .88; F(1, 39) = 2.84, p = .10).

Discussion

Taken together, the Study 4 results suggest that the positive effect of disfluency on competence is mitigated, and may even backfire, on measures of perceived value collected after a consumption experience. Consumers who received a disfluent description of a GMAT online course expected a more competent instructor and predicted higher value from the service than those who received a fluent description. However, after a service encounter of identical quality, those who initially received the disfluent (vs. fluent) information reported lower experienced value than those presented with the initial fluent service description. Overall, these findings reveal another boundary condition of the positive effects of disfluency, suggesting that the experience of metacognitive effort immediately before a consumption experience may heighten consumers’ expectations and increase the likelihood of negative disconfirmation.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Our research provides initial evidence of a cognitive-based mechanism that can account for positive effects of disfluency on consumers’ judgments of value. Our findings provide three specific contributions to previous research on processing fluency. First, we show that disfluency can increase expectations of service value by boosting perceptions of agent competence. When consumers read information about a target service, processing difficulty serves as a signal of the skills required to execute the target activity, highlighting the agent’s utility. Second, we examine conditions that moderate the strength of the disfluency–competence link. Our results show that the competence-enhancing effect of disfluency is mitigated under factors that reduce reliance on subjective effort during the evaluation process, such as the presence of cues challenging the agent’s competence and consumers’ sense of powerlessness. Specifically, we found significant attenuation (1) when specific agent-related traits triggered negative competence stereotypes and (2) when consumers were primed with the concept of lacking power. Last, we explore whether disfluency affects consumers’ value perceptions after a consumption experience. Study 4 suggests that, holding service performance constant, disfluency interventions may lower postconsumption evaluations, presumably by increasing the comparison standard used to evaluate service outcomes. Our findings were reliable across attitudinal and behavioral measures, different service contexts, and various manipulations of disfluency.

Theoretical Implications

Overall, our research builds on previous work linking subjective effort with inferred utility (e.g., Labroo and Kim 2009; Pochepstova, Labroo, and Dhar 2010; Schrift, Netzer, and Kivetz 2011) by specifying another domain and a unique mechanism whereby subjective effort affects judgments of value. Specifically, our work extends research by Song and Schwarz (2008), who demonstrate that the experience of processing difficulty can hinder behavioral change by increasing perceptions of the effort involved in performing a target task. Our results show that in agency relationships, these attributions of task effort can actually promote behavioral change. When consumers enter service relationships, they are outsourcing tasks they are unable or unwilling to perform themselves; therefore, accentuating perceptions of task effort provides a positive signal of agent competence and value.

Our findings contribute to several streams of research. We extend the literature on positive effects of disfluency by testing a new path whereby disfluency can enhance the appeal of people such as agents in service domains. Labroo and Kim (2009) show that when products are means to fulfill accessible goals (primed before the evaluation task), disfluency enhances product evaluations because the product is viewed as more instrumental in accomplishing that goal (i.e., instrumentality heuristic). In the absence of any goal priming, they find that processing fluency improves evaluations. We extend these findings in several ways. In the domain of service relationships, our results reveal that processing difficulty can lead to a positive instrumentality effect in the absence of any goal priming, suggesting that the consideration of the agent’s value automatically triggers exchange goals. In addition, we show that consumers make specific individual trait ascriptions (e.g., expert, skilled) and that these inferences about the agent’s distinguishing qualities account for the positive effect of disfluency. Importantly, our studies also highlight potential moderators for Labroo and Kim’s (2009) as well as Pochepstova, Labroo, and Dhar’s (2010) findings, indicating that stereotypes, consumers’ sense of low power, and consumption stage can mitigate the positive effects of disfluency on value judgments.

Our research also contributes to the literature on states of power. Rucker, Galinsky, and Dubois (2012) propose that states of high power foster an agentic orientation (i.e., a focus on self-expansion, self-assertion, and self-protection), whereas states of low power foster a communal orientation (i.e., a tendency to consider others in thinking and decision making). Initial empirical evidence supports this hypothesis in consumer domains. For example, Rucker and Galinsky (2009) show that high-power consumers place greater weight on product performance (which directly benefits the self), and low-power consumers place greater weight on status (i.e., esteem in the eyes of others). Our work offers additional evidence in support of the agentic disposition of high-power states by showing that high (vs. low) power increases the likelihood that people extract competence-related information (i.e., an agentic trait) from ambiguous cues, such as subjective effort. Furthermore, using a different manipulation of subjective experience (i.e., through processing fluency), we replicate previous work showing that powerful people are more influenced by subjective experiences than powerless people (Guinote 2007, 2010; Weick and Guinote 2008). It is important to note that although Study 3 did not include measures of abstract thinking, it is plausible that abstract thinking mediated this effect. Smith and Trope (2006) show that greater independence from others leads high-power people to feel distinct and psychologically distant from other people, processing information more
abstractly. This research demonstrates that power holders tend to focus on primary or central aspects of information about an event or object. Therefore, participants in our high-power condition in Study 3 may have adopted a more distal perspective and engaged in more abstract thinking than those in the low-power condition. Abstract thinking, in turn, can augment or attenuate fluency effects depending on whether processing fluency is considered primary or secondary information. Tsai and Thomas (2001) show that abstract (vs. concrete) thinking attenuates the effect of processing fluency when consumers are focused on message content, but it actually heightens the effect of processing fluency when consumers are focused on their instinctive feelings. Given that high- (vs. low-) power people tend to be more focused on their feelings, it is possible that participants primed with high power engaged in more abstract thinking, which in turn increased the relevance of subjective experiences as a signal of value.

Extensions and Practical Implications

Our findings suggest several avenues for further research on the link between disfluency and value perceptions. For example, audience captivity is an important moderator that we did not explore in our studies. A higher level of information fluency may be more effective to increase the likelihood that consumers attend to a target message. The benefits of disfluency may emerge only when the audience is captive; therefore, marketers should carefully consider the timing of fluency interventions. An initial level of consumer interest in the target service may be an important requirement to observe positive disfluency effects. Likewise, practitioners should be aware that disfluency interventions may increase expectations about service value; therefore, such interventions will only be effective if the service experience matches consumers' value expectations.

Additional potential moderators of the disfluency-competence effect are the salience of text authorship and the level of processing disfluency. For example, Oppenheimer (2006) shows that lowering the fluency of graduate admission essays, dissertation abstracts, and translations of philosophical essays decreased perceptions of the author's intelligence. One difference that may account for this different pattern is that in those studies, disfluency was produced by the authors' own text. In contrast, in our research, the agent is not presumably the creator of the text, and the disfluent information was only moderately difficult to process. At higher levels of disfluency, readers may be more likely to blame the agent for the processing difficulty, mitigating the competence effect.

An additional consideration is whether making only information about the agent (but not the service) disfluent could attenuate our findings. Our studies suggest that the disfluency-competence link requires the task being performed by the agent to be perceived as more difficult to execute. In marketing contexts, agent and task descriptions are typically intertwined, and we expect that disfluent agent information would increase perceived task effort as long as consumers are processing information about agent and task simultaneously. Nonetheless, this is an empirical question that awaits investigation.

Furthermore, our findings suggest that stereotypes are likely to play an important role in the way disfluency shapes perceptions of competence and value. Aaker, Vohs, and Mogilner (2010) show that nonprofit and for-profit organizations are associated with distinct reputations that influence consumers' reactions. Nonprofits are viewed as warm but less competent; thus consumers are more willing to buy a product when they view it as being made by a for-profit than by a nonprofit organization. Their findings demonstrate that cues boosting nonprofits' perceived competence attenuate these stereotypes. A worthwhile extension of our findings would be examining the extent to which disfluency provides an effective competence cue for nonprofit organizations. The results from Study 2 suggest that given the naïve theory that nonprofits lack competence, increasing subjective effort would be ineffective in those contexts.

Previous research has demonstrated that in the context of service relationships, consumers are influenced by perceptions of employee effort and use a variety of cues to infer exerted effort, such as time spent with the customer, level of enthusiasm, and attentiveness (Mohr and Bitner 1995). Our work suggests that companies can use the experience of processing difficulty as a tool to enhance perceptions of employee effort. However, even though previous research shows that disfluency can affect processing strategies and behavior in the real world (Diemand-Yauman, Oppenheimer, and Vaughan 2011), further research is needed to examine the extent to which disfluency can enhance perceptions of agent effort and competence in naturalistic settings.

Recently, there have been several examples of companies that purposefully increase the amount of effort consumers need to exert as a strategy to boost product interest. For example, midnight releases of products such as video games, movies, and shoes make consumers wait for hours in front of a store (Brown and Patterson 2010). In the services domain, our research suggests that requiring consumers to exert more effort to process information can indeed be beneficial, particularly when the production and delivery of a service are separable and employee effort is removed from a customer's experience. For example, professional service encounters (e.g., those performed by consultants) tend to be ritualistic, with several stages marking the key moments in the relationship, such as sales pitches, introductions of staff at the beginning of an engagement, status reports, conference calls, and face-to-face presentations (Chase and Dasu 2001). Font manipulations (e.g., typeface, size, contrast) and variations in vocabulary and sentence complexity (e.g., sentence and word length, language conventionality and clarity) can be embedded in these written and oral communications to enhance perceptions of exerted effort and technical competence. Although consultants should certainly not overcomplicate their offerings, slightly increasing the vocabulary complexity used in descriptions of job titles and staff credentials as well as in descriptions of the process behind the generation of a particular deliverable may amplify perceptions of a project value. Moreover, in computer-mediated services, firms frequently design online interfaces that provide a running tally of the tasks being undertaken to demonstrate the "sweat" that the technology is exerting and create the illusion of labor being performed on consumers' behalf (Buell and Norton 2011). Our work suggests that making the information presented in these "waiting screens" more challenging to process could further enhance the labor illusion effect.
When Disfluency Signals Competence

In retail settings, subtle manipulations of processing difficulty might already be successfully at work. Dim lights, difficult-to-read menu fonts, and long and convoluted dish names are frequently used in fine dining restaurants. Bars and gyms finely tune their sound systems to increase background noise and influence consumer behavior, sometimes using noise levels that are dangerously high (Buckley 2012). Calibration is certainly an important practical issue, and further research is needed to investigate the optimal levels of disfluency in real-life settings. As Diemand-Yauman, Oppenheimer, and Vaughan (2011) note, disfluency effects are likely to follow an inverted U curve, and the exact parameters of this function remain to be determined.

APPENDIX: GRADUATE SCHOOL COACHING

SERVICE DESCRIPTION: STUDY!

Course Advisor

Applying for graduate schools can feel overwhelming—learning how to locate and evaluate graduate programs, preparing your applications and writing admission essays, contacting schools and potential advisors, getting letters of recommendation, ordering all the transcripts and GREs. Yikes!

Well, the founders of Course Advisor have been on the other end of it. They have served as chairs of graduate admissions for top business and law schools in the U.S. They have read through hundreds of applications and over the years have found clear regularities that are present in the credentials of successful applicants. Since trying to find out all of this information can be very challenging for prospective graduate students, they developed Course Advisor to help you.

Course Advisor is a website that works as an online portal with many useful sources of information for the various tasks involved in applying to MBA programs and law school, helping you evaluate different schools, assemble application materials, prepare for interviews, and much more.

Best of luck finding the right graduate school home for you! Come visit us at Courseadvisor.com.

REFERENCES


