



MASTERARBEIT | MASTER'S THESIS

Titel | Title

The Effect of Non-Standard Accents in Service Encounters: The Role of
Consumer Animosity and Institutional Prestige

verfasst von | submitted by

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angestrebter akademischer Grad | in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science (MSc)

Wien | Vienna, 2026

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt |
Degree programme code as it appears on the
student record sheet:

UA 066 914

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt | Degree
programme as it appears on the student
record sheet:

Masterstudium Internationale Betriebswirtschaft

Betreut von | Supervisor:

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Abstract

This study examines how foreign accents in service encounters influence customer evaluations and whether these effects depend on situational and psychological factors, namely institutional prestige and consumer animosity. While prior research has documented negative accent effects in service encounters, less attention has been paid to the conditions under which these effects vary. To address this gap, the study was conducted using an AI-generated audio stimulus and a framing manipulation of institutional prestige, while consumer animosity was measured at the individual level. A total of 214 responses from native German speakers were collected in an online experiment. The analysis included ANCOVAs which revealed that a service employee speaking with an American accent was not rated differently from a service employee speaking with a Standard German accent based on the accent alone. However, consumer animosity significantly moderated the accent effect, such that more negative evaluations of the American-accented employee emerged at higher levels of consumer animosity, whereas no differences were observed at lower levels. Institutional prestige did not show a significant moderating effect. Overall, the study contributes to a more differentiated understanding of accent effects by demonstrating that their impact varies across individuals rather than being universally applied.

German Abstract

Diese Studie untersucht, wie fremdsprachige Akzente in Serviceinteraktionen die Kundenbewertung beeinflussen und inwiefern diese Effekte durch einen situativen Faktor, nämlich institutionelles Prestige, sowie einen psychologischen Faktor, Consumer Animosity, bedingt werden. Während bisherige Forschung negative Akzenteffekte in Servicekontexten dokumentiert hat, wurden die Bedingungen, unter denen diese Effekte variieren, bislang weniger berücksichtigt. Um diese Forschungslücke zu schließen, wurde die Studie mithilfe eines KI-generierten Audio-Stimulus und einer Framing-Manipulation des institutionellen Prestiges durchgeführt, während Consumer Animosity auf individueller Ebene gemessen wurde. Insgesamt wurden 214 Antworten von deutschsprachigen MuttersprachlerInnen im Rahmen eines Online-Experiments erhoben. Die Analyse umfasste ANCOVAs, die zeigten, dass ein Servicemitarbeiter mit US-amerikanischem Akzent allein aufgrund des Akzents nicht anders bewertet wurde als ein Servicemitarbeiter mit standarddeutschem Akzent. Allerdings moderierte Consumer Animosity den Akzenteffekt signifikant. Bei hoher Consumer Animosity wurde der Mitarbeiter mit amerikanischem Akzent negativer bewertet, während bei niedriger Consumer Animosity keine Unterschiede festgestellt wurden. Für das institutionelle Prestige zeigte sich hingegen kein signifikanter Moderationseffekt. Insgesamt trägt die Studie zu einem differenzierteren Verständnis von Akzenteffekten bei, indem sie zeigt, dass deren Wirkung zwischen Individuen variiert und nicht universell auftritt.

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List of Abbreviations

ANCOVA	Analysis of Covariance
EU	European Union
EMN	European Migration Network
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SCM	Stereotype Content Model
SIT	Social Identity Theory
UN	United Nations
USA	United States of America

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1 INTRODUCTION

Services are one of the largest sectors of modern economies, accounting for more than two-thirds of global GDP and employment in many advanced economies (World Bank, 2024). The success of a service, however, does not solely depend on the technical quality of the offering. In service encounters, the impression of the service employee is essential, as they play a major role in shaping the overall service experience (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000; Sirianni et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2013). Prior research has consistently shown that observable characteristics of service employees such as appearance, ethnicity, and speech influence these evaluations (Azab & Clark, 2017; Lippi-Green, 1997; Rakić, 2011). Yet, in the literature, accent has been identified as a particularly salient cue, often more important than ethnicity itself (Azab & Clark, 2017; Rakić, 2011).

Accents function as powerful social categorization cues, enabling customers to infer information about a speaker's ethnicity, regional background, and social class (Lippi-Green, 1997; Wang et al., 2013). However, the impact of an accent is not uniform but rather depends on the specific situational context. In service interactions, accent effects tend to be particularly pronounced (Fuertes et al., 2012). Specifically, studies show that a non-standard accent can be disadvantageous in service encounters and leads to employees being perceived as less intelligent, honest, competent, and professional compared to speakers with a native accent (DeShields & de los Santos, 2000; Fuertes et al., 2012; Hosoda & Stone-Romero, 2010). Importantly, these perceptions are not limited to the individual employee. Instead, customers tend to generalize their perception of the service employee to the entire service experience and to the company itself (Wang et al., 2013). Consequently, negative evaluations of a service employee may translate into tangible economic disadvantages for firms (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000). At the same time, globalization and international mobility have made culturally diverse service encounters the norm rather than an exception (Trask, 2022). Individuals frequently live and work in countries other than those in which they were born (UN DESA, 2022). This trend is further expected to increase in the following years due to economic, political and environmental crises as well as shifting demographics (ILO, 2022; UN DESA, 2022). Under these circumstances, linguistic differences become particularly relevant. Individuals born in another country may perfectly master the language of the host country but are still likely to retain an accent, as accents are typically formed early in life and are difficult to fully suppress later on (Flege, Munro, & MacKay, 1995).

Although past studies have examined the accent effect, comparatively little attention has been paid to factors that may strengthen or attenuate this effect. One such factor is institutional prestige. Organizational prestige signals status and quality and has been shown to positively influence evaluations of individuals, products, and firms (Cargile & Bradac, 2001; Fuertes et al., 2012). It is therefore plausible that it could counteract the accent effect or even neutralize negative accent-based evaluations. Additionally, customers' emotional or political attitudes toward a country associated with a particular accent may further shape responses. This is captured by the concept of consumer animosity, which describes enduring negative feelings toward a foreign country based on political, economic, or historical tensions (Klein et al., 1998). The phenomenon of consumer animosity has been shown to negatively influence evaluations of products and firms from the respective country (Cao et al., 2025; Shoham et al., 2006; Shoham & Gavish, 2016). It is therefore plausible that if the relationship between the customer's home country and the country linked to the accent is politically strained, negative evaluations may be intensified. Against this background, the aim of this study is to shed light on service encounters involving service employees who speak with a non-standard accent and to examine factors that may influence the accent effect. Specifically, the study investigates how contextual and individual-level variables shape customers' evaluations in such encounters. By incorporating both situational and psychological moderators, the study seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of the conditions under which accent effects become stronger or weaker in service encounters. To address this objective, an online experiment was conducted. The thesis is structured into three main parts. First, the relevant literature is reviewed to establish the theoretical foundation of the study. Second, the experimental design and methodology are presented. Finally, the empirical results are reported and discussed considering the existing literature.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The following section reviews the key concepts and literature that are relevant for the analysis of the study. It first outlines the broader context of service encounters and immigration, followed by a review of foreign accent perception within these contexts, which form the theoretical foundation for the analysis.

2.1 Service Encounters

2.1.1 Definition

Surprenant and Solomon (1987) define a service encounter as “*the dyadic interaction between a customer and a service provider*” (p. 87), with customer satisfaction as a critical determinant of the interaction. In personal service encounters, the service provider essentially represents the service itself. Consequently, small variations in service delivery affect the evaluation of the service provider, perceptions of the institution they represent, and overall customer satisfaction (Sarpong, 2016; Surprenant & Solomon, 1987). Shostack (1985) defines a service encounter as “*a period of time during which a consumer directly interacts with a service*” (p. 243), and Vargo and Lusch (2004) offer a similar definition by saying “*the process of doing things in interaction with the customer*” (p. 28). These definitions highlight interaction as a central role to service delivery. In management literature, the service encounter is often labeled as “*the moment of truth*” (Sarpong, 2016), referring to the idea that this interaction forms how the customer will evaluate a business. It is the point at which a potential customer becomes an actual one, and a key factor influencing whether they will return in the future. Sarpong (2016) further emphasizes that it represents the primary source of information from which customers draw conclusions about service quality.

2.1.2 The Role of Service Employees in Value Creation

Service employees play a central role in service encounters, as they represent the primary point of contact between an organization and its customers. As boundary-spanners between the internal organization and the external market, service employees directly influence how the firm is perceived by customers (Sirianni et al., 2013). In many service settings, they can be considered the “*living brand*” and act as representatives of the firm, embodying the organization’s values, standards, and brand image during customer interactions (Sirianni et al., 2013). Particularly when customers are unfamiliar with a brand, frontline employees can act as interpreters who help customers to understand and evaluate the firm through the service

interaction. Their behavior during these interactions can significantly influence the overall brand evaluation. Prior research suggests that the interpersonal aspects of service delivery are as important as the actual service outcome itself (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000). Unlike goods-based exchanges, services are characterized by simultaneity and interaction, meaning that production and consumption occur at the same time. As a result, customers evaluate not only the functional outcome of a service but also the manner in which it is delivered. Interpersonal interaction therefore becomes a central element of the service experience. Gremler and Gwinner (2000) emphasize the relationship between the customer and the service employee and argue that satisfaction with an individual employee significantly influences satisfaction with the overall service. Specifically, their results indicate that enjoyable interactions between customers and service employees lead to higher customer satisfaction, increased word-of-mouth communication, and stronger loyalty intentions. Moreover, when interactions are sufficiently positive such that customers feel a personal connection with the service employee, they primarily influence customers' willingness to engage in positive word-of-mouth (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000). These findings demonstrate that service employees are not only operational actors but also play a strategic role in shaping the firm's economic performance. This view is also reflected in the work of Vargo and Lusch (2004), who emphasize the service-dominant logic, which posits that value is not embedded in products but is co-created through service as interaction between firms and customers. From this perspective, value arises not from the product itself as traditionally assumed, but from interactions between customers and firms, and from applying knowledge and skills for the benefit of others. Overall, this approach emphasizes that service interactions are often underestimated, yet are becoming increasingly important. Thus, service employees occupy an important position in the value creation process, as customer perceptions are formed during interpersonal interactions. In most developed economies, services account for more than two-thirds of GDP (World Bank, 2024), underscoring the macroeconomic relevance of service interactions. Given this importance, the factors that shape customer perceptions in service encounters become particularly relevant.

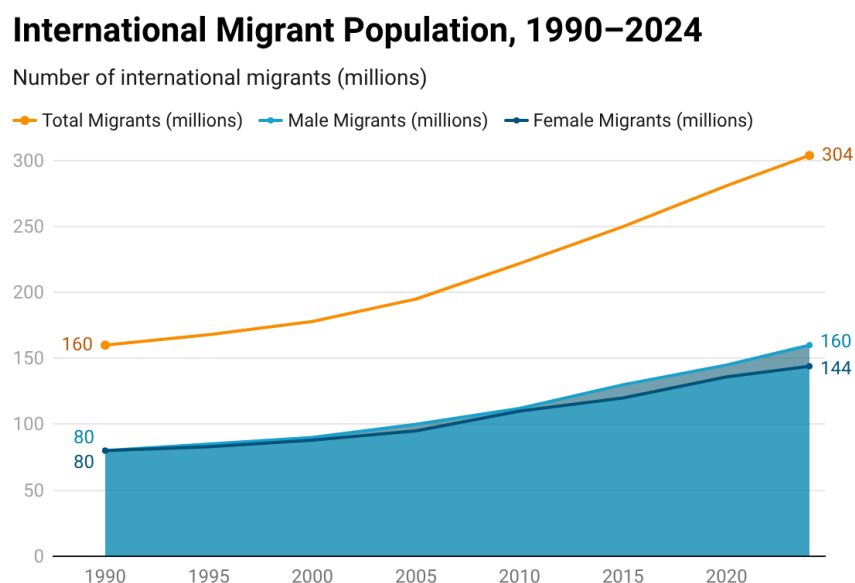
2.2 Immigration Data and Facts

The following section provides an overview of immigration and demographic developments relevant to the context of this study.

2.2.1 Definition and Key Indicators

The United Nations defines an international migrant as “*any person who has changed his or her country of residence. This includes all migrants, regardless of their legal status, or the nature, or motive of their movement*” (United Nations, n.d.). Building on this definition, migration can occur for numerous reasons. Most people migrate for work or economic opportunity or for uniting with their families, while others are forced to migrate to escape conflicts or large-scale human rights violations (Trask, 2022). Migration may also occur due to their home being destroyed by natural disasters, climate change or related environmental factors (Trask, 2022). Today, more people than ever live in a country they are not born in. As shown in Figure 1, the global number of international migrants has steadily increased over time. According to the Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, more than 304 million people were migrants in 2024, a number that doubled since 1990 (United Nations, n.d.). Notably, the absolute number of migrants increased by 11% between 2020 and 2024 and is expected to grow further in the coming years due to economic, political and environmental crises, as well as shifting demographics, which will particularly affect labour migrants (ILO, 2022; Trask, 2022).

Figure 1: International migrant population worldwide, 1990–2024



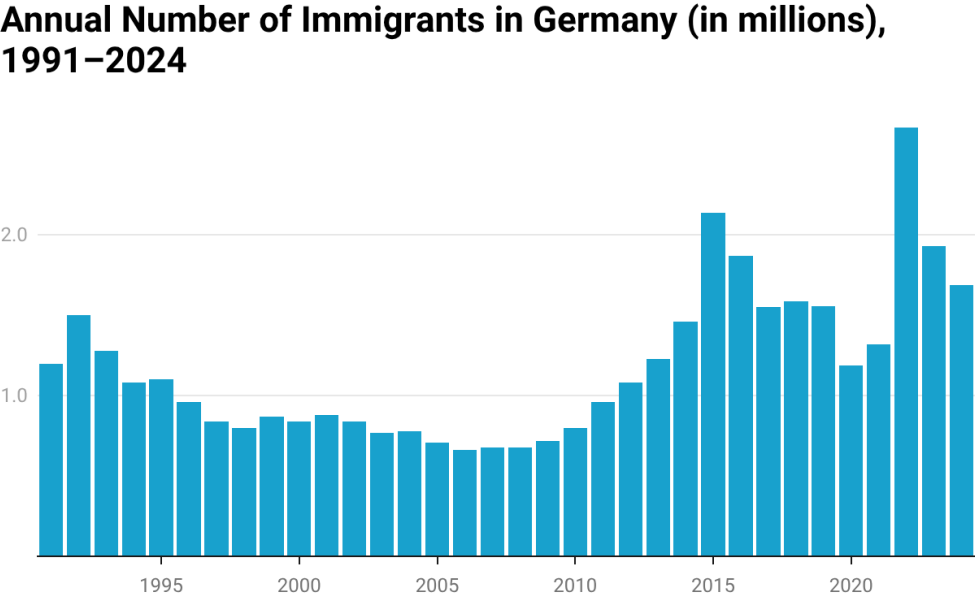
Note. Own illustration based on data from United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA, 2025).

Among all world regions, Europe hosted by far the largest number of international migrants, with 94 million in 2024, representing an increase of 43 million between 1990 and 2024 (UN DESA, 2025). This sharp increase is partly driven by the globalization of the labour market and the removal of barriers to the movement of the global workforce which have facilitated the employment of a large number of immigrant employees (UN DESA, 2022; Trask, 2022). In 2022, 66% of international migrants of working age (15 and over) were migrant workers, moving in other countries for employment, indicating that work-related motives are among the key drivers to move across national borders (ILO, 2024). Migrant workers play an increasingly important role in host countries, particularly in response to skill shortages and ageing populations, making them essential to meeting labour demands in these countries (Woetzel et al., 2016). Their labour further benefits host countries by fostering innovation and contributing to economic growth (Woetzel et al., 2016). In light of the benefits for both migrants and host countries, international labour migration has become increasingly common, making moving across borders for work a normalized phenomenon (UN DESA, 2022; Trask, 2022).

2.2.2 *Immigration and Labour Migration in Austria and Germany*

As two economically and politically stable central European countries, Germany and Austria attract a significant influx of international migrants. Immigration is an important factor in shaping the demographic landscape of both countries (OECD, 2025; Statista Research Department, 2025). In Germany, over 21 million out of 83.5 million inhabitants have an immigrant history, which is an all-time high (OECD, 2025). Moreover, the average level of immigration to Germany per year has increased over time. In 2024, approximately 1.7 million people immigrated to Germany. While immigration levels have fluctuated in response to major global events, such as the European refugee crisis (2015), the COVID-19 pandemic (2020), and the Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022), the overall trend indicates sustained high levels of immigration as illustrated in Figure 2 (Statista Research Department, 2025).

Figure 2: Annual numbers of immigrants in Germany, 1991-2024



Note. Own illustration based on data from Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis).

A similar trend can be observed in Austria, which has also recorded substantial immigration. In 2023, approximately 2.5 million inhabitants had a migration background, representing 28% of the population (Statistik Austria, 2024). Against this background, both Germany and Austria represent advanced countries with robust labour markets and a high demand for workers. Nevertheless, both countries belong to those facing significant skill shortages across many

industries (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024; EMN & OECD, 2025), which increases their reliance on the immigration of foreign workers in order to maintain their economic status quo. Otherwise, the labour market is expected to decline noticeably in the upcoming years (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024; EMN & OECD, 2025). As a result, international migrant workers have become an integral part of the labour markets in Germany and Austria and are expected to play an even greater role in the future.

2.2.3 Public Attitudes and Political Climate on Immigration

Public attitudes concerning international immigration in Europe are mixed. Henning et al. (2022) find in their study that the largest share of respondents was unsure and did not hold a clear opinion on whether they should support or reject non-conflict migrants, while the second-largest group supports hosting them. However, one-fifth of respondents hold a clearly negative position and prefer to reject migrants even if they are fleeing from conflicts, reflecting divergent public attitudes towards this issue (Henning et al., 2022).

Political orientation has been shown to influence these attitudes. Research indicates that individuals with right-wing political orientations tend to hold more negative attitudes towards immigration (Henning et al., 2022; Indelicato et al., 2023), which is also reflected in the political landscape. Immigration is not only a highly salient political issue in many European countries but is also frequently discussed in public debates. Some recent survey data find that younger generations such as Generation Z and Millennials have stronger anti-immigration attitudes compared to older generations in Europe (Smith, 2025). The Eurobarometer, which is a dataset of international surveys on public opinions, supports this by showing that the negative attitude towards immigrants worsened, especially for younger individuals. For individuals aged between 25 and 34 years, negative feelings towards immigration had risen from 38% to 42% within four years (European Commission, 2019; Smith, 2025).

According to the international opinion research institute YouGov, most Western Europeans believe that immigration has become excessive in recent years, to a point that the respondents believe it has a negative impact on their country. They further blame their government and hold the view that they can't handle the high inflow of immigration (Smith, 2025). According to the survey, the European population feels this issue is so severe that they consider immigration as one of the main issues facing their country. In Germany, 42% even consider it their top issue and number one concern (Smith, 2025). It becomes evident that public attitudes toward international immigration have increasingly deteriorated, and that, for some individuals, it has become a source of concern. In this regard, several factors influence the level of tolerance

toward migrants, including whether they come from a poorer country outside Europe or belong to a different ethnic group (Heath & Richards, 2019). In such cases, levels of tolerance are considerably lower than when migrants originate from culturally and ethnically similar countries. In terms of individual characteristics of migrants, their adherence to the host country's way of life and their ability to speak the host country's language also represent important factors influencing their acceptance among most respondents (Heath & Richards, 2019). However, there is also a substantial group with positive attitudes toward immigration that believes that immigration is necessary for the country (Goubin et al., 2022). Since many countries, particularly across Western Europe, face significant labour shortages, they view immigration as essential for sustaining economic growth and supporting key sectors of the economy (Woetzel et al., 2016). This explains why Western European countries agree that work skills are an important criterion for admitting international migrants (Heath & Richards, 2019). In addition, all European countries show a clear preference for admitting young, highly educated migrants compared to older and less educated migrants (Heath & Richards, 2019). This indicates that countries are far more willing to accept migrants if they contribute to the country's economic stability by participating in the labour market. Taken together, these findings show that public attitudes towards immigration have become increasingly negative, indicating that immigration remains a contested issue in Western Europe. At the same time, attitudes tend to be more tolerant when migrants are perceived as culturally similar, possess host-country language skills, and engage in employment.

2.3 Foreign Accent Perception

The following section introduces the concept of foreign accents and discusses how they are perceived in both social and professional interactions. It also outlines the origins of foreign accents and their relevance in interpersonal communication.

2.3.1 The Nature and Origin of Foreign Accents

Accent is defined as *“a manner of pronunciation with other linguistic levels of analysis (grammatical, syntactical, morphological, and lexical) more or less comparable with the standard language”* (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010, p. 215). In linguistic research, accents are often classified into two main types: standard and non-standard varieties. A standard accent represents a linguistic norm, in other words, the accent that is perceived as “normal” or correct. It is the form of a language that is most widely accepted and understood in a country. It is used in newspapers and broadcasting and is the form normally taught to learners of that language

(Lippi-Green, 1997). This norm emerges through the widespread acceptance of certain pronunciation patterns within a society. Any accent that deviates from this socially accepted norm is described as non-standard (Morales et al., 2012).

Standard accents are often favoured by listeners because they align with prevailing social and cultural norms. As a result, they prefer the sound of a standard accent and even perceive it as more aesthetically pleasing (Morales et al., 2012). However, these accents are not necessarily the most widely spoken forms of language in everyday communication. Instead, many individuals speak regional or non-standard varieties, which may nevertheless be evaluated differently in social contexts (Morales et al., 2012).

An accent is automatically associated with a particular culture or place of origin, yet it is not related to a person's actual ability to speak the host-country language. The exact reasons why foreign accents occur are not fully understood. Several theories suggest that age-related neurological changes may influence the ability to acquire new pronunciation patterns. Specifically, some researchers argue that the brain becomes less flexible in processing new speech sounds after adolescence, which may affect the ability to produce certain vowels and consonants in a second language (Flege, Munro, & MacKay, 1995).

Individuals may live in the host country for many years and master the language perfectly, yet still retain an accent from their country of origin. Losing an accent after beginning to learn a language past the age of 15 is nearly impossible (Flege, Munro, & MacKay, 1995). As a result, individuals may retain a foreign accent even when they speak the language fluently (Flege, Munro, & MacKay, 1995).

2.3.2 Accent-Based Bias, Discrimination, and Their Consequences

People who hear accents are typically able to categorize them in broad terms, for example, identifying a British or Spanish accent, while they are often unable to make more fine-grained distinctions such as distinguishing between Cuban, Costa Rican, or Puerto Rican accents (Podberesky, Deluty, & Feldstein, 1990). However, even if listeners cannot accurately identify an accent, they still tend to project stereotypes onto the speaker (Lindemann, 2003). This suggests that accent perception does not require accurate identification but can nevertheless trigger stereotype-based evaluations. An accent is an indicator that many people use to classify others in terms of ethnicity, regional affiliation, and social class (Lippi-Green, 1994). It functions as an important part of a speaker's identity and carries a considerable amount of social information (Lippi-Green, 1994). Azab and Clark (2017) show that accents serve as a more important cue for social categorization than ethnicity. Other studies such as Rakić et al. (2011)

support the significance of accent as a social indicator, demonstrating that accents are more salient to listeners than visual cues such as skin color and state: *“it was rather irrelevant for participants what targets looked like; it mainly mattered whether they were speaking with an accent or not.”* (p. 24). Studies consistently show that having a foreign accent leads to disadvantages in interpersonal interactions, as nonstandard accents are associated with negative biases, particularly when the accent is recognized and linked to low-prestige minority groups (Fuertes et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2013).

Discrimination toward foreign accents does not apply uniformly to all foreign accents. Hosoda and Stone-Romero (2010) describe a hierarchy of preferences among foreign accents, whereby Spanish, Greek, and various Asian and African accents are judged more negatively than European accents such as French or British (Fuertes et al., 2012; Lippi-Green, 1994). In line with this, evidence in hiring contexts showed that many Anglo-Americans are more tolerant toward people speaking with a European accent than Asian applicants, who are often considered poorer communicators and less effective despite there being no difference in objective performance (Hosoda & Stone-Romero, 2010). This may be explained by the fact that certain European accents are perceived as having equal or even higher status than the dominant social group (Cargile & Bradac, 2001). As a result, they receive more positive ratings on the speakers' education, success, social status, attractiveness, personality and perceived similarity to the listener (Wang et al., 2013). This suggests that some accents are perceived more positively than others, rather than there being a simple ingroup-outgroup mindset.

Nevertheless, although some accents are associated with a positive bias, in some contexts native accents are still preferred the most. Gill (1994) examined how American students perceive teachers with different accents in the USA and compared Standard North American English, British English, and a Malaysian accent. The results showed that although British English is well regarded, it is evaluated less favourably than the more familiar Standard North American English. This demonstrates that even when accents, particularly Western European accents, are evaluated as very positive, they can still be evaluated less favourably than the standard in-group language, which is perceived as accent-free. Some research suggests that this is due to the ethnocentrism of certain individuals, who view people with accents as bringing outside cultural influences into the country, even if the accent is considered to be favourable (Clément et al., 2001; Cobas & Feagin, 2008).

A large body of research demonstrates that individuals with foreign accents face discrimination in many areas, including school, housing, medical care, the legal system, and hiring processes (Fuertes et al., 2012). This is because individuals with accents are often associated with negative stereotypes, being perceived as less intelligent, honest, competent and professional than those without accents (DeShields & de los Santos, 2000; Fuertes et al., 2012; Hosoda & Stone-Romero, 2010). These biases and stereotypes are reinforced by the mass media and consumer-generated content, which contribute to the spread of accent-related clichés and amplify negative evaluations of service employees with foreign accents (Modic, 2007). Consequently, individuals with accents are perceived less favourably and are more likely to experience discrimination on this basis (Fuertes et al., 2012), with these effects becoming more pronounced as accent strength increases (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010).

Such discrimination can have social consequences. Gluszek & Dovidio (2010) refer to the stigma that can arise from speaking with a foreign accent, meaning that individuals thereby hold a social identity that is valued less in a given society. In this regard, the accent serves as a social cue that may activate stereotypical assumptions about the speaker. Due to the accent, people may automatically assume that there is a communication barrier, even though the person with the foreign accent may speak the language well (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010). As a result, individuals may be less willing to interact with someone who speaks with a foreign accent or may even avoid such interactions. Montgomery and Zhang (2018) further show that negative accent stereotypes reduce social attraction, meaning that accented speakers are perceived as less likable. This can lead listeners to experience more uncertainty and discomfort when interacting with someone who speaks with an accent, which is described as “*intergroup communication anxiety*” (Montgomery & Zhang, 2018). Furthermore, individuals who themselves speak with an accent and have previously experienced stigmatization because of it may also avoid situations in which they could be stigmatized and may initiate fewer social interactions (Derwing, 2003). These findings suggest that stereotypes and stigmatization may reduce social interaction from both sides, resulting in lower willingness for friendship, cooperation and collaboration.

Beyond social consequences, accent discrimination may also hinder professional opportunities. While Title VII of the Civil Rights Act prohibits discrimination based on national origin, which may include discrimination based on accent, legal precedents show that employers have sometimes been protected when they argued that an accent interfered with required

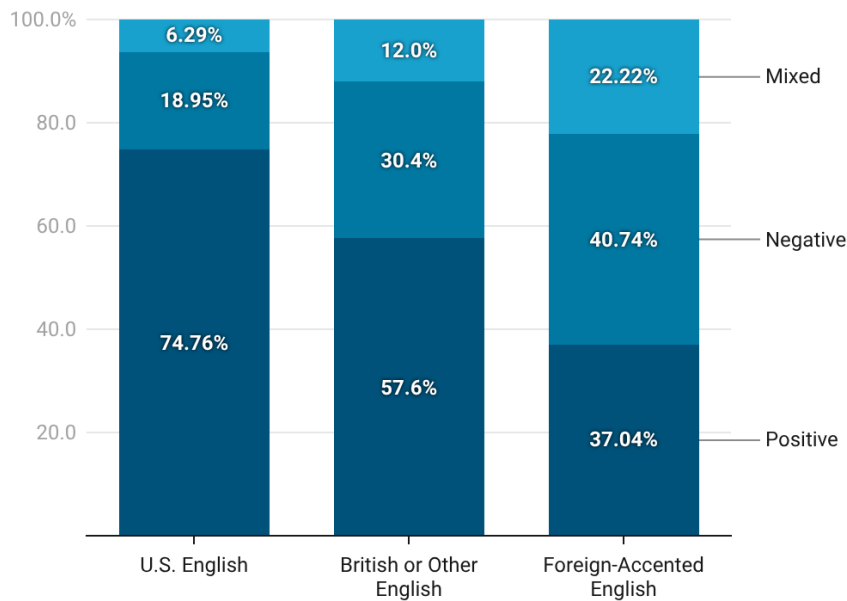
communication skills (Lippi-Green, 1994; Nguyen, 1993). This shows that accent discrimination may not only occur as isolated incidents but can have lasting effects for individuals' professional opportunities.

2.3.3 Accent Socialization and Social Learning

Foreign accents can function as powerful social cues. Research suggests that sensitivity to linguistic cues emerges at a very early age, as infants as young as five months already show preferences for speakers of their native language compared to foreign-language speakers (Kinzler et al., 2007). While these early preferences are based on familiarity of linguistic patterns, the social meaning of accents is shaped by language ideologies that are socially transmitted. Through processes of socialization, individuals learn which accents are considered correct, educated, or associated with higher or lower social status. These beliefs are reinforced through stereotypes that are reproduced in media, such as television and film (Lippi-Green, 1994, 1997). This is particularly relevant during early childhood, a developmental stage in which individuals acquire many of the cognitive and social categories used to interpret the world (Kinzler et al., 2009). Children are systematically exposed to a standard language ideology through linguistic hierarchies presented in entertainment media. Specifically, children between the ages of two and eleven watch approximately 30 hours of television per week (Lippi-Green, 1997). Considering that children actively absorb information from television and use it to form cognitive and social categories, research suggests that even short exposure to television content results in the development of beliefs about language and accents (Lippi-Green, 1997). As the largest producer of animated films, Disney productions constitute a substantial part of this exposure (Lippi-Green, 1997). An analysis of animated Disney films shows that characters speaking with foreign accents are significantly more likely to be portrayed with negative motivations compared to characters speaking without a foreign accent (see Figure 3). In contrast, characters speaking with a standard native accent are more frequently portrayed as protagonists or as having morally positive motivations. Such portrayals may reinforce negative perceptions of foreign-accented speech and contribute to the reproduction of accent-based stereotypes that children are exposed to through television.

Figure 3: Character motivations in animated films by accent

Character Motivations in Animated Films by Accent



Note. Own illustration based on data from Lippi-Green (1997). Percentages represent the distribution of character motivations across accent groups; U.S. English represents the standard accent, as the evaluations were conducted with American participants.

In addition to media representations, language ideologies are also transmitted through institutions such as schools. In educational settings, standard language is often taught as the linguistic norm, while teachers function as authority figures and role models (Lippi-Green, 1997). As a result, children learn at an early age which forms of language are considered correct or educated (Lippi-Green, 1994, 1997). Research has shown that speech patterns can already function as a basis for social categorization in early childhood (Kinzler et al., 2009; Lippi-Green, 1994, 1997). Children are able to distinguish between native and foreign accents at a young age and often use these cues when forming social preferences. In experimental settings, children consistently preferred speakers with a native accent over those with a foreign accent when asked to choose a potential friend (Kinzler et al., 2009). Over time, however, these preferences may become influenced by the social status associated with different accents within a given society. Taken as a whole, these findings indicate that evaluations of accents are socially constructed and shaped by broader cultural norms that individuals begin to internalize during early

childhood. These early processes of socialization influence linguistic perception later in life, as individuals carry these learned evaluations into adulthood.

2.3.4 The Role of Accent in Service Encounters

The effect of an accent varies depending on the setting and context. In formal and high-risk situations, such as employment decisions or sales situations, the accent effect is particularly pronounced (Fuertes et al., 2012). In the service sector, where the job is based on communication, speaking with an accent can shift the entire evaluation of the service, potentially damaging customer loyalty and the company's long-term economic success (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000). Customers tend to prefer service workers whom they perceive as belonging to the same ethnic or social group as themselves, as this increases their sense of trust (Kulik & Holbrook, 2000). However, when customers associate a service employee with a different cultural background based on their accent, this can influence how the employee is perceived, resulting in negative attitudes driven solely by the accent (Wang et al., 2013). Consequently, the employee's perceived competence, professionalism, or even friendliness may be called into question (Wang et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2008). Previous studies have shown that this can reduce customer satisfaction. One such study is that of Tsalikis et al. (1991), who examined salespeople speaking with either a standard American accent or a Greek accent in English in the USA. From an ingroup-outgroup perspective, the standard American accent represents the linguistic ingroup, whereas the Greek accent serves as an outgroup cue. They found that sales intention was much higher for the speaker with the American accent. In addition, the salesperson with the heaviest Greek accent received a significantly worse evaluation. Another study examining the effect of nonstandard accents compared native Australian English with foreign-accented English and found that the impact of accent depends on the type and criticality of the service (Rao Hill & Tombs, 2011). The results showed that a nonstandard accent tends to reduce both customer satisfaction and purchase intention. The difference in purchase intention was larger in experience services, while the negative effect on customer satisfaction was particularly pronounced in services with high criticality (Rao Hill & Tombs, 2011). These findings suggest that customers rely more strongly on accent cues when the service situation involves higher uncertainty or greater consequences.

A common context in which accent effects have been widely studied is call centres in customer service. In many industries, service interactions are increasingly handled by employees located in other, often low-cost countries to reduce costs. Several studies have shown that outsourcing

can lead to negative customer reactions, partly due to the accent of a service employee (Bharadwaj & Roggeveen, 2008; Wang et al., 2013). In some cases, companies have even been forced to shut down their offshored service activities due to high levels of customer dissatisfaction when being connected with service employees located abroad (Wang et al., 2013). Bharadwaj and Roggeveen (2008) examined customers' perceptions of call center interactions and found that a call center employee's communication skills and ability to solve problems are rated more positively when the service employee is located in the same country as the customer. Additionally, customers reported higher satisfaction with problem solving when the call center was offshore, so owned by the company rather than outsourced to another firm. Wang et al. (2013) examine a more specific aspect of service encounters by investigating how customers evaluate accented service employees in the context of service failures. The authors argue that customers often suppress accent-based biases toward service employees. Their findings support this assumption and show that accents associated with negative stereotypes, such as Indian-accented English, are evaluated more negatively, particularly when the service outcome is unfavorable. The authors suggest that in such situations customers may feel justified in having pre-existing prejudices toward negatively stereotyped accents (Wang et al., 2013). Taken together, these studies suggest that service encounters involving foreign locations or accented employees are systematically disadvantaged in customer evaluations. Customers often project impressions of the service employee onto the entire service experience (and the company as a whole), which in the worst case can lead to dissatisfaction and sometimes even irritation (Wang et al., 2013). Furthermore, the presence of a foreign accent decreases processing fluency and makes communication more difficult, either because customers have trouble understanding the employee or because they assume that they themselves will not be understood (Rao Hill & Tombs, 2011). This, in turn, is another factor that can contribute to lower consumer satisfaction (Rao Hill & Tombs, 2011).

As shown in the previous studies, employees with an accent, especially an unfavourable one, are viewed less positively in service occupations. However, in a few contexts, a negatively biased accent can elicit positive ratings. Rao Hill and Tombs (2011) found that when there is a cultural fit between the ethnicity of the service employee and the service provided, such as an employee with a Chinese accent at a Chinese language school, the accent is perceived as an indication of the provider's skills and expertise. This increases perceived credibility, leading to a more positive evaluation of the service (Rao Hill & Tombs, 2011). Nonetheless, this only

applies to a limited number of occupations and should be regarded as an exception to most service jobs.

2.4 Social Evaluation in Service Encounters

2.4.1 Warmth and Competence as Core Evaluations

The Stereotype Content Model (SCM) is the model most frequently used in the context of stereotypes and has been widely and empirically applied since the early 2000s (Cortes, 2024). It was developed by Fiske et al. (2002) to explain perceptions of social groups, but has since been applied to judgments of individuals, brands and organizations and helps explain how people evaluate them along two main dimensions: competence and warmth (Aaker et al., 2012; Kervyn et al., 2015). Competence refers to the perception of someone's ability and capability, including attributes like efficiency, intelligence, skill, and conscientiousness. In contrast, warmth relates to perceived intentions toward others and includes characteristics such as friendliness, helpfulness, sincerity, and trustworthiness (Fiske et al., 2007). The SCM suggests that these two dimensions serve as a basic framework through which people interpret social information and evaluate others. Research has shown that warmth and competence are used in a wide range of social contexts, for example in racial prejudice, gender subgroups, national stereotypes, and in the perception of individual people (Fiske et al., 2002). Since social interactions include uncertainty, individuals automatically rely on these two dimensions to make sense of social situations. Stereotypical inferences serve as mental shortcuts help listeners to quickly evaluate speakers along two key dimensions of social perception such as their ability to achieve a goal (competence) or their intentions toward others (warmth) (Fiske et al., 2007). Individuals naturally ask themselves two questions that match these dimensions when encountering a social group or individual. The first concerns warmth: *What does this group want and what are their intentions?* The second relates to competence and concerns capability: *Are they capable of pursuing or carrying out these intentions?* (Fiske et al., 2007).

When foreign-accented service employees speak with an accent, they are often placed into certain outgroups, meaning they are seen as part of the country or cultural background their accent is associated with. As a result, group-based stereotypes get activated and used to evaluate them. Fiske et al. (2018) argued that individuals prioritize the warmth dimension and first try to assess other people's intentions before assessing their competence. This is because people first seek to determine whether others represent a potential benefit or threat before considering whether they are capable of acting on these intentions. As a result, perceptions of warmth often

play a more immediate role in social evaluations than perceptions of competence. According to the SCM, social groups can be categorized into four different clusters, each of which is associated with specific stereotype patterns (Fiske et al., 2002):

Table 1: Warmth and competence dimensions

The Stereotype Content Model: Warmth and Competence Dimensions

Warmth / Competence	High Competence	Low Competence
High Warmth	Admiration (in-group, close allies, middle class)	Paternalistic stereotypes (elderly, disabled people, children)
Low Warmth	Envious stereotypes (rich people, Jews, Asians)	Contemptuous stereotypes (welfare recipients, poor people, immigrants)

Note. Own illustration based on data from Fiske et al. (2002) and Fiske et al. (2007).

Stereotypes do not only consist of negative traits, as is often assumed. They are ambivalent and mostly represent a mix of positive and negative stereotypes across the two SCM dimensions (Fiske et al., 2002). Warmth and competence function as independent dimensions and can vary in the same or in opposite directions, as shown in Table 1. Groups perceived as high in both warmth and competence are typically associated with positive stereotypes and tend to elicit admiration. In contrast, groups perceived as low on both dimensions are often linked to contemptuous stereotypes. Groups perceived as warm but less competent are commonly associated with paternalistic stereotypes and tend to evoke pity, whereas groups perceived as competent but lacking warmth are associated with envious stereotypes and often elicit feelings of envy (Fiske et al., 2002, 2007, 2018). These combinations illustrate how stereotypes about social groups are reflected in different combinations of warmth and competence, which are linked to distinct emotional responses. Furthermore, empirical research has shown that different ethnic groups can be associated with different combinations of warmth and competence depending on social context and national history (Fiske et al., 2002, 2007, 2018). For instance, in the United States, Americans are often perceived as both warm and competent, whereas groups such as Asians, Jews, or Germans are sometimes stereotypically viewed as more competent but less warm (Kervyn et al., 2015). This illustrates how stereotypes, which are often related to individuals' origin or ethnicity, shape perceptions of their warmth and competence. The social reactions elicited by these perceptions further highlight their influence on interpersonal evaluations. However, it is important to note that these evaluations are not entirely

fixed. Research suggests that contextual cues and cognitive biases, such as the halo effect, can influence how individuals are perceived along the warmth and competence dimensions (Yzerbyt et al., 2008).

2.4.2 Stereotype Content Model in Service Contexts

The dimensions of warmth and competence are also central to the evaluation of front-line service employees. Service encounters represent social interactions in which customers must quickly assess whether the service employee acts in their best interest and whether the employee is capable of delivering the service effectively. In such encounters, the behaviour of service employees can serve as a signal that influences how they are perceived along these dimensions. Cues such as smiling, appearance, or emotional communication can strongly influence customers' evaluations of service employees (Cortes, 2024; Wang et al., 2017).

Previous studies suggest that in service encounters, compared to general social interactions, the competence dimension is often more important than warmth (Aaker et al., 2012). This is particularly relevant because consumers do not only apply the competence dimension to employees but also to the company, where perceived competence serves as an important purchase argument. Consequently, consumers are more likely to purchase from firms they perceive as high in competence. This is also illustrated by the fact that customers perceive for-profit companies as more capable and therefore prefer to purchase from them rather than from nonprofit organizations, which are often perceived as warmer but less efficient (Aaker et al., 2012). Even though competence tends to dominate warmth in business contexts, perceptions of a company's warmth also contribute to a positive and desirable image as it fosters perceptions of trustworthiness and cooperativeness, attributes that encourage customers to make purchases. The ideal case, however, is when a company performs well on both dimensions, resulting in particularly positive customer reactions. When both dimensions are highly pronounced, they elicit feelings of admiration, which strongly predict willingness to purchase (Aaker et al., 2012). This demonstrates how the Stereotype Content Model can be transferred to professional contexts and illustrates how perceptions of service employees, and consequently of the organizations they represent, can influence organizational economic success.

2.4.3 Institutional Prestige

2.4.3.1 Definition

Perceived institutional prestige refers to the extent to which an organization is viewed positively by others. In other words, it reflects how prestigious, economically successful, and socially respected outsiders perceive the organization to be. It answers the question: “*What do external individuals think about the fact that I belong to this organization?*” (Fuller et al., 2006, p. 819). March and Simon (1993) offer a more detailed conceptualization by describing the so-called “*symbols of success*” that define institutional status. These consist of organizational visibility (size, growth and recognition), success in achieving organizational goals (economic success and goal attainment), and the average status level of employees (high status employees).

2.4.3.2 Effect of Institutional Prestige on Competence

While prior literature does not explicitly refer to institutional prestige, it often conceptualizes status as a key social cue. Institutional prestige involves indicators such as occupation, income and organizational standing representing a typical status characteristic and is therefore treated as a status-related construct. With regard to status, research studies have found a strong positive correlation (greater than 0.8) between status and competence, which has been confirmed across different countries and cultures, indicating a stable relationship (Kervyn et al., 2015). The higher an individual's perceived status, the more competent they are seen to be. This is because people associate competence with power, as individuals are assumed to have access to and control over resources required to attain this position (Fiske et al., 2002), leading to the perception that they have earned their status and are responsible for achieving it (Fiske et al., 2002). Fiske et al. (2002) provide a foundational theoretical account of the relationship between status and competence in a seminal study in social psychology. Using survey-based studies, researchers examined how participants evaluated various social groups and found that groups associated with status characteristics such as occupation, income and group prestige (e.g., high-income or high-status professional groups) were clearly attributed higher competence (Fiske et al., 2002, 2018). This relationship between status and perceived competence also extends to the prestige of organizations. Although research explicitly examining institutional prestige is limited, related work on firm reputation suggests that a strong reputation signals high-quality offerings, implying that they are perceived as more competent (Aaker et al., 2012). Building on the SCM, research shows that individuals also evaluate organizations similarly to social groups, particularly in terms of ability (competence) and intentions (warmth). In this context,

competence reflects the perceived ability to implement their intentions, which is associated with attributes such as leadership, success and intelligence (Aaker et al., 2012). Overall, the literature indicates that characteristics associated with high status, in both individuals and organizations, contribute to higher perceived competence, highlighting the relationship between status and competence as a stable and robust pattern in social perception.

2.4.3.3 Effect of Institutional Prestige on Warmth

While institutional prestige has a direct influence on perceived competence, the relationship with warmth is less clear. Some studies suggest that warmth is unrelated to status, while others show a negative correlation between status and warmth. Therefore, the relationship between competence and warmth is not stable and can change depending on the context (Caprariello et al., 2009; Durante et al., 2018; Kervyn et al., 2015). When institutional prestige is perceived as high, competence is rated higher. However, such groups are seen as less social and less approachable. Conversely, low-status groups are seen as less competent, but more social and approachable (Durante et al., 2018). Yet, Brambilla et al. (2010) demonstrate that an important exception exists when a profession requires warmth for goal achievement. In their experiment, participants were asked to rate the warmth and competence of engineers and psychologists at both high and low statuses. The results showed that high competence was predicted for both professional groups. Warmth, however, was rated as high only for psychologists. For occupations in which warmth is necessary for performance outcomes such as psychologists, nurses, social workers, or teachers, with warmth referring to friendliness, empathy, kindness and sincerity, high group status is expected to lead to high perceived competence as well as high warmth (Brambilla et al., 2010; Kervyn et al., 2015). Previous research has mainly focused on healthcare and educational professions, showing that warmth is perceived as functional for success in these occupations. Furthermore, when evaluating companies, a firm's reputation as a signal of organizational standing can also signal warmth through perceptions of trust, fairness, and the willingness to act in consumers' best interests, for example by treating customers fairly or repairing relationships after mistakes (Aaker et al., 2012). Thus, the relationship between status and warmth is not uniform but contingent on factors such as the professional context and the functional relevance of warmth.

2.4.4 Consumer Animosity

2.4.4.1 Definition

The first and widely used definition of consumer animosity is provided by Klein et al. (1998), who describes it as “*remnants of antipathy related to previous or ongoing military, political, or economic events*” (p. 90). As a result, many consumers develop avoidant or even hostile attitudes towards products, services, or even individuals originating from a certain country (Klein et al., 1998). Consumer animosity may stem from historical events as well as from current events that prevent individuals from forgiving or forgetting the actions of the country involved (Huang et al., 2010). Several studies demonstrate how substantial the impact of consumer animosity can be and how it affects the actual sales of products and services (Cao et al., 2025; Klein et al., 1998). The emergence of consumer animosity can be explained by two key theories that are frequently cited in the consumer animosity literature. The first is Social Identity Theory (SIT), which posits that individuals primarily strive for a positive social self-image. They categorize themselves into groups, the so-called in-groups, which are clearly distinguished from out-groups (Turner, 1999). As individuals compare these groups, they tend to favor their own group and be more critical of out-groups in order to enhance their self-esteem (Verlegh, 2007). The second theory is Realistic Group Conflict Theory, which is often discussed alongside SIT. It argues that discrimination and prejudice toward another group arise when the in-group perceives the out-group as a threat to its own survival (Levine and Campbell, 1972). Thus, gains for the out-group are seen as losses for the in-group, as both are competing for limited resources, leading to a hostile attitude toward the other group (Sidanius & Pratto, 2001). Danielidou and Horvath (2006) apply this mechanism to explain hostility from local populations toward international migrants and minorities, showing how perceived threats and intergroup conflict can lead to negative attitudes toward out-groups. Together, these theories are frequently combined to explain consumer animosity, emphasizing that it extends beyond simple in-group favoritism and involves perceived threats and conflicts between groups, often shaped by past and/or ongoing political or economic tensions between countries.

2.4.4.2 Effect of Consumer Animosity on Competence

The influence of consumer animosity on perceived competence of service employees is not yet established in the current literature. There are several studies on the perceived quality of products from the target country, but the literature on the evaluation of service employees is still limited. In the service context, one study examined how Lebanese consumers evaluated

expected service quality and willingness to buy when the service employee is a Syrian refugee. In Lebanon, animosity towards Syrian refugees is shaped by prolonged regional conflicts and economic competition and is further reinforced by social stereotypes towards Syrian refugees portraying them as less educated or less skilled. The results of the study indicate that animosity strongly distorts expected service quality in a negative direction (DeQuero-Navarro et al., 2022). This occurs as a result of consumer animosity, which is associated with strong negative emotions and stereotypes toward the Syrian out-group. Within this framework, animosity is partly driven by perceived threat arising from competition over limited resources, such as jobs. These perceived threats can foster negative attitudes toward the out-group, ultimately leading to lower expectations of service quality. This suggests that consumer animosity leads to more negative evaluations of individuals from the targeted country, solely based on their origin. Existing studies on consumer animosity have primarily focused on product-related evaluations. Klein et al. (1998) for example found that animosity does not necessarily result in poorer evaluations of product quality. Subsequent studies, however, suggest that consumer animosity can lead to a clear deterioration in perceived quality (Cao et al., 2025; Shoham et al., 2006; Shoham & Gavish, 2016). A very recent study on Vietnamese consumers' attitudes towards Chinese products demonstrates that when Vietnamese consumers feel animosity towards China, the emotions of anger and disgust lead to both a more negative perception of the quality of the product and an increased boycott behaviour, while disgust toward the targeted country had a particularly strong effect. This implies that evaluations of products and services do not occur rationally but are often driven by consumers' emotions (Cao et al., 2025). Yet, some individuals do not feel strong emotional responses for their country's affairs. They remain apathetic, meaning that they show an absence of interest or concern toward a particular matter. They do not perceive the issue as interfering with their personal interests and prioritize their habitual purchasing behaviour rather than ethical or moral considerations that would drive them to boycott. For these individuals, product quality judgments as well as boycott behaviour are not affected (Cao et al., 2025). Overall, existing research suggests that consumer animosity evokes strong negative emotions that can distort evaluations beyond products, leading to biased perceptions of competence that are not based on rational assessments.

2.4.4.3 Effect of Consumer Animosity on Warmth

Research suggests that consumer animosity negatively affects trust in a company (Jiménez, 2010). According to Jiménez (2010), when consumers know that a company originates from a country that they condemn for its international actions, they stop trusting the firm. Additionally,

they automatically assume that the company is unable to behave correctly (Jiménez, 2010). Lee and Mazodier (2015) examined the role of animosity in the context of a French company sponsoring the London Olympic Games in the United Kingdom. Survey data showed that, in cases of high animosity towards France, there was a significant negative longitudinal effect on both brand trust and brand affect, that is, the brand's potential to elicit positive emotional responses from customers.

While previous research focused on brand-related outcomes such as lower trust, insights from the SCM explain how animosity influences interpersonal evaluations. Within the SCM, warmth is determined by perceived threat, which depends on the structural relationship between in-group and out-group. This means that the economic and social relationship between the two groups determines whether the group is perceived as threatening.

Perceived threat can be divided into two types (Kervyn et al., 2015):

1. **Realistic threat:** economic or security-related threats. This occurs when a group believes that jobs, safety, or societal advantages may be taken away by another group. This reflects a competitive situation between the two groups because resources are perceived as limited (*“zero-sum logic”*).
2. **Symbolic threat:** threats to values, morals, or national identity. This occurs when a group holds different values, norms, or cultural beliefs that are incompatible with those of the in-group.

Kervyn et al. (2015) found that the presence of one of these threats is a very strong predictor of lower perceived warmth towards the out-group. In other words, when individuals experience animosity towards a country and perceive it as threatening, the group is seen as lacking warmth. As consumer animosity is rooted in political, economic or military conflicts with another country, it is common for individuals to perceive the hostile country as a source of danger or competition. The primary form is realistic threat, which is particularly prevalent when countries compete for economic resources, or when individuals perceive risks to their safety or existence. If hostile actions are additionally interpreted in moral terms, a symbolic threat may also arise. This occurs when the hostile country is perceived as violating central values, moral norms or societal principles. As perceptions of threat are related to attributions of intent and benevolence, such perceptions negatively affect the perceived warmth of people belonging to the target country (Klein et al., 1998).

3 RESEARCH

This section presents the empirical part of this study, linking the research objective and hypotheses derived from the literature to their empirical examination and resulting findings.

3.1 Relevance and Research Objectives

Due to globalization, people can move across national borders more easily than ever before (UN DESA, 2022; Trask, 2022). As a result, individuals often find themselves living and working in countries other than their countries of origin (UN DESA, 2022; Trask, 2022). In the largest economic sector, the service sector, it is therefore common to interact with people who come from different backgrounds and cultures. These employees often have an accent and are confronted with challenges that individuals without an accent do not face. As discussed in the theoretical background, individuals are often subject to stereotypes and biases based solely on this social cue and are therefore perceived as less favorable (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010; Lippi-Green, 1994). However, these perceptions can change depending on the context (Caprariello et al., 2009; Durante et al., 2018; Kervyn et al., 2015). Factors such as consumer animosity and institutional prestige may be present due to the type of job or the specific accent and can influence how the employee is perceived. While intercultural service encounters are normal and widespread in today's world, they are still viewed with reluctance despite decades of globalization, which makes it essential to understand how the perception of a service employee is shaped and influenced in intercultural interactions.

The main objective of this study is to gain a better understanding of accent-based service encounters. For this purpose, the literature on accents in service encounters, consumer animosity, and institutional prestige is applied. Previous research has primarily examined the main effects of accents in service encounters, while only a limited number of studies have examined moderators. The moderators that have been investigated so far are mostly closely tied to the service situation itself (e.g., service type, service criticality, and expected control). In contrast, broader contextual factors that are not directly tied to the immediate service situation and which may influence the accent effect have so far remained largely overlooked. This study addresses this gap by drawing on two boundary conditions: a situational (institutional prestige) and a psychological factor (consumer animosity).

The service context has not seen sufficient examination of either institutional prestige or consumer animosity. Existing literature on consumer animosity has primarily focused on

companies and their products, showing how hostile attitudes reduce sales (Cao et al., 2025; Shoham et al., 2006; Shoham & Gavish, 2016). Furthermore, studies on institutional prestige have mostly concentrated on societal groups (Brambilla et al., 2010; Kervyn et al., 2015). Consequently, both factors have rarely been applied to classical service encounters, and particularly not in the context of accent-related interactions. This leads to the following research question:

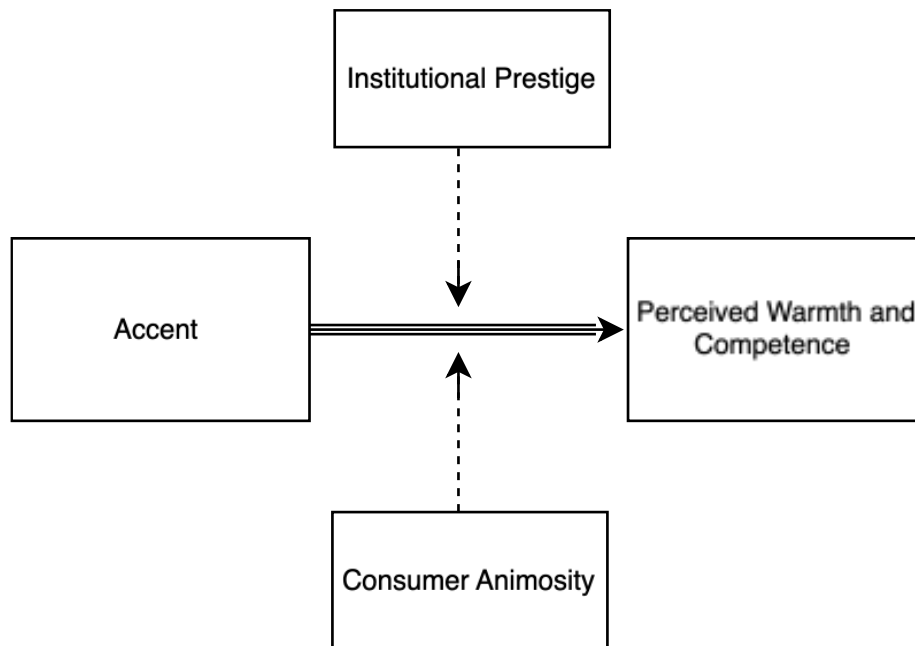
“How does an accent influence perceived competence and warmth in service encounters, and how do institutional prestige and consumer animosity affect these outcomes?”

Service providers can gain a better understanding of what to expect when their service employees speak with an accent, and which factors influence customer satisfaction in such encounters. The findings of this study can help service providers to adjust their services accordingly.

3.2 Hypothesis Development

The literature shows that perceptions of individuals are multifaceted and can be shaped by a variety of factors. Depending on the circumstances, a person’s perspective may change. This is particularly relevant in service contexts, as perceptions of employees influence customer satisfaction and, consequently, a company’s economic success (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000). This study examines the two boundary conditions of consumer animosity and institutional prestige, which can influence perceptions in service encounters both positively and negatively. Figure 4 illustrates the conceptual structure of this study.

Figure 4: Concept of the study



Research agrees that having a foreign accent is a disadvantage in service encounters, as accented employees are viewed less favourably (DeShields & de los Santos, 2000; Fuertes et al., 2012; Hosoda & Stone-Romero, 2010). This linguistic discrimination arises because accent serves as a basis for social categorization into groups that can activate stereotypes (Azab & Clark, 2017; Rakić et al., 2011). Yet, some researchers have reported different results, showing that certain accents associated with positive stereotypes are not perceived more negatively, but similarly or, in some cases, even more positively. Nevertheless, studies have shown that this applies particularly to accents typically associated with Western Europe, such as British and French (Cargile & Bradac, 2001; Hosoda & Stone-Romero, 2010). As customers in professional interactions are highly sensitive to such cues, accents have a particularly strong impact when evaluating the service employee (Fuertes et al., 2012). In the German-speaking context, an American accent may be perceived as unfamiliar and less aligned with linguistic norms, especially in service encounters. Consequently, the following hypothesis is proposed, forming the basis of this study:

H1: A service employee speaking with a non-standard accent will be perceived as less competent and less warm than a service employee speaking with a standard accent

Consumer animosity can lead individuals to develop strong negative feelings towards a country. These feelings include anger and sometimes even concern that they may be affected themselves

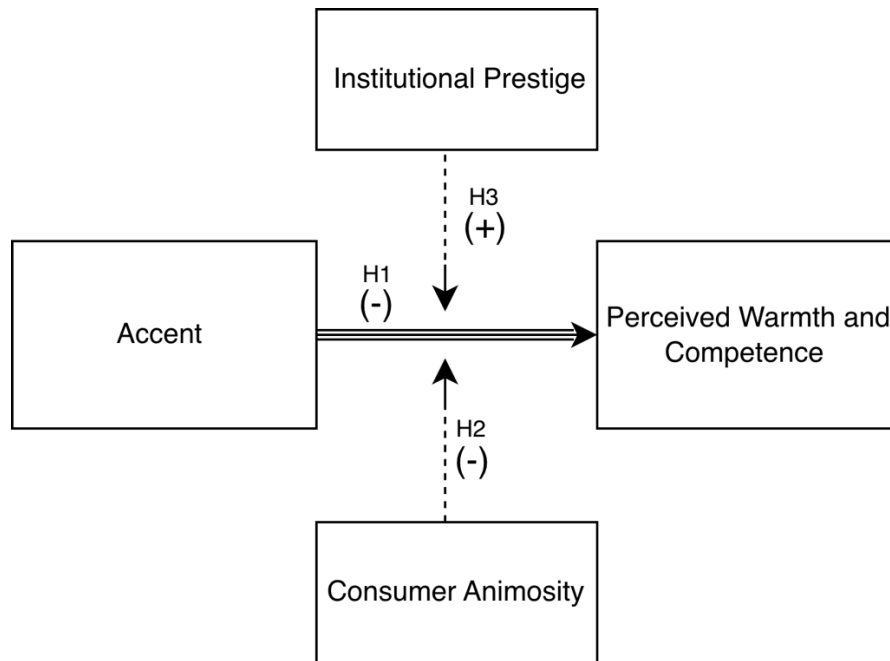
one day by the targeted country's actions (Akhtar et al., 2024; European Commission, 2019; Wike et al., 2025), thereby fostering hostile feelings toward specific countries (Klein et al., 1998). As country-related evaluations have been shown to transfer to both brands and individuals associated with them (Cao et al., 2025; DeQuero-Navarro et al., 2022; Farmaki, 2023; Shoham et al., 2006; Shoham & Gavish, 2016), these country-level perceptions may also extend to the service context, where service employees may be judged negatively due to an accent associated with a country toward which consumers feel animosity. Prior research showed that consumer animosity has a particularly strong negative effect on the warmth dimension, while also influencing certain competence-related evaluations, such as perceived product quality (Cao et al., 2025; Shoham et al., 2006; Shoham & Gavish, 2016). In light of these considerations, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H2: *Consumer animosity moderates the effect of the service employee's accent on perceived competence and warmth, such that evaluations of the service employee speaking with a non-standard accent are more negative under high (vs. low) consumer animosity.*

According to the literature, there is a clear correlation between high institutional prestige and perceived competence (Kervyn et al., 2015). Although studies suggest that high status can lead to lower perceived warmth, as exemplified by the well-known 'competent but cold' stereotype, Brambilla et al. (2010) demonstrate that an important exception exists: if a profession requires warmth for being successful, status also predicts warmth. In the case of service professions, studies have shown that friendliness, sympathy, and trustworthiness are important for assisting customers, increasing satisfaction and loyalty, and improving perceived quality (Lemmink & Mattsson, 2002). Therefore, this exception may also apply to service occupations, meaning that high-status service providers could be perceived as warm (Brambilla et al., 2010; Kervyn et al., 2015). In addition, a strong corporate reputation can promote a company's perceived warmth by signaling trustworthiness and fairness (Aaker et al., 2012). Based on this reasoning, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: *Institutional prestige moderates the effect of the service employee's accent (standard vs. non-standard) on perceived competence and warmth, such that evaluations of the service employee are more positive under high (vs. low) institutional prestige.*

Figure 5: Conceptual model of the hypotheses



3.3 Empirical Study

To examine the hypotheses and to answer the research question, a causal online experiment was conducted.

3.3.1 Independent and Dependent Variables

For the study, accent serves as the first independent variable. A Standard German accent and an American accent were selected as the accents for the stimulus. Standard German serves as the baseline and represents a familiar and commonly used reference accent for German and Austrian participants. As a second accent, an American-English accent was chosen. Although English education in Germany and Austria has traditionally been oriented toward British English, American English is highly prevalent in global media and widely recognized among younger generations (Tomović, 2022). Therefore, an American accent represents a salient and clearly identifiable foreign accent without posing comprehension difficulties. The perception of the United States as a country varies widely, which may be a contextual basis for consumer animosity. It's among the most important political actors with one of the largest economies in the world and is therefore highly regarded by some (Tomović, 2022). Moreover, the United States and Europe traditionally share a culture and value base, particularly with regard to

democratic principles and individual freedom. Yet, opinion polls indicate that the reputation of the United States has changed since 2016, coinciding with the start of Donald Trump's first presidency (Wike et al., 2022). Data from Pew Research Center show low levels of confidence in Trump as the President of the United States among respondents in several countries. Trump's presidency has been associated with shifts in international attitudes toward the United States (Wike et al., 2025). In particular, public opinion data suggest that trust in the United States and perceptions of its reliability have decreased, particularly in Western Europe (Wike et al., 2025). At the same time, Trump's politics have been described as highly polarizing and have received extensive international media attention. Policy decisions such as the imposition of arbitrary tariffs, withdrawal from international agreements such as the Paris Climate Agreement and increased immigration enforcement have contributed to international debates and political uncertainty (Martina & Lange, 2026; Wike et al., 2025). In addition, political rhetoric surrounding potential territorial expansion such as proposals concerning Greenland, Canada or the Panama Canal, have been met with criticism from various international political actors and institutions (Martina & Lange, 2026). However, opinions vary strongly depending on ideological orientation. Opinion polls show that right-wing populists are much more likely to express confidence in Trump's policies. For example, in Australia, 51% of respondents who identify as politically right-wing hold positive views of Trump's presidency and his competence, whereas only 8% of those on the political left agree. Similar patterns can also be observed in Western European countries (Wike et al., 2025). Taken together, these findings suggest that attitudes towards the USA are multifaceted. Nevertheless, there is a clear trend toward increasingly negative attitudes regarding the USA among the European public, making it a suitable context for examining the role of consumer animosity in shaping evaluations of a service encounter.

Perceived competence and perceived warmth are used as the dependent variables in this study. As already explained, these are the two main dimensions of social perception and therefore cover the two main factors through which people perceive other individuals. As this study aims to examine the perception of customers on service employees, these two factors are well suited for this purpose.

3.3.2 Study Design

For answering the research question, a quantitative study approach was used. It was a 2 (Accent: American vs. Standard German) x 2 (Institutional Prestige: High vs. Low) between-subject design in which participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: *Experimental conditions of the present study*

		Institutional Prestige	
		Low	High
Accent Type	Standard	Condition 1	Condition 2
	Nonstandard	Condition 3	Condition 4

The audio stimulus was generated and manipulated using text-to-speech technology based on artificial intelligence. It was created using *Google AI Studio* and was voiced by a young female (“Kore” in Google AI Studio). Both versions used the same standardized script (see Appendix A) and had a duration of 38 and 45 seconds for the German and American audio, respectively. Using AI for audio generation ensured that all elements were identical across both versions, including the voice, speech rate, pauses, and pitch, which increased control and internal validity. Minor adjustments were made to reduce a robotic sound, while all parameters were held identical. For the German accent, Standard German was used, as dialects introduce additional cues and may further influence perceived warmth, social class, and likability. Standard German is neutral and is widely accepted in professional settings across the German-speaking region, which also increases the internal validity of the study. Before listening to the audio in the online experiment, the respondents read an introduction to the scenario (see Appendix C). This instructed them to imagine themselves in a specific situation. They were told that they had received a call-back from their bank providing information and advice on a financial investment. This represents a typical frontline service interaction in the context of banking and financial advice, which frequently occurs in everyday life. In Germany and Austria, financial and

investment advice is typically provided by banks, making this a realistic and common situation (YouGov, 2025).

Following this, the participants read one of two randomly assigned framing texts, that explained the bank's institutional prestige (high vs. low) in order to manipulate this moderator (see Appendix B). The text was based on the "*symbols of success*" proposed by March and Simon (1993), which define institutional status and include visibility, achievement of organizational goals, and the average status level of employees (March & Simon, 1993). Afterwards, one of two audio recordings was played in which the supposed bank employee provided advice to the listener. In one version, the consultation was delivered in Standard German without a foreign accent, whereas in the other version, the employee spoke with an American accent. To test whether the manipulation of the independent variable worked for the respective participant, both quantitative and qualitative measures were used to assess whether the accent was perceived, recognized, and correctly assigned.

Consumer animosity was included as a measured moderator. It cannot be manipulated and therefore had to be measured at the individual participant level. In the online experiment, participants answered items measuring their personal attitudes toward the United States. The items used to assess animosity were taken from Akhtar et al. (2024) and were supplemented with three additional items from Klein et al. (1998), which were translated and adapted for the study. To measure the dependent variables perceived warmth and competence, items were adopted from prior research which have demonstrated reliability across multiple studies. Specifically, items from Klein et al. (1998) were selected, which have been widely used in research applying the SCM. Leach (2007) reviewed the items proposed by Klein et al. (1998) and extended them by adding items for perceived warmth and competence to capture additional facets of both dimensions. Selected items from Leach (2007) were additionally included in the present study, as shown in Appendix D. All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". In the third and final section of the survey, demographic questions were asked. These included gender, age, as well as personal ties with the United States and the participants' country of origin, which may influence the results and were therefore included as control variables. Moreover, the order of the questions followed the procedure used in the study of Klein (2002). The questions on consumer animosity were placed at the end of the survey to prevent the activation of negative associations through the consumer animosity items, which could otherwise influence the evaluations of the service employee.

To test whether the survey questionnaire functioned smoothly, a pretest with four participants was conducted. The purpose was to examine whether the online experiment and the designed

scenario were perceived as realistic and to check the clarity and technical functionality of the survey. The pretest was conducted using the *think-aloud* method (Ericsson & Simon, 1993), in which participants went through the online experiment, read the content aloud, and verbalized their thoughts. The evaluation of the pretest showed that the scenario was clearly understandable for all participants and revealed no notable issues. Based on the pretest, only minor linguistic adjustments were made to improve the clarity of the items.

3.3.3 Sampling

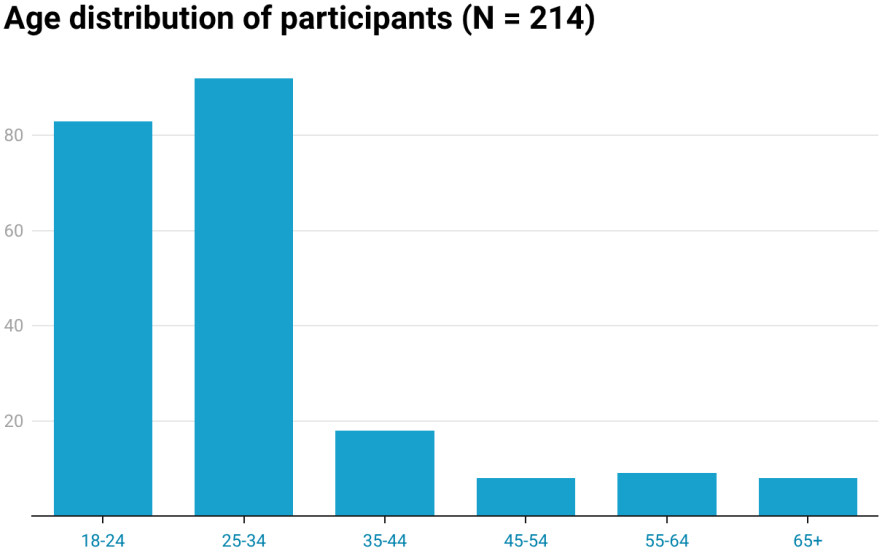
To determine the minimum number of participants for the online experiment, a power analysis was conducted. Effect size estimates for moderation effects were not available. Therefore, the present study follows Cohen's (1992) conventions for F-tests (Cohen's f), distinguishing between small ($f = 0.10$), medium ($f = 0.25$), and large ($f = 0.40$) effects. Comparable studies report medium-sized main effects of accented speech in service encounters (Bourdin et al., 2024). Based on this, a medium effect size ($f = 0.25$) was assumed for the power analysis. The power analysis was conducted with *G*POWER* (Faul et al., 2007) to determine the necessary sample size to detect a reliable true effect, resulting in a required sample size of $N = 128$ ($\alpha = .05$, power = .80, $f = 0.25$).

Data for the study were collected using an online questionnaire. The questionnaire was created and published on *SoSci Survey*, and participants were recruited using non-random sampling methods. To reach a larger sample, the questionnaire was also distributed and posted via social media platforms such as *Instagram* and *WhatsApp*. As this study examined the perception of foreign versus domestic accents, the target group consisted of German native speakers.

The online experiment was conducted from February 8, 2026 to February 19, 2026. A total of 244 responses were collected, of which 214 participants provided valid responses. Participants who answered one or more attention check questions incorrectly were excluded from the analysis. Of the 214 valid responses, 150 participants were recruited via *SurveyCircle* and 19 via *SurveySwap*, two online participant recruitment platforms based on a credit system in which researchers complete other surveys in exchange for participants for their own study. An additional 75 participants were recruited through the author's extended network and via flyers distributed in public buildings. The exact distribution across these recruitment channels is unknown. The final sample consisted of $N = 214$ participants aged between 18 and 71 years ($M = 29.83$, $SD = 11.25$), as shown in Figure 7. Of these, 121 were female (57%), 90 males (42%), two identified as diverse (0.9%), and one preferred not to disclose their gender (0.5%). Most

participants reported having predominantly grown up in Germany (N = 189), followed by Austria (N = 26) and other countries (N = 9).

Figure 7: Age distribution of participants



Note. Author’s own illustration.

3.3.4 Empirical Results

3.3.4.1 Preliminary Analyses

A contingency table was computed to examine the relationship between accent and institutional prestige. As shown in Table 2, 97 participants were exposed to the American accent, while 117 participants were exposed to the Standard German accent. Of those exposed to the American accent, 44 were assigned to the low institutional prestige condition and 53 to the high institutional prestige condition. For the German accent, 53 participants were assigned to the low institutional prestige condition and 64 to the high institutional prestige condition, showing a relatively balanced distribution across the four experimental conditions.

Table 2: Distribution of participants across experimental conditions

Accent	Low Prestige	High Prestige	Total
American	44	53	97
German	53	64	117
Total	97	117	214

Note. Low and high prestige refer to the institutional prestige manipulation.

Of the participants who were exposed to the accent stimulus, the majority perceived the accent as clearly noticeable. Specifically, 77 out of 97 participants who had the accent condition selected the highest scale point (“strongly agree”) for the statement “*The advisor spoke with a clearly audible accent*” ($M = 4.73$; $SD = 0.60$). Furthermore, 62 out of the 97 participants correctly identified the accent as American, while 20 identified the accent as originating from another English-speaking country, 13 identified an incorrect region, and 2 indicated that the voice was AI-generated. Of the participants who were exposed to the German stimulus, all correctly indicated that no accent was audible. These results demonstrate that the manipulation of the accent condition was successful, as participants clearly distinguished between the accented and non-accented stimulus. For institutional prestige, the respective item also served as an attention check. Participants who failed to correctly identify the prestige condition were excluded from further analyses. The final sample therefore only included respondents who correctly recognized the manipulated prestige condition.

Prior to hypothesis testing, the internal consistency of the multi-item scales was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha. Consumer animosity demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = .89$). Perceived competence and warmth demonstrated excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .96$; $\alpha = .92$). Furthermore, descriptive statistics were computed to provide an overview of the main study variables (Table 3). Consumer animosity showed a mean of $M = 3.52$ ($SD = 0.95$). Perceived warmth ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 0.89$) and perceived competence ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 1.09$) were rated moderately high. Perceived competence and warmth were strongly positively correlated ($r = .77$), whereas consumer animosity was not significantly correlated with either perceived competence or warmth ($r = -.04$; $r = .03$).

Table 3: Results of descriptive statistics and correlations among study variables

	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Consumer Animosity	3.52	0.95	-		
2. Warmth	3.58	0.89	-.04	-	
3. Competence	3.90	1.09	.03	.77	-

Note. N = 214. Correlations are Pearson's *r*. 1 = Consumer animosity; 2 = Warmth; 3 = Competence.

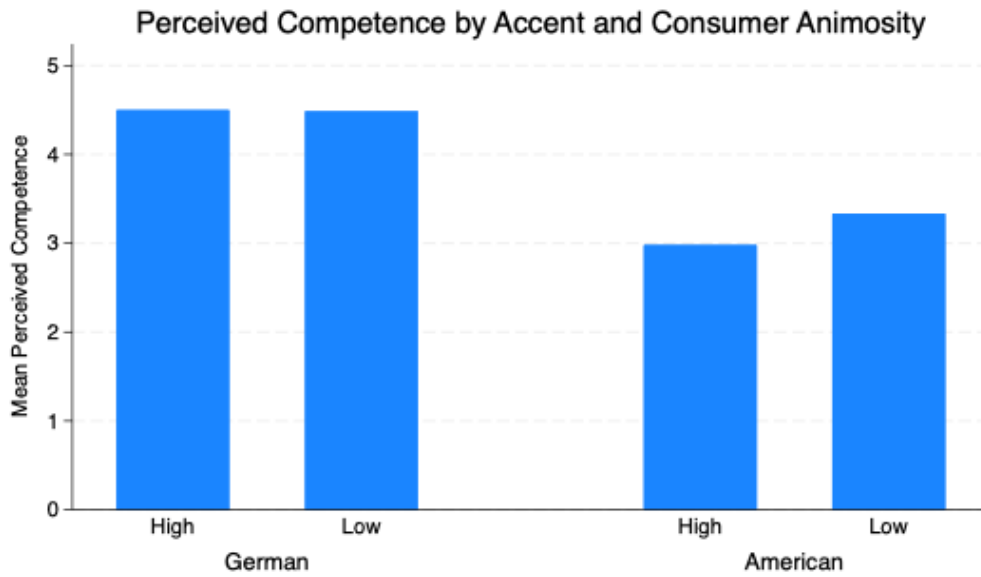
3.3.4.2 Hypothesis Testing

To test the hypotheses, two ANCOVAs were conducted with perceived competence and perceived warmth as dependent variables.

H1 examined whether a service employee speaking with a non-standard American accent is perceived as less competent and less warm than a service employee speaking with a Standard German accent. For perceived competence, the results did not reveal a significant main effect of accent, $F(1, 206) = 0.73, p = .395$. Similarly, no significant effect was found for perceived warmth, $F(1, 206) = 0.14, p = .706$. The effect of accent remained non-significant after controlling for participant's primary country of upbringing and personal ties to the US. Thus, H1 was not supported.

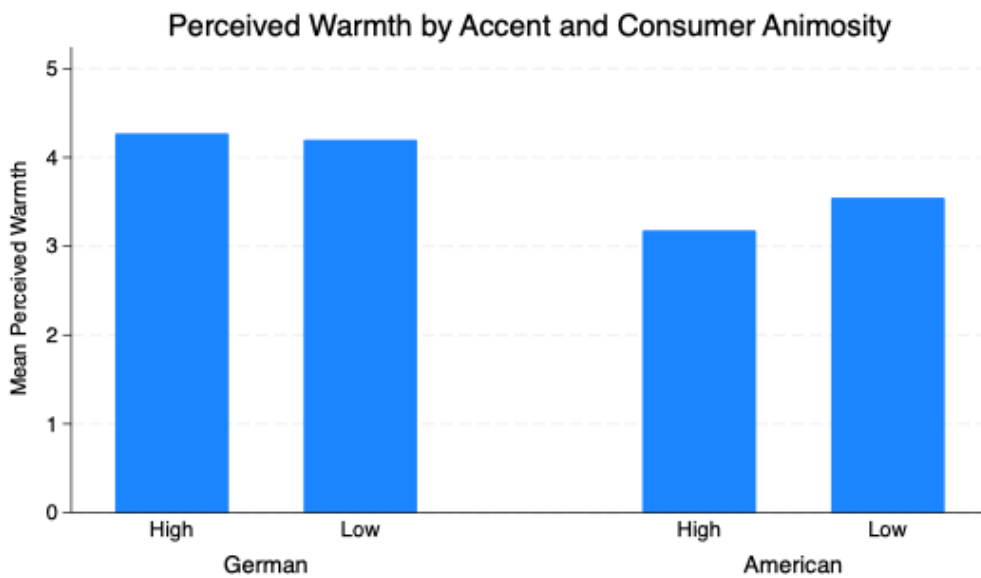
H2 examined whether consumer animosity moderates the relationship between accent and perceived competence and warmth. For perceived competence, the interaction between accent and consumer animosity was significant, $F(1, 206) = 3.96, p = .048$, indicating that the effect of accent depends on the participants' level of consumer animosity. Similarly, for perceived warmth, the interaction was also significant, $F(1, 206) = 6.28, p = .013$. These results suggest that consumer animosity moderates the accent effect on both perceived competence and perceived warmth, illustrated in Figures 8 and 9. Thus, H2 was supported.

Figure 8: Interaction of accent and consumer animosity on perceived competence



Note. High and low indicate levels of consumer animosity. Author's own illustration.

Figure 9: Interaction of accent and consumer animosity on perceived warmth



Note. High and low indicate levels of consumer animosity. Author's own illustration.

H3 examined whether institutional prestige moderates the relationship between accent and perceived warmth and competence. The interaction between accent and institutional prestige

was not significant for competence $F(1, 206) = 0.01, p = .938$, nor for perceived warmth, $F(1, 206) = 0.00, p = .973$. These findings indicate that institutional prestige does not moderate the accent effect on perceived competence and warmth. Hence, no support was found for H3.

3.3.4.3 Robustness Check Using a Reduced Sample

To assess the robustness of the findings, the analysis was repeated using a reduced sample, that only included participants that correctly identified the United States as the origin of the accent in the audio stimulus ($n = 62$). For the control group, $n = 62$ participants were selected from the German control condition, using a systematic rule based on a time-related variable (e.g., including only even values), to match the sample size of the American Accent condition. To ensure comparability, institutional prestige was assessed across the two groups and was found to show no systematic differences, indicating that both groups were balanced with respect to this variable.

Overall, the findings of the reduced sample were largely consistent with the full sample, while showing a stronger effect for perceived competence. In particular, the interaction between accent and consumer animosity was again observed with more negative evaluations of the American-accented service employee at higher levels of consumer animosity, while the evaluation for the German accent group remained relatively stable. For perceived warmth, the interaction between accent and consumer animosity remained significant $F(1, 206) = 6.35, p = .013$, and similar in magnitude to the full sample ($F(1, 206) = 6.28, p = .013$). For perceived competence, the results were again significant but more pronounced in the reduced sample $F(1, 206) = 6.06, p = .015$ compared to the full sample ($F(1, 206) = 3.96, p = .048$). In line with the full sample, institutional prestige did not significantly moderate the accent effect in the reduced sample for perceived warmth, $F(1, 206) = 0.08, p = .782$, nor for perceived competence, $F(1, 206) = 0.13, p = .716$. Detailed statistical output for the hypothesis testing and robustness checks is provided in Appendices E and F.

3.4 Discussion

The present thesis set out to explore how a non-standard American-accented versus a Standard German speaking service employee is evaluated in terms of competence and warmth, and whether these evaluations are shaped by institutional prestige and consumer animosity. In doing so, the study addresses the research question: *“How does an accent influence perceived competence and warmth in service encounters, and how do institutional prestige and consumer animosity affect these outcomes?”*

As stated before, an increasing number of individuals migrate to countries other than those in which they were born, partly out of necessity, in many cases to pursue professional opportunities abroad (ILO, 2024). Due to globalization, such mobility has not only become more common but also significantly easier to achieve than previous decades (UN DESA, 2022; Trask, 2022). At the same time, many Western countries rely on labour migration, as they face demographic challenges and workforce shortages requiring migrant workers to sustain their economic and social structures (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024; EMN, 2025). Germany and Austria are among the countries experiencing this development (OECD, 2025; Statista Research Department, 2025). In this context, people with a migrant background show high levels of labour market participation and represent an important part of the labour force (Statistik Austria, 2024; Statistisches Bundesamt, 2026). Individuals with a migrant background often acquire the host country's language later in life and therefore have a higher likelihood of speaking with a non-native accent (Flege, Munro, & MacKay, 1995). When these individuals work in service, such linguistic differences may influence how they are perceived by customers. Research suggests that foreign-accented employees are frequently evaluated less favourably, which can place them at a disadvantage compared to colleagues who speak without a foreign accent (DeShields & de los Santos, 2000; Fuertes et al., 2012; Hosoda & Stone-Romero, 2010). Previous studies have extensively examined accents in service encounters and generally agree that foreign accents lead to more negative evaluations of both the service itself and the service employee compared to interactions conducted in a standard accent. This thesis extends this line by investigating factors that may moderate the accent effect. In light of current political tensions, psychological factors such as hostility toward a specific country may exacerbate negative perceptions of a service employee whose accent is associated with that country. Additionally, situational factors, such as the institutional prestige of the organization in which the service employee works, may shape how the employee is perceived. Prior studies demonstrate that phenomena such as consumer animosity and perceived status can influence the evaluation of both products and individuals in either direction (Cao et al., 2025; Klein et al., 1998; Shoham et al., 2006; Shoham & Gavish, 2016). In this study, these factors were examined in relation to the service employee's accent to determine whether they amplify or attenuate the negative accent effect, thereby acting as moderating variables.

Some previous studies have suggested that accents are not perceived uniformly. Certain accents carry higher social status and are therefore perceived similarly to a standard accent (Cargile & Bradac, 2001; Fuertes et al., 2012; Purkiss et al., 2006). At the same time, other studies suggest that accent effects are particularly pronounced in formal and high-risk service contexts (Fuertes

et al., 2012), and customers tend to favor in-group members in such situations due to increased perceived trust (Kulik & Holbrook, 2000). Contrary to expectations, the H1 results did not support the existence of an independent accent effect within the sample. While consumer animosity moderated the relationship between accent and evaluations, no independent main effect of accent was observed when controlling for animosity. In this case, no in-group member was preferred, even though the scenario was a professional context in which accents have been shown to exert a stronger effect (Fuertes et al., 2012; Kulik & Holbrook, 2000). Notably, these findings align with prior research suggesting that foreign accents not associated with low-prestige minority groups are not necessarily evaluated negatively (Cargile & Bradac, 2001; Fuertes et al., 2012; Purkiss et al., 2006). It is possible that the American accent is perceived as relatively prestigious, similar to other traditionally prestigious accents such as British or French, which have been shown to elicit similar or sometimes more positive evaluations in prior research. At the same time, the increasing politicisation of migration in Western countries may lead to foreign accents being evaluated more negatively. In recent years, immigration has become a salient topic in political debates in countries such as Germany and Austria (Smith, 2025), potentially influencing how migration-related cues, including foreign accents, are perceived (Indelicato et al., 2023). Yet, these expectations were not supported in the present findings. This may be because such sociopolitical dynamics are more likely to affect accents that are typically associated with labour migration or lower-prestige social groups, rather than accents perceived as relatively prestigious. In this regard, the findings suggest that, in the present context, the American accent was not evaluated more negatively based on the accent alone. However, these results should be interpreted with caution. Although no significant main effect of accent was found, the accent effect can become significant within the framework of a significant interaction with a moderator. This relationship is discussed in the following section on Hypothesis 2.

The findings of H2 demonstrate that consumer animosity significantly moderates the relationship between accent and evaluations. Specifically, higher levels of individual consumer animosity were associated with more negative evaluations of the service employee. While a general accent effect was not observed, negative evaluations emerged at higher levels of animosity. Descriptive results indicated overall moderate to relatively high levels of animosity within the sample, which aligns with broader public opinion data suggesting that the perceptions of the U.S. politics has become less favorable in recent years (Wike et al., 2025). Consumer animosity is closely linked with emotional components such as anger and fear (Akhtar et al., 2024; Cao et al., 2025), which is reflected in the collected data. A considerable number of

participants reported moderate agreement with items reflecting perceived threat, including feelings of being threatened by the United States and concerns that its political actions could personally affect them. A closer inspection of the multi-item animosity scale revealed that general dislike of the United States showed the lowest level of agreement ($M = 3.08$), whereas rejection of the U.S politics received the highest ratings ($M = 4.22$). Perceived personal threat were moderately above the neutral midpoint ($M = 3.26-3.65$). As expected, this pattern suggests that animosity in the present sample reflects disapproval of U.S. political actions, rather than a generalized dislike of the country. Previous studies on the SCM suggest that a so-called “realistic threat”, defined as the perception that another country poses a tangible risk to one’s well-being or security, is associated with reduced perceptions of warmth (Kervyn et al., 2015). This study supports this finding. For warmth, the effect remained largely consistent and statistically significant across the full and the reduced sample, in which only participants were included that correctly recognized the United States as the origin of the accent. This may indicate that the relationship was already robust in the full sample. While the SCM only predicts the effect of animosity on warmth, the present findings suggests that it also extends to perceived competence as a significant effect was also observed for competence. Interestingly, the results became more pronounced in the reduced sample, which reinforces the interpretation that participants evaluated the employee more negatively on competence when the accent was recognized and linked to a country toward which they felt animosity. These results demonstrate that a more negative evaluation of an accent does not necessarily stem from the accent itself or associated stereotypes but can also be elicited by strongly negative feelings toward the origin of the accent. Interpersonal tensions between one’s own country and another can evoke strong anger and real fear, which may be transferred to individuals from that country, even when the connection is established solely through an accent. As a result, individuals, in this case, service employees from that country, may be perceived as not only less warm, but also less competent, even when their actual connection to that country is unclear. With regard to H1, no general main effect of accent has been found. However, the significant interaction between accent and consumer animosity points to the fact that the accent effect becomes significant at high levels of consumer animosity. In other words, service employees with an American accent are evaluated more negatively, only when individuals harbor hostile feelings toward the United States. This suggests that the negative accent effect is not universal but rather contingent upon other factors interacting with the accent, such as consumer animosity.

Building on these findings, a potential factor that may reinforce individual levels of consumer animosity is the presence of societal debates and increased media attention surrounding the

United States, which may heighten the accessibility of related attitudes. When such associations are cognitively more accessible, hearing an accent may trigger them more strongly, leading to stronger evaluations. Overall, these findings provide a novel contribution to the accent and consumer animosity literature, thereby extending the existing literature beyond product- and brand-related outcomes.

Contrary to expectations, the results for H3 found that institutional prestige did not significantly moderate the relationship between accent and service evaluations. Prior research suggests that high-status cues are typically associated with higher perceived competence and, under certain conditions, greater warmth (Brambilla et al., 2010; Fiske, 1993; Kervyn et al., 2015). However, this pattern was not observed in this study. One possible explanation is that the evaluation of the service employee was more strongly influenced by interpersonal cues, such as professionalism and friendliness. In voice-based encounters, where interaction is limited to auditory information, interpersonal cues may be more immediate and salient for assessing an employee's competence and warmth than abstract information about a bank. Another reason might be that institutional prestige was only presented in written form and was not directly observable during the interaction, potentially reducing its salience. Yet, a stronger focus on interpersonal cues may be driven by the specific scenario of this study. In high-stakes situations in which individuals receive advice at a bank about investing substantial amounts of money, trust and reassurance may strengthen the tendency to focus on person-related cues. Further research is needed to determine whether interpersonal cues play a more dominant role than institutional characteristics or whether this effect depends on situational factors such as communication mode or perceived risk.

Beyond the hypothesis testing, several additional findings warrant discussion. The manipulation checks for the accent condition indicated that the manipulation was largely successful. Of the 97 participants who were exposed to the accent stimulus, 62 correctly identified the intended country. An additional 20 participants did not name the United States but named other English-speaking countries (e.g., the United Kingdom, Australia, or Ireland), which share the same language but differ in accents. Given the linguistic similarity, such responses were to be expected. However, 13 participants provided incorrect responses, including "Italy/Spain" (three mentions), "Netherlands" (two mentions), "Poland," and "Balkan." Some of the countries are geographically closer or represent familiar migration categories in Central Europe. Such classifications can be linked to pre-existing associations or stereotypes connected to certain regional groups when encountering unfamiliar accents. Interestingly, some participants identified Germany or Austria as the accent's country of origin

(four mentions). This may indicate that certain participants were uncertain about the accent and therefore answered with the most familiar or most accessible country to proceed with the questionnaire. Alternatively, it is possible that some participants focused less on the accent and more on the content of the message, which may reduce their ability to correctly identify the accent. This may suggest that some participants, even if only a small subset of the foreign accent condition, do not rely on accent cues when forming evaluations, either because they are unable to accurately identify accents or because they generally tend to prioritize the content of a message. Furthermore, only two participants mentioned artificial intelligence when commenting on the audio recording. As this represents a very small proportion of the sample, it is assumed that the use of AI to generate the stimulus did not influence the results significantly. Another noteworthy finding is that the foreign accent was not only recognized but also that it was perceived as highly pronounced ($M = 4.73$; $SD = 0.60$). Prior research suggests that the perceived strength of an accent plays a crucial role in evaluation processes, with stronger accents being associated with more negative evaluations of competence and professionalism (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010). In the present study, the accent was perceived as very strong, which may have facilitated the identification of the speaker's origin. However, this did not translate into a direct main effect on evaluations, indicating that negative evaluations are not rooted in the accent itself, but rather in how it is interpreted.

Another finding of the study was that perceived competence and warmth were strongly correlated ($r = .77$). However, according to the Stereotype Content Model, competence and warmth represent two distinct dimensions that often function independently or even in opposition to one another (Cortes, 2024; Fiske et al., 2002). Interestingly, although the SCM conceptualizes these dimensions as theoretically independent, prior research suggests that their relationship can vary depending on broader societal conditions. Fiske et al. (2015) argue that macro-level factors such as income inequality and social conflict influence how strongly warmth and competence are differentiated. In more egalitarian societies with lower levels of inequality and conflict, social groups are less likely to be perceived as competitors or threats. As a result, individuals may rely more on general positive or negative impressions when evaluating others, which can lead to stronger correlations between warmth and competence. As the sample consists of participants from the DACH Region (Germany, Austria, and Switzerland), which is generally characterized by relatively low levels of income inequality and social conflict, participants may have been more likely to form less differentiated evaluations of the service employee. Another possible explanation is related to the service situation itself. In high-stakes financial contexts, the ability to give advice and the perception of trustworthy

intentions are functionally intertwined, as both are essential for minimizing risk and establishing trust. Customers must not only believe that the advisor is capable but also that they act in the client's best interest. As a result, participants may have integrated both dimensions into a broader judgment. This could help explain why warmth and competence were highly correlated in the present study.

This study offers valuable insights into research on accent-based evaluations in service encounters. Firstly, the study found no evidence for a general accent effect, suggesting that an American accent alone does not independently influence evaluations in service encounters. Furthermore, the findings diverge from studies indicating that due to the uncertain nature of service interactions, individuals primarily prefer service employees who are perceived as in-group members, namely in this case a person speaking with a Standard German accent (Fuertes et al., 2012; Kulik and Holbrook, 2000). Secondly, a central contribution of the study is that consumer animosity moderates the relationship between accent and evaluation. Specifically, the negative effect of an American accent only becomes significant at high levels of consumer animosity. This pattern indicates that negative evaluations of employees are not necessarily due to the accent itself but may instead be related to the individual's consumer animosity towards a specific country. The present findings demonstrate that individual levels of consumer animosity meaningfully influence interpersonal evaluations in service contexts. Whether consumer animosity influences evaluations in the absence of a perceived threat, for example in cases involving less severe political conflicts with the country, requires further research.

Finally, the study found that institutional prestige did not significantly moderate the relationship between accent and service evaluations. Although previous studies suggest that high status can enhance evaluations of competence and warmth in service contexts, the present findings indicate that such effects may be context-dependent (Brambilla et al., 2010; Fiske, 1993; Kervyn et al., 2015). Specifically, in voice-based high-risk interactions, interpersonal cues such as friendliness and professionalism may outweigh organizational status signals.

In response to the research question, the findings demonstrate that a non-native accent did not independently reduce perceived competence or warmth of a service employee. Instead, differences in evaluations based on accent emerged at higher levels of consumer animosity, whereas institutional prestige did not significantly affect these evaluations. Overall, these results suggest that the effects of accented speech depend on additional interacting factors, such as consumer animosity, rather than emerging independently.

3.5 Theoretical Implications

This research has three theoretical contributions to the theory of international business and consumer psychology. Firstly, while the accent effect has been widely examined (e.g. DeShields & de los Santos, 2000; Fuertes et al., 2012; Hosoda & Stone-Romero, 2010), the potential boundary conditions of this effect have received limited attention. By identifying consumer animosity as a moderator, this study advances accent perception research and bridges the gap between research on accent perception and the literature on consumer animosity, demonstrating that evaluations of accented speakers are also influenced by wider socio-political attitudes. Second, this study extends the literature on consumer animosity, beyond its traditional focus on products and companies (Cao et al., 2025; Shoham et al., 2006; Shoham & Gavish, 2016) to interpersonal contexts. By showing that consumer animosity also transfers to individuals linked to that certain country, it broadens the scope of the consumer animosity literature integrating interpersonal service encounters. Thus, consumer animosity not only operates on a market level but also influences social perception. Finally, this study offers a complementary perspective of institutional prestige (Brambilla et al., 2010; Fiske, 1993; Kervyn et al., 2015). It suggests that interpersonal cues may attenuate or even override the positive effects of perceived institutional prestige, thereby challenging the assumption that prestige signals consistently enhance evaluations. Overall, this research advances theory on accent-based service encounters by integrating insights from consumer animosity and institutional prestige, thereby emphasizing the interplay between different sources of evaluation in shaping perceptions of service employees.

3.6 Managerial Implications

The findings presented in this thesis carry several practical implications. While prior research highlights the importance of corporate image and reputation-building strategies (Cao et al., 2025), the findings of this study suggest that managerial measures should address consumer attitudes, particularly consumer animosity. First and foremost, given that the origins of accent-related stereotypes are deeply embedded in society, they cannot be directly altered by managers. Instead, companies operating internationally should be aware of how a service employee's accent may interact with consumer animosity, and actively acknowledge these dynamics. Such issues should, for example, be incorporated into employee training programmes. Attempts to reduce accents or generally conceal cues that reveal an employee's origin are unlikely to be an effective solution. Rather, both organizations and employees should learn how to manage and

respond to consumer animosity in service interactions. Organizations can promote general communication skills and interaction quality, for example, Tsalikis et al. (1991) proposed that good speech habits, such as voice volume, reducing hesitation, and clear articulation, can be trained to enhance perceived professionalism and confidence in service encounters. Although such communication skills do not directly counteract consumer animosity, they may help improve perceptions of professionalism. Furthermore, employees can be trained to respond effectively to negative reactions or initial negative impressions from customers. DeQuero-Navarro et al. (2022) emphasize that sales training programmes may include role-playing exercises to practice handling such situations and responding in ways that convey confidence and reassurance. This approach could be applied to situations involving consumer animosity by incorporating role-play scenarios that allow employees to practice appropriate responses. These strategies may be particularly effective among customers with low to moderate levels of consumer animosity, whose evaluations are more flexible.

3.7 Limitations

The results of this study should be interpreted with several limitations taken into consideration. First, the study used artificial intelligence to generate the audio recording. The recordings were computer-generated using *Google AI Studio* and while this approach increased internal validity by ensuring consistency and control of speech style, tone, script, and pauses, AI-generated speech still differs from natural human speech. Only a very small number of participants indicated that the recording was AI-generated. This suggests that the manipulation was largely perceived as realistic. However, a potential influence of perceived artificiality on participants' evaluations cannot be entirely ruled out.

Second, the possibility of demand effects represents another limitation. Since a large proportion of the sample reported that the accent was perceived as very strong, it is possible that participants guessed that the study focused on judging people based on their accent. As a result, people might have evaluated the accented service employee more positively, in order to avoid appearing biased. Therefore, the true negative effect of the accent might be underestimated.

Third, a substantial proportion of participants was recruited through credit-based exchange platforms such as *SurveyCircle* and *SurveySwap*. These platforms are based on a system in which users complete multiple studies to earn credits which increases the visibility of their own study and leads to more people seeing and completing it. This system may have encouraged

participants to complete the questionnaire quickly in order to accumulate credits, without carefully reflecting on their true opinions. As a result, response quality might have been reduced. Lastly, considering that the extended network of the author as well as users of the platforms *SurveyCircle* and *SurveySwap* tend to be younger, the sample consisted mainly of younger participants, many of whom were students. This limits the generalizability of the findings, as perceptions of accents, consumer animosity, and status cues may differ across age groups. Certain age groups may have a higher tolerance toward foreign accents or may react more strongly to political tensions. Therefore, the results of this study may not be fully generalizable to more diverse demographic groups.

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5 APPENDICES

Appendix A: Experimental Stimulus Script

„Hallo, hier ist Frau Kirschner von der Bank. Ich melde mich bei Ihnen, weil Sie uns wegen einer Geldanlage kontaktiert haben, erst mal vielen Dank dafür! Damit ich Ihnen da wirklich das Passende raussuchen kann, würde ich Ihnen gerne ein paar kurze Fragen stellen. Mir geht es vor allem darum, besser zu verstehen, was Sie sich genau vorstellen. Also zum Beispiel: Welche Ziele haben Sie, über welchen Zeitraum sprechen wir und möchten Sie eher monatlich etwas sparen oder einen einmaligen Betrag anlegen? Ich erkläre Ihnen dann natürlich auch ganz in Ruhe, worauf man bei den Kosten, der Laufzeit und dem Risiko achten sollte, damit Sie sich mit der Entscheidung wohlfühlen. Sollen wir einfach mal loslegen?“

Appendix B: Framing for the Manipulation of Institutional Prestige

Condition 1: High Institutional Prestige

Der Service-Mitarbeiter, mit dem Sie sprechen, arbeitet bei der Wiener Zentralbank, einer hoch angesehenen Finanzinstitution.

Sie befindet sich im Zentrum Wiens und ist aufgrund der Größe ihres Hauptstandorts sowie ihrer starken wirtschaftlichen Leistung weithin bekannt.

Die Institution genießt einen ausgezeichneten Ruf, erreicht ihre Ziele kontinuierlich und weist beeindruckende finanzielle Ergebnisse sowie sehr positives Kundenfeedback auf.

Sie hat mehrere Auszeichnungen für herausragende Leistungen erhalten und gehört regelmäßig zu den bestbewerteten Finanzinstituten in Österreich.

Condition 2: Low Institutional Prestige

Der Service-Mitarbeiter, mit dem Sie sprechen, arbeitet bei Gesundbrunn Kasse, einem kleinen und wenig bekannten Finanzdienstleister.

Sie befindet sich in einer Kleinstadt im Burgenland und verfügt über einen kleinen Standort mit wenig Sichtbarkeit.

Die Institution hat bisher nur eingeschränkt ihre Ziele erreicht, hat eine wechselhafte wirtschaftliche Leistung und erhält gemischtes Kundenfeedback.

Sie hat bisher keine Auszeichnungen für ihre Arbeit erhalten und wird in Branchenvergleichen selten erwähnt.

Appendix C: Scenario Presented in the Online Experiment

Bitte stellen Sie sich folgende Situation vor:

Sie interessieren sich für Möglichkeiten der Geldanlage und haben dazu Kontakt mit Ihrer Bank aufgenommen.

Die Bank ruft Sie nun telefonisch zurück, um Sie zu beraten und verschiedene Anlageoptionen zu besprechen.

Im nächsten Abschnitt erhalten Sie Informationen zu der Bank, die Sie kontaktiert hat. Danach hören Sie ein kurzes Audio.

Appendix D: Measurement Items

Warmth:

1. Die Beraterin wirkt warmherzig
2. Die Beraterin wirkt freundlich
3. Die Beraterin wirkt sympathisch
4. Die Beraterin wirkt vertrauenswürdig

Competence:

1. Die Beraterin wirkt kompetent
2. Die Beraterin wirkt qualifiziert
3. Die Beraterin wirkt intelligent
4. Die Beraterin wirkt fähig

Consumer Animosity:

1. Ich mag die USA als Land nicht.
2. Ich empfinde Wut gegenüber den USA.
3. Ich lehne die Politik der USA ab.
4. Aufgrund der politischen Handlungen der USA empfinde ich negative Gefühle gegenüber den USA.
5. Ich fühle mich durch die USA bedroht.
6. Ich habe Angst, dass die politischen Handlungen der USA mein eigenes Leben betreffen können

Control Variables:

In welchem Land sind Sie überwiegend aufgewachsen?

1. Deutschland
2. Österreich
3. Anderes Land
4. Möchte ich nicht beantworten

Haben Sie einen persönlichen Bezug zu den USA (z. B. durch Familie, Freunde, Herkunft oder längeren Aufenthalt)?

1. Ja
2. Nein
3. Möchte ich nicht beantworten

Manipulation/Attention Checks:

Wie wird die Institution beschrieben?

1. Als kleine, wenig bekannte Finanzinstitution ohne besondere Auszeichnungen
2. Als große, bekannte Finanzinstitution mit hoher Reputation
3. Als mittelgroße Finanzinstitution mit sehr schlechter Bewertung

Wonach fragt Frau Kirschner im Telefonat?

1. Nach dem beruflichen Hintergrund
2. Nach der aktuellen Zinspolitik
3. Nach den finanziellen Zielen, dem geplanten Zeitraum und der Sparform

Appendix E: ANCOVA Results

Table E1. ANCOVA results for perceived competence

Predictor	df	F	p	η^2
Accent	1	0.73	.395	.00
Institutional prestige	1	0.04	.844	.00
Consumer animosity	1	0.33	.565	.00
Nationality (control)	1	0.06	.800	.00
Personal ties to the US (control)	1	0.11	.746	.00
Accent x Consumer animosity	1	3.96	.048	.02
Accent x Institutional prestige	1	0.01	.938	.00

Table E2. ANCOVA results for perceived warmth

Predictor	df	F	p	η^2
Accent	1	0.14	.706	.00
Institutional prestige	1	1.12	.291	.01
Consumer animosity	1	2.29	.132	.01
Nationality (control)	1	0.18	.668	.00
Personal ties to the US (control)	1	0.14	.709	.00
Accent x Consumer animosity	1	6.28	.013	.03
Accent x Institutional prestige	1	0.00	.973	.00

Appendix F: ANCOVA Results (Reduced Sample)

Table F1. ANCOVA results for perceived competence

Predictor	df	F	p	η^2
Accent	1	0.47	.496	.00
Institutional Prestige	1	1.05	.309	.00
Consumer Animosity	1	0.65	.421	.01
Personal ties to the US (control)	1	0.00	.957	.00
Nationality (control)	1	0.01	.912	.00
Accent x Consumer animosity	1	6.06	.015	.05
Accent x Institutional prestige	1	0.13	.716	.00

Table F2. ANCOVA results for perceived warmth

Predictor	df	F	p	η^2
Accent	1	1.44	.233	.01
Institutional prestige	1	0.00	.954	.00
Consumer animosity	1	0.34	.563	.00
Personal ties to the US (control)	1	0.10	.758	.00
Nationality (control)	1	0.64	.424	.01
Accent x Consumer animosity	1	6.35	.013	.05
Accent x Institutional prestige	1	0.80	.782	.00