

**Trusting the “Look and Feel”: Situational Normality, Situational Aesthetics, and the  
Perceived Trustworthiness of Organizations**

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**TRUSTING THE “LOOK AND FEEL”:  
SITUATIONAL NORMALITY, SITUATIONAL AESTHETICS, AND  
THE PERCEIVED TRUSTWORTHINESS OF ORGANIZATIONS**

We conducted two studies examining how the “look and feel” of an organization shapes newcomers’ trust in that organization. More specifically, we examined the effects of situational normality—the degree to which the work setting appears customary, with everything in proper order. We then introduced the construct of situational aesthetics—the degree to which the work setting has a pleasing and attractive appearance. A field study of new accountants revealed that situational normality and situational aesthetics had indirect effects on trust through perceived trustworthiness, with trust going on to predict coworker ratings of learning behavior. We then replicated those trustworthiness findings in a laboratory setting. Taken together, our results suggest that newcomer trust formation may be shaped by aspects of the work setting that have been heretofore ignored by trust scholars.

“A discreet logo at the top of one of the towers is the only outward sign of having reached the European headquarters of one of the world’s largest accountancy firms... On entering the building, one encounters a lobby designed so that the head of any newcomer will ineluctably lean backwards to follow a succession of floors rising up to apparent infinity, and in the process dwell—as the cathedral-builders once invited one to do with their vaulted naves—on the respect that must be owed to those responsible for putting up and managing this colossus... Everything... appears elegant and well-maintained. There are none of the cobwebs endemic to the ordinary world. People cross the corridors and elevated walkways with purpose... To feel at home in the office is not to notice the strange silver sculpture in the lobby and to forget how alien the place felt on the first day” (from *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work* by Alain de Botton, 2009).

Thousands of employees around the world are having their first day today—beginning work in a new organization. As they do, one of the questions foremost on their minds may be, “Can I trust this organization?” (Lind, 2001). Newcomers who develop a sense of trust in their organization may take chances during their work day—experimenting with new skills, asking for additional feedback, and so forth (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). Newcomers who do not may struggle with their focus—monitoring what occurs around them while planning for negative contingencies (Mayer & Gavin, 2005). Understanding newcomer trust is important because first impressions are often surprisingly accurate (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992) and can have long-lasting effects on attitudes and behaviors (Human, Sandstrom, Biesanz, & Dunn, 2013). Negative impressions can also have more immediate consequences, as one estimate suggests that 40% of employees who quit do so within their first six months (Vaccaro, 2014). For these reasons, trust formation remains a vital interest for trust scholars.

Unfortunately, scholars’ understanding of trust formation remains limited. Most models in the trust literature can be classified as *rational/historical models* (Kramer, 1999; see also Weber, Malhotra, & Murnighan, 2005) that emphasize the *systematic gathering of straightforwardly relevant data* on trustworthiness (Jones & George, 1998; Kee & Knox, 1970; Lewicki & Bunker, 1996; Mayer et al, 1995; McAllister, 1995). The most dominant of these is

Mayer et al.'s (1995) integrative model, which argues that—aside from being colored by their trust propensity—newcomers should systematically gather relevant data on whether the organization possesses ability, benevolence, and integrity. For example, newcomers might attend to whether promises made during recruitment are kept (Montes & Irving, 2008), whether practices are supportive (Tan & Tan, 2000), whether rewards are appropriate (Aryee, Budhwar, & Chen, 2002), and whether the rank-and-file are civil (Miner-Rufino & Reed, 2010).

Rational/historical models, like Mayer et al. (1995), are inconsistent with the notion that newcomers often need to form trust perceptions before straightforwardly relevant data has been gathered (McKnight, Cummings, & Chervany, 1998; Meyerson, Weick, & Kramer, 1996; Wildman, Shuffler, Lazzara, Fiore, Burke, Salas, & Garven, 2012; Williams, 2001). Such models also ignore the bulk of the stimuli at play in a newcomer's organizational existence. For example, any calculus about ability, benevolence, or integrity is occurring within a physical work setting—something that has long been believed to shape employee cognitions and behaviors (Elsbach & Pratt, 2007; Zhong & House, 2012). In terms of our opening quote, could newcomers' perceptions of trustworthiness be shaped by vaulted cathedral-like ceilings, a silver sculpture in a lobby, or the sense that a new place feels “alien?” Few employers would suspect such connections, but those aspects of the work setting could shape trust formation in important ways.

The possibility that the work setting could help shape trustworthiness is important for organizational scholars for three reasons. First, organizations have more direct control over the physical setting than other potential inputs into the trust formation process. That setting could even be used as an impression management tool, falling under the “exemplification” tactic where the organization tries to model the ideal employer (e.g., Bolino, Long, & Turnley, 2016). Second,

organizations spend significant sums of money on enhancements to their physical setting. Apple is spending billions on a four-story circular building with walls fashioned with curved glass, surrounding a green space with plant life indigenous to California (Moore, 2016). Twitter spent millions refurbishing a downtown San Francisco building in an art deco style, while also installing two log cabins in one of the shared spaces (Lev-Ram, 2015). Third, drawing a connection between the physical setting and trust formation would take both literatures in new directions. Scholarly theorizing on the physical setting has ebbed these last few decades (Elsbach & Pratt, 2007; Zhong & House, 2012) and trust scholars have neglected the potential influence of factors that lack an obvious relevance to ability, benevolence, and integrity.

The purpose of our investigation is to examine how perceptions of the setting shape perceptions of trustworthiness and trust in two studies. As in the excerpt from de Botton (2009) that opens this paper, Study 1 focuses on a sample of accountants as they begin work in their new organization. Study 2 then moves to the laboratory in order to replicate the most central findings in a way where causality can be inferred. The independent variables in our investigation were inspired by one of a handful of *heuristic/categorical models* that emphasize the *less conscious consideration of implicit cues* relevant to trustworthiness (McKnight et al., 1998; Meyerson et al., 1996; Wildman et al., 2012; Williams, 2001). Specifically, McKnight et al. (1998) speculated that an important element of initial trust formation was a sense of *situational normality*—the degree to which the setting appears customary, with everything in proper order.

We also extend McKnight et al.'s (1998) speculation by introducing the construct of *situational aesthetics*—the degree to which the setting has a pleasing and attractive appearance. The term “aesthetics” is taken from the Greek *aisthànomai*, which means to perceive or feel with the senses (Gagliardi, 2006). Although more modern treatments of aesthetics can be traced to

Kant's (1790/1952) work in the realm of philosophy, our work is based on empirical perspectives from experimental and environmental psychology (for a review, see Palmer, Schloss, & Sammartino, 2013). There the study of aesthetics focuses on the mental processes that underlie evaluative experiences like "that's beautiful" or "I love that."

Our conceptual model is summarized in Figure 1. Consistent with both Mayer et al. (1995) and McKnight et al. (1998), we control for any effects of newcomer trust propensity on the perceived trustworthiness of the organization. Our focus is on how perceptions of situational normality and situational aesthetics shape the development of the perceived ability, benevolence, and integrity of the organization—cognitions that should give rise to trust among newcomers. To lend our findings a practical consequence, Study 1 includes an outcome relevant in a sample of accounting newcomers: learning behavior. This outcome reflects actions that help achieve greater understanding, adaptation, and mastery (Edmondson, 1999). Learning behavior was a natural choice for our study, given how vital it can be for newcomers in accounting (e.g., Bonner, Libby, & Nelson, 1997).

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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Our work makes a number of theoretical contributions. First, we tackle a question that represents what Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) term a "breakdown"—a phenomenon that cannot be explained using the dominant theoretical lenses in a literature. Instead, understanding how newcomer perceptions of the trustworthiness of the organization are shaped by the work setting requires the application of heuristic/categorical models that exist at the edges of the literature (McKnight et al., 1998; Meyerson et al., 1996; Wildman et al., 2012; Williams, 2001). Second,

those models have limited their focus to trust between and among people, whether two newcomers in an organization (McKnight et al., 1998), multiple newcomers to a team (Meyerson et al., 1996), trust in a new team as a unit (Wildman et al., 2012), or trust between members of different teams (Williams, 2001). We extend such models by using their logic to examine trust in the larger organization. In so doing, the “surface characteristics” of situational normality and situational aesthetics become analogs for the kinds of person characteristics that have been studied by trust scholars, including facial typicality, facial attractiveness, uniform logos, and the like (Klapper, Dotsch, Van Rooij, & Wigboldus, 2016; Rafaeli, Sagy, & Derfler-Rozin, 2008; Sofer, Dotsch, Wigboldus, & Todorov, 2015). Third, we introduce a new construct to the trust formation landscape in the form of situational aesthetics. Fourth, studies of the work setting have been rather infrequent in top organizational behavior journals (Elsbach & Pratt, 2007), despite calls for viewing the setting as a key organizational resource (Becker, 1981). Linking aspects of the setting to trust formation answers calls to shine more light on such issues.

### **STUDY 1: THEORY DEVELOPMENT**

Our use of the rational/historical label for the bulk of the models in the trust literature is taken from discussions by Kramer (1999) and Weber et al. (2005). Those authors note that most models in the literature assume that “both parties will understand the process of trust development and its inherent risks and will choose to trust and/or to engage in a trusting act carefully and deliberately” (Weber et al., 2005: 79) and that “Interactional histories give decision makers information that is useful in assessing others’ dispositions, intentions, and motives. This information, in turn, provides a basis for drawing inferences regarding their trustworthiness and for making predictions about their future behavior” (Kramer, 1999: 575).

Mayer et al.'s (1995) model is an exemplar of such rational/historical conceptualizations given that it emphasizes the careful collection of data on ability, benevolence, and integrity over time, as an input into trust perceptions. Mayer et al. (1995) illustrate the mechanics of their model using the example of a protégé forming trust in a potential mentor. The protégé would be expected to systematically consider several pieces of straightforwardly relevant data, including: how knowledgeable the mentor is about the profession and company, how politically astute the mentor is with work relationships, whether past statements and actions have been consistent, whether the mentor feels some attachment for the protégé, and whether the mentor has been singled out for honorable actions. Each of these pieces of data is rational to consider, and all are based on some knowledge of the mentor's history. Indeed, such mechanics would be indicative of what psychologists term System 2 information processing: conscious, controlled, high effort, and reflective consideration of rational and explicit data (Evans, 2008).

Although rational/historical models make up the bulk of the theorizing in the trust literature, there are some models that portray trust formation differently—and in a way that is better suited to our research question. For example, Meyerson et al. (1996) argue that new members of temporary groups extrapolate data from the categories to which members seem to belong, such as imbuing “an engineer” with the qualities of “engineering.” McKnight et al. (1998) theorized that trust between two newcomers would be shaped by institutional forces—impersonal structures that suggest or signal the presence of trustworthiness. Williams (2001) argued that individuals imbue members of groups with the beliefs they feel for those groups, thereby shaping trustworthiness levels. Finally, Wildman et al. (2012) suggested that new members' trust in their team is shaped by surface-level cues and category-based preconceptions.



We label such models as heuristic/categorical because they are indicative of what psychologists term System 1 information processing: less conscious, more automatic, low effort, and perceptual consideration of heuristic and tacit data (Evans, 2008). They represent category-based models where “trust is predicated on information regarding a trustee’s membership in a social or organizational category—information which, when salient, often unknowingly influences others’ judgments about their trustworthiness” (Kramer, 1999). Many of the propositions in such models argue that “thin slices” of data—brief glimpses that lack typically relevant details—can have powerful effects on perceptions (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992). Importantly, past research suggests that impressions built on such “thin slices” can wind up being surprisingly robust and accurate (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992).

Scholars of social cognition have proposed that even when perceptions are largely based on heuristic processing (i.e., System 1), systematic processing (i.e., System 2) may play a supplementary role (Chen & Chaiken, 1999; Sloman, 1996). A core tenet of heuristic–systematic models is that people attempt to strike a balance between minimizing cognitive effort and protecting their interests. When the setting contains relevant heuristic cues, employees are likely to engage in low-effort, heuristic processing. If heuristic processing fails to bestow sufficient confidence in a judgment or potential behavior, employees are likely to engage in systematic processing to close this gap (Chen & Chaiken, 1999). Emphasizing the complementary nature of these two processes, Garfinkel (1967: 173) suggested that heuristic processing provides a starting point for systematic processing: “...in order for the person to treat rationally the one-tenth of the situation that, like an iceberg appears above the water, he must be able to treat the nine-tenths that lies below as an unquestioned...background of matters that are demonstrably relevant to his calculations, but which appear without even being noticed.”

The heuristic/categorical models in the trust literature all allow for the possibility that heuristic processing is supplemented by systematic processing. For example, Wildman et al. (2012) proposed that although swift-forming teams determine the trustworthiness of new teams through the use of heuristics, they may supplement this process with a conscious reflection on the available information. Likewise, McKnight et al.'s (1998) proposals are based on Garfinkel's (1963) work on normality, which argues that this primarily heuristic process is supplemented by a rational process. Following this conceptual work, we focus on the heuristic processes of situational normality and situational aesthetics while allowing for the supplementary role of rational processing.

To date, heuristic/categorical models have been focused on explaining trust in other people (McKnight et al., 1998; Meyerson et al., 1996; Wildman et al., 2012; Williams, 2001). In this way, such models echo recent work on the effects of facial characteristics on perceived trustworthiness. For example, Sofer, Dotsch, Wigboldus, and Todorov (2015) examined the linkage between facial typicality and facial attractiveness on the perceived trustworthiness of the person being pictured. As another example, Wilson and Rule (2015) showed that judgments about how trustworthy criminals' faces looked predicted sentencing decisions, even in the presence of more seemingly relevant data (see also Wilson & Rule, 2016). Applying such findings to a protégé forming trust in a potential mentor, the results suggest that the protégé might be influenced by how typical the mentor's face looks, or how attractive it seems.

Our examination of the effects of the physical work setting on newcomers' trust in the organization will use faces as a metaphor for the "look and feel" of the place. Just as faces can look typical and attractive, so too can the work setting look normal and aesthetically pleasing. Although the bulk of the trust literature has focused on trust between individuals, scholars have

proposed that employees also form trust in their organizations as “generalized, and perhaps anthropomorphic” entities (Whitener, 1997: 400; see also Gillespie & Dietz, 2009; Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Robinson, 1996; Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007; Zhang, Tsui, Song, Li, & Jia, 2008). Employees are exposed to a variety of practices, decisions, and experiences which can not be attributed to a particular individual or group within the organization. As such, employees distill these experiences into a global perception that is ascribed to “the organization” as a discrete entity (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986; Levinson, 1965; Wayne, Shore, & Liden, 1997; Whitener, 1997). Supporting this perspective, empirical studies have demonstrated that employees do form trust in their organizations (e.g., Lo & Aryee, 2003; Montes & Irving, 2008; Robinson, 1996; Robinson & Morrison, 2000; Zhang et al., 2008), and trust in the organization is distinguishable from trust in a supervisor (e.g., Aryee et al., 2002; Colquitt, Baer, Long, & Halvorsen-Ganepola, 2014; Tan & Tan, 2000).

Of all the heuristic/categorical models, McKnight et al.’s (1998) is most relevant to our research question given its focus on impersonal and institutional cues. One of those cues was situational normality, which the authors described using the example of a customer walking into a bank. The physical setting in banks is typically clean and uncluttered, often finished with wood and marble trim. McKnight et al. (1998) argued that such cues connote both conscientiousness and prosperity, notions amenable to the management of one’s money by a stranger. Although McKnight et al. (1998) focused on the setting enhancing the perceived trustworthiness of a bank employee, our theorizing would extend that notion to the bank itself, as perceived by the employees working in it. As Garfinkel (1963) suggested, normalcy, typicality, and properness are valued commodities for social order. In contrast, the “nastiness of surprise” can make people feel both confused and uncomfortable (Garfinkel, 1963: 187).

We argue that situational normality can enhance the perceived trustworthiness of the organization for both heuristic (i.e., System 1) and systematic (i.e., System 2) reasons. Beginning with the former, scholars note that heuristic processing relies on the activation and application of relevant rules and shortcuts (Chen & Chaiken, 1999; Evans, 2008). Because it is less conscious than systematic processing, it is vital in periods where cognitive capacity is strained. We propose that newcomers are able to absorb the normality of a setting fairly quickly, with that sense feeding into perceived trustworthiness in two ways. First, given the importance of predictability to trust (Mayer et al., 1995), newcomers could activate and apply a “what is typical is good” heuristic that shapes perceptions of ability, benevolence, and integrity. Second, that sense of normalcy could feed into perceived trustworthiness through the confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998). Here the sense that the look and feel of the organization is normal would create a self-fulfilling prophecy that its capability, supportiveness, and character are—at least—not atypical (McKnight et al., 1998). Although such mechanics might not foster especially high levels of trustworthiness, they should at least prevent especially negative perceptions.

In a supplementary systematic process, newcomers could explicitly use situational normality as data consciously relevant to the organization’s ability, benevolence, and integrity. For example, the sense that the environment is similar to other organizations in the industry could point to prior benchmarking efforts—signaling a certain level of ability. Alternatively, newcomers could presume that the normality is an explicit attempt to create an environment of psychological comfort. One could also assume that the organization had been receptive to past complaints about unusual or atypical features. In either event, such concern or receptivity would signal a certain level of benevolence or integrity.

We are not aware of any tests of McKnight et al.'s (1998) situational normality construct within organizational behavior. Findings from three other literatures are indirectly relevant, however. First, information systems research in the area of e-commerce has shown that the degree to which website experiences are similar to brick-and-mortar experiences predicts the perceived trustworthiness of the vendor (Gu, Lee, & Suh, 2009; see also McKnight, Choudhury, & Kacmar, 2002; Gefen, Karahanna, & Straub, 2003). Second, Sofer et al.'s (2015) study of facial typicality and perceived trustworthiness revealed a strong linkage. Using composite photography in the laboratory, the authors arranged 11 faces on a continuum ranging from atypical and unattractive to atypical and attractive, with the typical face laying at the midpoint. The researchers then asked participants to rate the perceived attractiveness and perceived trustworthiness of the faces. The results revealed a curvilinear relationship, such that perceived trustworthiness was maximized at the midpoint, with the most typical face. Third, Lau, Lam, and Deutsch Salamon (2008) examined the effects of employee–manager demographics on the perceived trustworthiness of the manager. Rather than trustworthiness being maximized with shared demographics in dyads, trustworthiness was maximized when the manager had a typical demographic profile. We expect that same “what is typical is good” effect to be seen when evaluating the perceived trustworthiness of organizations.

*Hypothesis 1. Newcomer perceptions of situational normality are positively related to the perceived trustworthiness of the organization.*

Sofer et al.'s (2015) findings for the attractiveness of faces raises interesting questions about newcomer reactions to the work setting. Whereas perceived attractiveness increased linearly as the faces on the continuum became more attractive, perceived trustworthiness was lower for atypical but attractive faces than it was for typical faces. Should the sense that the

setting is aesthetically pleasing—artistic, beautiful, and tasteful—have no influence on the perceived trustworthiness of the organization? Do organizations only have to strive to look typical, with no more ambitious goal for fostering trustworthiness? Returning again to de Botton's (2009) excerpt that opens this paper, can companies gain not just by making a setting feel familiar rather than "alien," but also from atmospheric elements like silver sculptures and vaulted ceilings?

The scientific study of aesthetics focuses on the antecedents and consequences of evaluative experiences in response to scenes, objects, and events (Palmer et al., 2013). Like situational normality, a certain degree of subjectivity should be inherent in situational aesthetics. Some aspects of a setting could seem more beautiful to some newcomers than to others, just as some aspects could seem more typical to some newcomers than to others. That said, there are some elements that reliably elicit positive aesthetic reactions, including natural decor, more saturated colors, high quality lighting, clear and ordered arrangement of elements, and proportions that reflect the "golden ratio" of a rectangle (Bitner, 1992; Elsbach & Pratt, 2007; McCoy & Evans, 2002; Palmer et al., 2013).

We argue that situational aesthetics can also enhance the perceived trustworthiness of the organization for both heuristic (i.e., System 1) and systematic (i.e., System 2) reasons. Beginning with the former, one of the most oft-activated and applied heuristics is "what is beautiful is good" (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972). Studies of interpersonal reactions have shown that more attractive people are viewed as being more intellectually competent, having more concern for others, and having more integrity (Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991). This research shows that attractiveness can be used as a stereotype that impacts social cognition, saving cognitive effort on the part of the perceiver. If newcomers use a similar heuristic for

situational aesthetics, such judgments could color subsequent perceptions of trustworthiness through the confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998). Here the sense that the look and feel of the organization is beautiful would create a self-fulfilling prophecy that its capability, supportiveness, and character are also high.

In a supplementary systematic process, newcomers could also use situational aesthetics as data consciously relevant to the organization's ability, benevolence, and integrity. This possibility is notable, as one could envision newcomers giving organizations more "credit" for aesthetics than for normality. Indeed, the quality of the materials in an organization's setting is used as one marker of status (Elsbach & Pratt, 2007). Moreover, although some employees find it difficult to verbalize aesthetic issues (Taylor, 2002), the work setting is an input into sensemaking processes (Rafaeli & Vilnai-Yavetz, 2004; Vilnai-Yavetz, Rafaeli, & Yaacov, 2005). In this way, the sense that the environment is beautiful could point to a bigger budget for the organization, or taking more time and care to choose talented architects or designers. Alternatively, newcomers could presume that aesthetics are an explicit attempt to please or inspire employees. In either case, such interpretations would support perceived trustworthiness.

*Hypothesis 2. Newcomer perceptions of situational aesthetics are positively related to the perceived trustworthiness of the organization.*

McKnight et al.'s (1998) model depicts perceptions of trustworthiness as going on to shape trust itself. More specifically, the authors argue that the sense that a trustee is competent, benevolent, and honest will shape whether trustors intend to accept vulnerability to them. In our context, the question becomes whether perceiving that an organization is more trustworthy encourages newcomers to be willing to "stick their necks out" when making work decisions, to speak candidly about work matters, and to grant the organization significant control over their

career. Of course, that presumed connection between perceived trustworthiness and intentions to trust is foundational to the trust literature, with Lewis and Weigert (1985: 970) noting that “we cognitively choose whom we will trust in which respects and under what circumstances, and we base the choice on what we take to be ‘good reasons,’ constituting evidence of trustworthiness.”

The portion of McKnight et al.’s (1998) model that connects trustworthiness to trust is functionally similar to Mayer et al.’s (1995) model. Those authors argued that the “good reasons” that encourage trustors to accept vulnerability to trustees tend to cluster into the categories of ability, benevolence, and integrity. A meta-analytic test of those propositions revealed strong relationships between those trustworthiness facets and trust levels (Colquitt, Scott, & LePine, 2007), even when controlling for trust propensity. Those results reveal that perceived ability, perceived benevolence, and perceived integrity remove some of the uncertainty associated with trust, making trustors more willing to take risks (Mayer et al., 1995). More relevant to our focus, if situational normality and situational aesthetics are able to engender perceptions of trustworthiness, those effects should wind up increasing newcomer trust levels.

*Hypothesis 3. Newcomer perceptions of situational normality have a positive indirect effect on trust in the organization, through perceived trustworthiness.*

*Hypothesis 4. Newcomer perceptions of situational aesthetics have a positive indirect effect on trust in the organization, through perceived trustworthiness.*

Although McKnight et al.’s (1998) model does not include any outcomes downstream of trust, Mayer et al. (1995) argued that trust would promote risk taking in the relationship. In this way, the psychological state of being willing to accept risk results in the behavioral manifestation of assuming that risk. A number of specific constructs have assumed that risk-taking role in tests of trust theorizing, including the delegation of tasks, the disclosure of



information, and the decision to avoid monitoring or safeguards (Colquitt et al., 2007). Our goal was to include a form of risk taking that was relevant to a newcomer in an accounting firm—something that would comprise an important behavioral manifestation of the trust fostered by situational normality and situational aesthetics. Learning behavior was a natural choice, given how vital it can be for newcomers in accounting (e.g., Bonner et al., 1997).

In describing her conceptualization of learning behavior, Edmondson (1999) noted that knowledge and skill could be gained through an iterative process of reflecting upon and modifying actions. For example, employees can pause to reflect on their performance, seek help from more experienced colleagues, experiment with new approaches, and test their assumptions about task success. Importantly, Edmondson (1999) argued that such actions bring a certain risk, necessitating some sense that employees will not be punished or embarrassed for engaging in them. Although Edmondson (1999) described that sense as psychological safety, it is functionally similar to trust (Detert & Burris, 2007). Our model proposes that newcomers' trust gives them the comfort needed to engage in learning behavior. Such a finding would be important given that effective learning is one of the most pivotal challenges faced by newcomers (Ashforth, Sluss, & Harrison, 2007).

*Hypothesis 5. Newcomer trust in the organization is positively related to newcomer learning behavior.*

In testing our hypotheses, we decided to include a more rational/historical antecedent to act as a sort of baseline or control. Specifically, we included psychological contract fulfillment—an overall evaluation of whether promises and obligation have been upheld in a work relationship (Robinson & Morrison, 2000; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). The degree to which a psychological contract is fulfilled—or breached—by an organization should have implications

for its perceived competence, character, and supportiveness. Indeed, a meta-analytic review showed that psychological contract fulfillment has a strong positive relationship with trust (Bal, De Lange, Jansen, & Van Der Velde, 2008). Moreover, as rational/historical antecedents go, psychological contract fulfillment seems practical to examine among newcomers because some promises are created in the early stages of the recruitment process. If situational normality and situational aesthetics exerted effects even in the presence of such a variable, their conceptual and practical relevance would be promising.

## **STUDY 1: METHODS**

### **Sample and Procedure**

The sample for our first study was 165 accountants from a Big Four accounting firm in Ireland. Participants were recruited directly by the authors during an introductory training session on their very first day of employment. They then participated in the study throughout their 10-week training period. Participants' age averaged 22.7 years ( $SD = 1.71$ ) and ranged from 19 to 33. Fifty-two percent of the participants were female.

Data were collected across four waves, each separated by an average of 24 days. That time lag allowed newcomers sufficient time to form and develop perceptions of our variables of interest while also providing the temporal separation needed to minimize common method bias (Doty & Glick, 1998; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Newcomers reported their trust propensity at Time 1 on the very first day, given that no exposure to the work setting was needed. They then reported their situational normality, situational aesthetics, and psychological contract fulfillment at Time 2, after enough time had passed for them to gain exposure to the work setting. Time 3 assessed newcomer perceptions of perceived ability, benevolence, and integrity. Time 4 then assessed newcomer perceptions of trust in the

organization. We gathered data on learning behavior using a coworker-report at Time 4. We randomly selected those coworkers from the newcomers' primary unit, ensuring sufficient familiarity with the behaviors of interest.

## Measures

All measures used a five-point Likert scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*.

***Trust propensity.*** We measured trust propensity with nine items from MacDonald, Kessel, and Fuller (1972). Items included, "I am more trusting than a lot of people," "I have faith in human nature," and "I am less trusting than the average person" (R) ( $\alpha = .83$ ).

***Situational normality.*** Given that situational normality has not been operationalized in an organizational behavior context, we developed a measure for our study. We first created five items to reflect the conceptual definition of situational normality offered by McKnight et al. (1998). Following Hinkin and Tracey (1999), we then recruited 136 undergraduates from a large southeastern university to quantitatively evaluate the correspondence between the items and the conceptual definition. Participants were asked to rate the extent to which the items matched the definition of situational normality using a seven-point scale: 1 = *Item is an extremely bad match to the definition* to 7 = *Item is an extremely good match to the definition*. The mean level of definitional correspondence was 5.72 out of 7.00—a level that compares favorably to other uses of this procedure (Colquitt et al., 2014; Gardner, 2005; Hinkin & Tracey, 1999; Long, Baer, Colquitt, Outlaw, & Dhensa-Kahlon, 2015; Rodell, 2013). Newcomers were asked to consider the setting in which their work occurs, including the physical appearance of places and things. The items then began, "That setting...." The five validated items were "Seems normal," "Comes

across as customary,” “Appears ‘in proper order,’” “Is as one would expect,” and “Strikes me as typical” ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

***Situational aesthetics.*** We also developed our measure of situational aesthetics, given that we introduced that construct in this study. As with situational normality, we followed the content validation procedure outlined by Hinkin and Tracey (1999). Students rated the correspondence between the items and the definition of situational aesthetics, resulting in a mean of 5.23 out of 7.00. This result also compares favorably to other uses of the procedure (Colquitt et al., 2014; Gardner, 2005; Hinkin & Tracey, 1999; Long et al., 2015; Rodell, 2013). Newcomers were again asked to consider the setting in which their work occurs, including the physical appearance of places and things. The items—which began with “That setting...”—were “Is aesthetically pleasing,” “Has parts that are beautiful,” “Is tasteful,” “Has artistic elements,” and “Is lovely” ( $\alpha = .88$ ).

***Psychological contract fulfillment.*** We assessed psychological contract fulfillment using Robinson and Morrison’s (2000) five-item scale. Items included “I feel that my organization has come through in fulfilling the promises made to me when I was hired” and “So far my organization has done an excellent job of fulfilling its promises to me” ( $\alpha = .85$ ).

***Perceived trustworthiness.*** Perceptions of trustworthiness were measured using Mayer and Davis’s (1999) scales. Perceived ability was assessed with six items, including “My organization is known to be successful at the things it tries to do,” and “I feel very confident about my organization’s competencies” ( $\alpha = .95$ ). Perceived benevolence was measured with five items, including “My organization is very concerned about my welfare,” and “My organization would not knowingly do anything to hurt me” ( $\alpha = .91$ ). Finally, perceived integrity

was measured with six items, including “My organization has a strong sense of justice,” and “I like my organization’s values” ( $\alpha = .76$ ).

**Trust.** We measured trust in the organization using Mayer and Davis’s (1999) four-item scale. The items included, “I would be willing to let this organization have significant influence over my career,” and “I don’t feel the need to ‘keep an eye on’ this organization” ( $\alpha = .78$ ).

**Learning behavior.** Learning behavior was assessed by newcomers’ coworkers using Edmondson’s (1999) seven-item measure. All items began with “This coworker...” Sample items included “Frequently seeks new information that leads them to make important changes,” “Goes out and gets all the information they possibly can from others,” and “Often makes sure to stop and reflect on their work processes” ( $\alpha = .96$ ).

## STUDY 1: RESULTS

### Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations for our variables are shown in Table 1.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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### Tests of Hypotheses

We tested our hypotheses using structural equation modeling in LISREL 8.72 (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1989). We first tested the fit of our measurement model, with item-level indicators for our eight latent variables. That model demonstrated good fit to the data:  $\chi^2 (1238) = 1884.33$ ,  $p < .001$ ; comparative fit index (CFI) = .96; incremental fit index (IFI) = .96; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .05. Factor loadings had an average of .75. Moreover, our measurement model yielded better fit than two competing models. The first collapsed situational

normality and situational aesthetics into one work setting factor ( $\chi^2_{\text{diff}} [8] = 426.271, p < .001$ ). The second collapsed ability, benevolence, and integrity into one perceived trustworthiness factor ( $\chi^2_{\text{diff}} [15] = 694.74, p < .001$ ).

Having found support for our measurement model, we moved on to testing the structural model in Figure 1. We allowed the four exogenous variables—trust propensity, situational normality, situational aesthetics, and psychological contract fulfillment—to covary, as is the default in LISREL. We also included direct paths from situational normality and situational aesthetics to trust. Such paths must be included to estimate the indirect effects predicted in Hypotheses 3 and 4 (MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002). The resulting structure is shown in Figure 2 and exhibited good fit to the data:  $\chi^2 (1249) = 1998.64, p < .001$ ; CFI = .95; IFI = .95; RMSEA = .05.

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Insert Figure 2 about here

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Hypothesis 1 predicted that newcomer perceptions of situational normality would be positively related to the perceived trustworthiness of the organization. That prediction was partially supported, given that situational normality was significantly related to perceived ability ( $\beta = .17$ ) and perceived integrity ( $\beta = .14$ ), but not perceived benevolence ( $\beta = -.01$ ).

Hypothesis 2 predicted that newcomer perceptions of situational aesthetics would be positively related to the perceived trustworthiness of the organization. That prediction was partially supported, given that situational aesthetics was significantly related to perceived benevolence ( $\beta = .26$ ) and perceived integrity ( $\beta = .17$ ), but not perceived ability ( $\beta = .10$ ).

Hypothesis 3 predicted that newcomer perceptions of situational normality would have a positive indirect effect on trust in the organization, through perceived trustworthiness. We tested this prediction using LISREL's effect decomposition statistics. Situational normality had an indirect effect of .04 on trust through perceived ability, benevolence, and integrity, which was not statistically significant.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that newcomer perceptions of situational aesthetics would have a positive indirect effect on trust in the organization, through perceived trustworthiness. We tested this prediction using LISREL's effect decomposition statistics. Situational aesthetics had an indirect effect of .17 on trust through perceived ability, benevolence, and integrity, which was statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ).

Hypothesis 5 predicted that newcomer trust in the organization would be positively related to newcomer learning behavior. This prediction was supported as trust was significantly related to that criterion ( $\beta = .22$ )<sup>1</sup>.

Taken together, these results illustrate that newcomer perceptions of situational normality and situational aesthetics can predict perceptions of trustworthiness, even when controlling for trust propensity and psychological contract fulfillment. The situational normality component of McKnight et al.'s (1998) model was associated with two of the three facets of perceived trustworthiness. Our addition of situational aesthetics was also associated with two of the three

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<sup>1</sup> Although not part of our formal hypotheses, our model suggests that situational normality and situational aesthetics will have serial indirect effects on learning behavior through perceived trustworthiness and trust in the organization. Supplemental analyses revealed several significant serial indirect effects: situational normality → perceived integrity → trust in the organization → learning behavior = .01; situational aesthetics → perceived benevolence → trust in the organization → learning behavior = .02; situational aesthetics → perceived integrity → trust in the organization → learning behavior = .02;  $p < .05$ , one-tailed. These results provide additional support for the practical significance of situational normality and situational aesthetics.

facets. Such effects wound up having practical significance given that newcomers who trusted more also engaged in more learning behavior.

## **STUDY 2: THEORY DEVELOPMENT**

Of course, it is possible that there are newcomer traits other than trust propensity that influence the connections in Figure 1. There may also be unmeasured contextual variables that could inflate some of our observed relationships. We therefore sought to replicate these findings in a laboratory study where situational normality and situational aesthetics would be manipulated via random assignment. Given that the effects of those variables on perceived ability, benevolence, and integrity lay at the core of our contribution, our Study 2 focused specifically on testing Hypotheses 1 and 2.

At the suggestion of anonymous reviewers, we also used our data collection in Study 2 to consider two additional issues in our theorizing. The first issue concerns the connection between situational normality and perceived benevolence, which was non-significant in both our correlation matrix and our structural equation modeling results. In reflecting on what makes perceived benevolence different from perceived ability and perceived integrity, we drew insights from the negativity bias literature (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). That literature has identified constructs, like morality, where the “diagnosticity” of positive and negative information varies. Being viewed as morally good requires always being good, whereas being viewed as immoral can occur with several mixes of good and bad actions (Baumeister et al., 2001; Skowronski & Carlston, 1992). The same could be true for integrity and ability, with any departure from normality in the work setting becoming unusually diagnostic for those trustworthiness forms. Perceived benevolence does not seem to have that quality, and also seems to be built from the commission of “extra good” actions as



much as the omission of bad ones. Merely being normal may not be enough to illustrate concern, to show that employee needs and desire are important, or to signal helpfulness. We therefore examined whether Study 2 would replicate that null result for situational normality and perceived benevolence.

The second issue concerns the role played by psychological contract fulfillment. Given our use of experimental manipulations with random assignment in Study 2, there is no value in “controlling for” psychological contract fulfillment when examining the effects of situational normality and situational aesthetics. However, it may be reasonable to expect that rational/historical factor to interact with our heuristic/categorical antecedents. Specifically, models of information processing argue that the relative prominence of System 2 versus System 1 processing depends on individuals’ cognitive capacities and the accessibility of relevant heuristics (Chen & Chaiken, 1999; Evans, 2008). The less conscious, more automatic mechanics of System 1 will loom larger when cognitive capacity is low and when access to heuristics is high. We would argue that experiencing psychological contract breach triggers information processing that is especially controlled and effortful. Employees who experience broken promises must grapple with unmet expectations, with the sense that norms have been violated, and what all that means for the employer as an entity (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). Such reactions should simultaneously stretch cognitive capacity while also making heuristics about that entity more accessible. Put differently, employees’ rumination should make organization-referenced heuristics more salient, just as the effort-saving value of those heuristics becomes more needed. We therefore expect that psychological contract fulfillment will interact with situational normality and aesthetics, such that the latter two variables are more impactful under conditions of breach.

## STUDY 2: METHODS

### Sample and Procedure

The sample for our study was 1039 participants from Amazon's *Mechanical Turk* (Paolacci & Chandler, 2014). Participants' age averaged 34.88 years ( $SD = 10.82$ ). Fifty percent of the participants were female.

The participants were asked to assume that they had just started working at a professional services firm that offers accounting, consulting, and financial advisory services. This frame therefore matched the sample and setting in Study 1. The participants were told that their firm "ranks around the midpoint of its peer group in market share, profitability, and other aspects of corporate performance. It also ranks around the midpoint in rankings that consider 'softer' issues, like treatment of employees, corporate social reputation, and other managerial practices. Those rankings are offered by *Fortune*, *Glassdoor*, and *Bloomberg Businessweek*." That information was meant to provide some rational/historical data that could be relevant to perceptions of ability, benevolence, and integrity, albeit data that would be supplemented by our manipulations.

Situational normality, situational aesthetics, and psychological contract fulfillment were then manipulated using a 3 (normality: low, medium, or high) x 3 (aesthetics: low, medium, or high) x 2 (contract fulfillment: low or high) between-subjects design, with participants randomly assigned to conditions. The manipulations were introduced by explaining that the participants had been working at the firm for three weeks and had been struck by three things. The text of the situational normality and situational aesthetics manipulations is shown in Tables 2a–2b. For psychological contract fulfillment, participants were told: "The 'contract' that was created from your conversations with organizational recruiters and representatives has been

[fulfilled/breached] so far. That is, the promises made to you by the organization have been [kept/broken], and it has [upheld/not upheld] its ‘end of the deal.’”

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Insert Tables 2a–2b about here

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## Measures

All measures used a five-point Likert scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*.

**Manipulation checks.** We verified the efficacy of our manipulations using the situational normality, situational aesthetics, and psychological contract fulfillment scales used in Study 1. Their coefficient alphas were .96, .96, and .97, respectively.

**Perceived trustworthiness.** Perceptions of trustworthiness were again measured using Mayer and Davis’s (1999) scales. The coefficient alphas were as follows: perceived ability (.92), perceived benevolence (.95), and perceived integrity (.93).

## STUDY 2: RESULTS

### Manipulation Checks

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) yielded a strong positive main effect of the situational normality manipulation on the normality check ( $F = 967.26, p < .001, M = 1.89$  vs.  $3.09$  vs.  $4.26$ ). Similarly, ANOVA yielded a strong positive main effect of the situational aesthetics manipulation on the aesthetics check ( $F = 1930.54, p < .001, M = 1.62$  vs.  $2.72$  vs.  $4.50$ ). Finally, ANOVA yielded a strong positive main effect of the psychological contract fulfillment manipulation on the fulfillment check ( $F = 6193.54, p < .001, M = 1.59$  vs.  $4.55$ ). All other effects, including main effects of manipulations on unintended manipulation checks and

interaction effects on manipulation checks, were much weaker or near zero. Taken together, these results suggest that the experimental manipulations were received as intended.

### **Tests of Hypotheses**

Hypotheses 1 and 2 predicted that perceptions of situational normality and situational aesthetics, respectively, would be positively related to the perceived trustworthiness of the organization. Figures 3 and 4 show the means for perceived ability, benevolence, and integrity across the situational normality and situational aesthetics conditions. ANOVA yielded a positive main effect for situational normality on perceived ability ( $F = 12.26, p < .001$ ) and a positive effect on perceived integrity that approached significance ( $F = 2.58, p < .08$ ). As in Study 1, there were virtually no differences across conditions for perceived benevolence. Hypothesis 1 was therefore supported with the revised pattern. ANOVA also yielded positive main effects for situational aesthetics on all three trustworthiness facets: perceived ability ( $F = 32.14, p < .001$ ), perceived benevolence ( $F = 7.90, p < .001$ ), and perceived integrity ( $F = 12.53, p < .001$ ). Hypothesis 2 was therefore fully supported.

Turning to the results for psychological contract fulfillment, ANOVA also yielded positive main effects on all three trustworthiness facets: perceived ability ( $F = 603.63, p < .001, M = 2.88$  vs.  $3.86$ ), perceived benevolence ( $F = 1388.86, p < .001, M = 1.95$  vs.  $3.53$ ), and perceived integrity ( $F = 1975.68, p < .001, M = 2.03$  vs.  $3.71$ ). More relevant to our speculation above, ANOVA also yielded two statistically significant interaction effects between the psychological contract fulfillment manipulation and our situational manipulations. Specifically, the results revealed a situational normality X psychological contract fulfillment interaction for perceived ability ( $F = 9.18, p < .001$ ) and a situational aesthetics X psychological contract fulfillment interaction for perceived ability ( $F = 5.16, p < .01$ ). Both interactions are shown in

Figure 5. The patterns illustrate that variations in situational normality or aesthetics had little effect on perceived ability when psychological contracts were fulfilled. When such contracts were breached, however, increases in normality or aesthetics were indeed associated with increases in perceived ability.

## DISCUSSION

The first days walking the halls of an organization can be overwhelming for any new recruit. There is so much data to gather in hopes of gauging the organization's trustworthiness, from traditional business metrics to treatment of employees to supportiveness of practices to corporate social performance. In addition, such data may be not-yet-available, ambiguous, complex, or contradictory. This situation presents something of a puzzle for the rational/historical models of trust formation that dominate the literature (Jones & George, 1998; Kee & Knox, 1970; Lewicki & Bunker, 1996; Mayer et al., 1995; McAllister, 1995). Such models rely on the systematic gathering of straightforwardly relevant data on trustworthiness—something that may be impossible or impractical for most newcomers.

With that in mind, we built and tested theory on whether perceptions of trustworthiness might depend, say, on the sense that a place feels “alien” or the presence of vaulted ceilings and silver sculptures. Put differently, we argued that the “look and feel” of an organization could help shape the perceived trustworthiness of it. Our theorizing was inspired by the heuristic/categorical models of trust formation that lay at the edges of the literature (McKnight et al., 1998; Meyerson et al., 1996; Wildman et al., 2012; Williams, 2001). We argued that their focus on less conscious consideration of implicit cues—of System 1 processing rather than System 2 processing (Chen & Chaiken, 1999; Evans, 2008)—would better match the trust formation demands faced by newcomers. In particular, we applied McKnight et al.'s (1998)

concept of situational normality to a newcomer's trust in the organization while introducing the construct of situational aesthetics.

What stands out most from our results is that situational normality and situational aesthetics both exhibited significant relationships with perceived trustworthiness. Having a sense that the work setting was normal, customary, and proper, or that it was pleasing, beautiful, and tasteful, was associated with viewing the organization as able, benevolent, and of high integrity. Those effects occurred both in a field study of newcomers in accounting and in a laboratory study that modeled a similar context. Those effects also occurred while controlling for trust propensity—a construct believed to be especially pivotal for newcomers (McKnight et al., 1998)—and for psychological contract fulfillment—a strong rational/historical driver of trust (Bal et al., 2008). Moreover, those results had practical significance because newcomers' trust in the organization was associated with learning behavior—a critical outcome in accounting (Bonner et al., 1997).

### **Theoretical Contributions**

These results offer a number of theoretical contributions. Our focus on newcomer trust formation uses a “breakdown” to illustrate a place where the consensus models in the trust literature fall short (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). Rational/historical models, like Mayer et al. (1995), seem unable to capture the psychological experience of oft-overwhelmed newcomers, and cannot explain why the “look and feel” might impact trustworthiness perceptions. As a result, our work challenges the notion that understanding trust formation only requires an appreciation of the straightforward data collection described by such theorists. Indeed, understanding that breakdown required leveraging heuristic/categorical models with a combination of theory testing, theory extending, and theory building.

We engaged in theory testing by taking an element from McKnight et al.'s (1998) model—situational normality—and operationalizing it for the first time in an organizational behavior context. Past applications of the concept have been largely confined to information systems studies of e-commerce (Gefen et al., 2003; Gu et al., 2009; McKnight et al., 2002). We engaged in theory extending by taking the person-to-person bounding of heuristic/categorical models (McKnight et al., 1998; Meyerson et al., 1996; Wildman et al., 2012; Williams, 2001) and using them to understand trust in an organization. In this way, situational normality and situational aesthetics became analogs of the facial, demographic, and other surface-level cues used to study trust between people (Klapper et al., 2016; Rafaeli et al., 2008; Sofer et al., 2015). We engaged in theory building by introducing situational aesthetics to the landscape of heuristic/categorical models. Whereas situational normality could encourage trustworthiness through a “what is typical is good” heuristic, situational aesthetics could encourage it through a “what is beautiful is good” heuristic. In this way, both heuristics represent cases where “thin slices” of data wind up impacting overall impressions (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992).

Taken together, our combination of theory testing, theory extending, and theory building results in a pattern of findings that would not be anticipated from extrapolations of existing work on trust formation. At the same time, our work lends new areas of relevance to studies on the physical work setting—an area that has grown largely dormant (Elsbach & Pratt, 2007; Zhong & House, 2012). As Zhong and House (2012: 4) summarized, “So long as physical workplace conditions do not induce negative affect...or signal the extent of organizational support (e.g., an inhumane sweatshop), whether organizational behaviors and decisions take place in well lit or dim rooms, cold or warm temperatures, or clean or messy offices, are largely considered irrelevant factors by organizational scholars.” Bringing the physical setting into the trust

literature offers one way of rediscovering the relevance of this domain, especially given the money and attention that organizations devote to it (Lev-Ram, 2015; Moore, 2016).

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Those contributions promise to open up fertile new directions for trust scholars. For example, scholars might explore whether situational normality and situational aesthetics effects are completely heuristic, or whether there is some rational element to the influence of the work setting. For example, an experience sampling methodology study could employ verbal protocol analysis (Barber & Wesson, 1998) to ask newcomers to “think out loud” about how the work setting is influencing their trust formation. Discussions of benchmarking efforts, budgets, designer choices, and company intentions would be indicative of a rational, System 2-style process. Cases where newcomers could not articulate any influence but the data again revealed relationships could be indicative of a heuristic, System 1-style process.

Future studies should also examine interactions between rational and heuristic trustworthiness antecedents. Our additional analyses in Study 2 revealed that situational normality and situational aesthetics had stronger effects on perceived ability when psychological contracts were breached. It may be that there are pivots between System 1 and System 2 processing during trust formation, with those pivots depending on combinations of rational and heuristic factors. We speculated that such pivots would be a function of individuals’ cognitive capacities and the accessibility of relevant heuristics. Different conceptualizations of dual processing paint different pictures of how System 1 and System 2 interrelate (Evans, 2008), making this an important area for future work.

Future work should also explore whether the rational vs. heuristic underpinnings of trustworthiness vary across its three facets. Meta-analytic data reveals high correlations between



perceived ability, perceived benevolence, and perceived integrity (Colquitt et al., 2007). Moreover, some antecedents seem equally relevant to all three. For example, our results for psychological contract fulfillment suggest that broken promises can signal incompetence, unsupportiveness, and poor ethics. It may be, however, that heuristic predictors allow for more between-facet differences in effects. Our non-significant correlational and direct effects of situational normality on perceived benevolence suggests some difference in mechanics for judging that facet versus perceived ability and integrity. Being “atypical” may not be as diagnostic for judging benevolence, or it may be that viewing organizations as especially caring requires something “extra” that normality does not convey.

We focused on situational normality and situational aesthetics as heuristic predictors of trust in order to draw attention to the oft-ignored role of the work setting in employee cognitions and behaviors (Elsbach & Pratt, 2007; Zhong & House, 2012). Yet, these are certainly not the only heuristic predictors of trust that newcomers may experience early on in the organization. Indeed, their experiences with other members of the organization may also be extrapolated to the organization as a whole. For example, the friendliness of the reception staff or the courtesy shown by people in the elevator may act as a heuristic predictor of the organization’s benevolence. These relational dynamics are reflected in several heuristic/categorical models of trust (i.e., McKnight et al., 1998; Meyerson et al., 1996; Wildman et al., 2012), yet remain untested. Future research should empirically examine whether these relational-type heuristic predictors are ultimately more important to early trust formation than heuristics that stem from the physical setting. This research should also consider whether the relative importance of heuristics fluctuates over time. For example, do more “relational” heuristics formed from experiences with the reception staff wane as employees gather more concrete data on their

colleagues, with the heuristics formed from the physical setting persisting given their more permanent nature?

Finally, research is needed that assumes the perspective of management. To what degree do executives in charge of physical setting decisions consider the impact of those decisions on employee reactions? Do they indeed view the physical setting as a tool for impression management—for exemplification (Bolino et al., 2016)—by seeking to become more typical and/or beautiful? It may be that such considerations are rare, currently, and there may even be a risk of “going overboard” if organizations take them too far. One could envision attempts to improve aesthetics that wind up giving employees “too much of a good thing,” or seeming like a poor use of funds with high opportunity costs. Alternatively, one could envision a physical setting being created that falls out of step with the the people who inhabit it. After all, it seems likely that heuristic/categorical processes could simultaneously consider situational normality/aesthetics and the typicality/attractiveness of salient employees. Examining the relative effects of such stimuli becomes another interesting research direction.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

The two studies described here have a number of strengths. Our field study followed new accountants from the very first day of their employment to the end of their 10-week training period. That allowed us to study trust formation during the very days and weeks that it was at its most intense. Our use of four different time periods and two different sources also allowed us to combat common method bias through temporal and source separation (Doty & Glick, 1998; Podsakoff et al., 2003). We also gathered data to validate our new measures of situational normality and situational aesthetics, with both exhibiting favorable content validity (Hinkin & Tracey, 1999). In addition, our use of random assignment in Study 2 allowed us to control for

newcomer differences other than trust propensity (Kerlinger & Lee, 2000). Of course, the marriage of the two studies—and the consistency of their results—allows us to have more confidence in the robustness and generalizability of our findings.

In terms of limitations, the linkage between trust in the organization and learning behavior in the field study was not temporally separated. Although source separation allays concerns about common method bias, that test lacks the temporal precedence between presumed cause and presumed effect that is desirable in hypothesis tests (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002). Attrition across time periods and sources also resulted in a limited sample size in Study 1. We addressed that issue in Study 2, however, by ensuring that our laboratory design had strong statistical power. Another potential limitation is that our measurement of situational normality and situational aesthetics in Study 1 occurred approximately 3 weeks after newcomers' first day on the job, with this time lag designed to allow newcomers time to form and develop perceptions of situational normality and situational aesthetics. It is possible that measuring these perceptions sooner—in the first few days or hours on the job—would have altered our results. Yet, our results in Study 2, which measured perceptions of trustworthiness only minutes after exposure to the organization's situational normality and situational aesthetics, were very similar to our results in Study 1. This suggests that the timing of the measurement would not substantially affect our conclusions. However, future research should address these temporal dynamics.

### **Practical Implications**

Our findings offer a number of practical implications. First and foremost, organizations should more carefully consider how to leverage the work setting to foster employee perceptions of trustworthiness. The value of such actions is easy to defend given all the practically meaningful outcomes that can be linked to trust. Whereas our studies focused on learning

behavior and intentions to accept a job offer, meta-analyses have linked trust to a variety of performance-related behaviors (Colquitt et al., 2007). Perhaps the first step should be to ensure that the work setting does not look too atypical. In this regard, construction, remodeling, and redecorating decisions could more carefully consider benchmarking data from relevant peers—the kinds of peers that help define “normal.” Alternatively, vendor decisions could be based on whether the vendor has serviced relevant peers and not just on vendor pricing.

Fostering situational aesthetics is likely to be more challenging than fostering situational normality, given the subjectivity involved in aesthetic judgments (Palmer et al., 2013). One helpful finding in that regard is the moderately positive correlation between situational aesthetics and situational normality in our field study. That result suggests that “not being strange” is the first step towards being aesthetically pleasing. Once that is accomplished, however, survey efforts could be used to gather data on employee preferences with respect to relevant aesthetics issues, such as lighting, colors, textures, spatial forms, internal organization, and dividing surfaces (McCoy & Evans, 2002). Such efforts could ensure that construction, remodeling, and redecorating decisions are made in a way that pleases the maximum number of people. Alternatively, such decisions could be guided by the maxims that are most universal in the study of aesthetics, such as a preference for natural decor, high-quality lighting, and an ordered arrangement of internal elements (Bitner, 1992; Elsbach & Pratt, 2007; McCoy & Evans, 2002; Palmer et al., 2013). If neither of those approaches is feasible, then organizations could consider giving newcomers more freedom to tailor their work setting to their aesthetic preferences—something that would be especially practical in closed office environments. The mere gesture of such freedom could have its own effects on perceived trustworthiness, apart from the heuristic value of an elevated sense of aesthetics.

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**TABLE 1**  
**Correlations and Descriptive Statistics for Study 1<sup>a</sup>**

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Trust propensity	3.53	0.55	.83								
2. Situational normality	4.03	0.53	.00	.87							
3. Situational aesthetics	3.47	0.73	.29*	.17*	.88						
4. Psychological contract fulfillment	4.20	0.67	.09	.18*	.24*	.85					
5. Perceived ability	4.42	0.55	.21*	.28*	.26*	.45*	.95				
6. Perceived benevolence	3.73	0.66	.21*	.13	.34*	.46*	.42*	.91			
7. Perceived integrity	3.92	0.54	.22*	.24*	.28*	.54*	.67*	.67*	.76		
8. Trust in organization	3.59	0.57	.19*	.09	.14†	.20*	.29*	.51*	.48*	.78	
9. Learning behavior	3.94	0.70	.12†	-.02	.13	.09	.10	.14†	.15*	.18*	.96

<sup>a</sup>  $n = 165$ . Coefficient alphas are on the diagonal.

†  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; two-tailed.

TABLE 2A

**Manipulation Passages for Situational Normality**

<b>Situational Normality</b>
<p>High</p> <p>The setting is very normal—being quite typical when compared to other professional services firms that you’re familiar with. The decor is as expected for this kind of firm and the atmosphere is very customary for this kind of firm. As you walk around the setting, it’s clear that things are very standard.</p>
<p>Medium</p> <p>The setting has some more normal aspects and some less normal aspects. It has things that are typical of professional services firms you’re familiar with and things that are atypical of such firms. In terms of the decor and the atmosphere, some things are as expected and others are uncustomary. As you walk around the setting, it’s clear that things lay somewhere between standard and “non-standard.”</p>
<p>Low</p> <p>The setting is not very normal—being quite atypical when compared to other professional services firms that you’re familiar with. The decor is very unusual for this kind of firm and the atmosphere is very uncustomary for this kind of firm. As you walk around the setting, it’s clear that things are very “non-standard”.</p>



TABLE 2B

**Manipulation Passages for Situational Aesthetics**

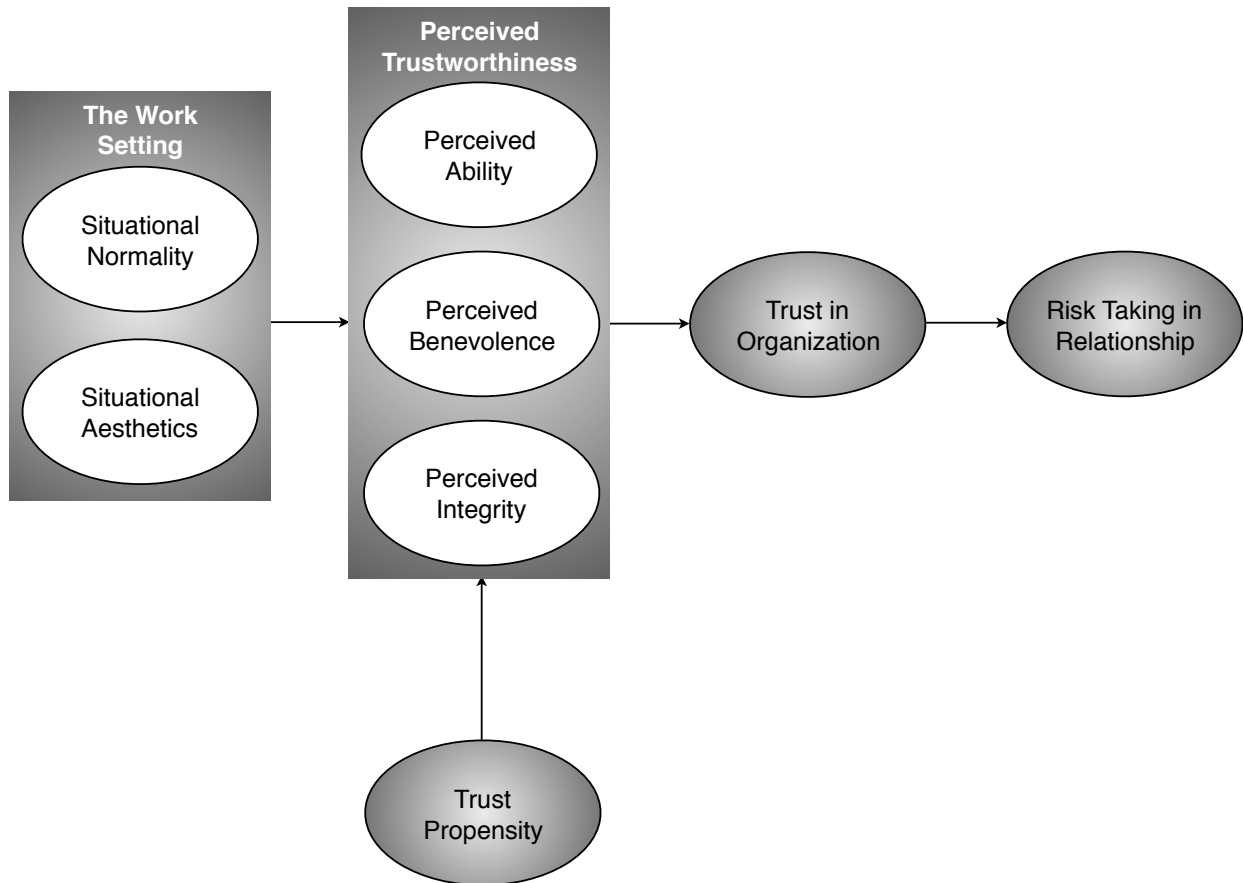
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<b>Situational Aesthetics</b>
<b>High</b>
The setting is very aesthetically pleasing—being quite beautiful in your view. The decor is very artistic and the atmosphere is very tasteful, to your eye. As you walk around, you see many aspects of the setting that are very pleasing and very lovely, relative to your tastes.
<b>Medium</b>
The setting is aesthetically “fine”—being neither beautiful nor unattractive in your view. In terms of the decor and the atmosphere, things are generally “okay” to your eye. As you walk around, you see many aspects of the setting that are “fair” or “so-so,” relative to your tastes.
<b>Low</b>
The setting is very aesthetically “un-pleasing”—being quite unattractive in your view. The decor is very bad looking and the atmosphere is very ugly, to your eye. As you walk around, you see many aspects of the setting that are very uninviting and very unappealing, relative to your tastes.

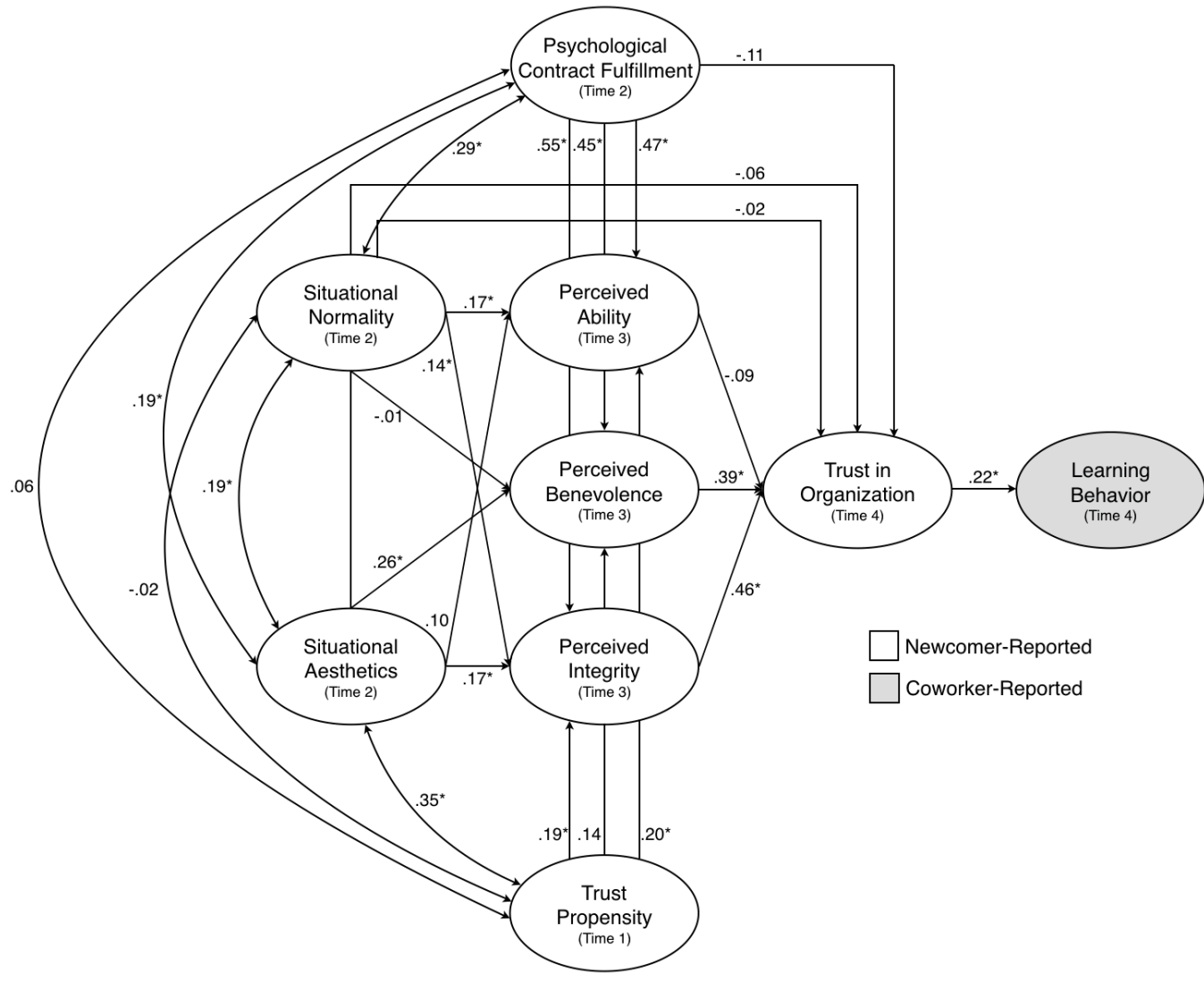
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FIGURE 1

## Conceptual Model



**FIGURE 2**  
**Structural Equation Modeling Results for Study 1**



\*  $p < .05$ , two-tailed.

FIGURE 3

## Means Across Experimental Conditions for Situational Normality

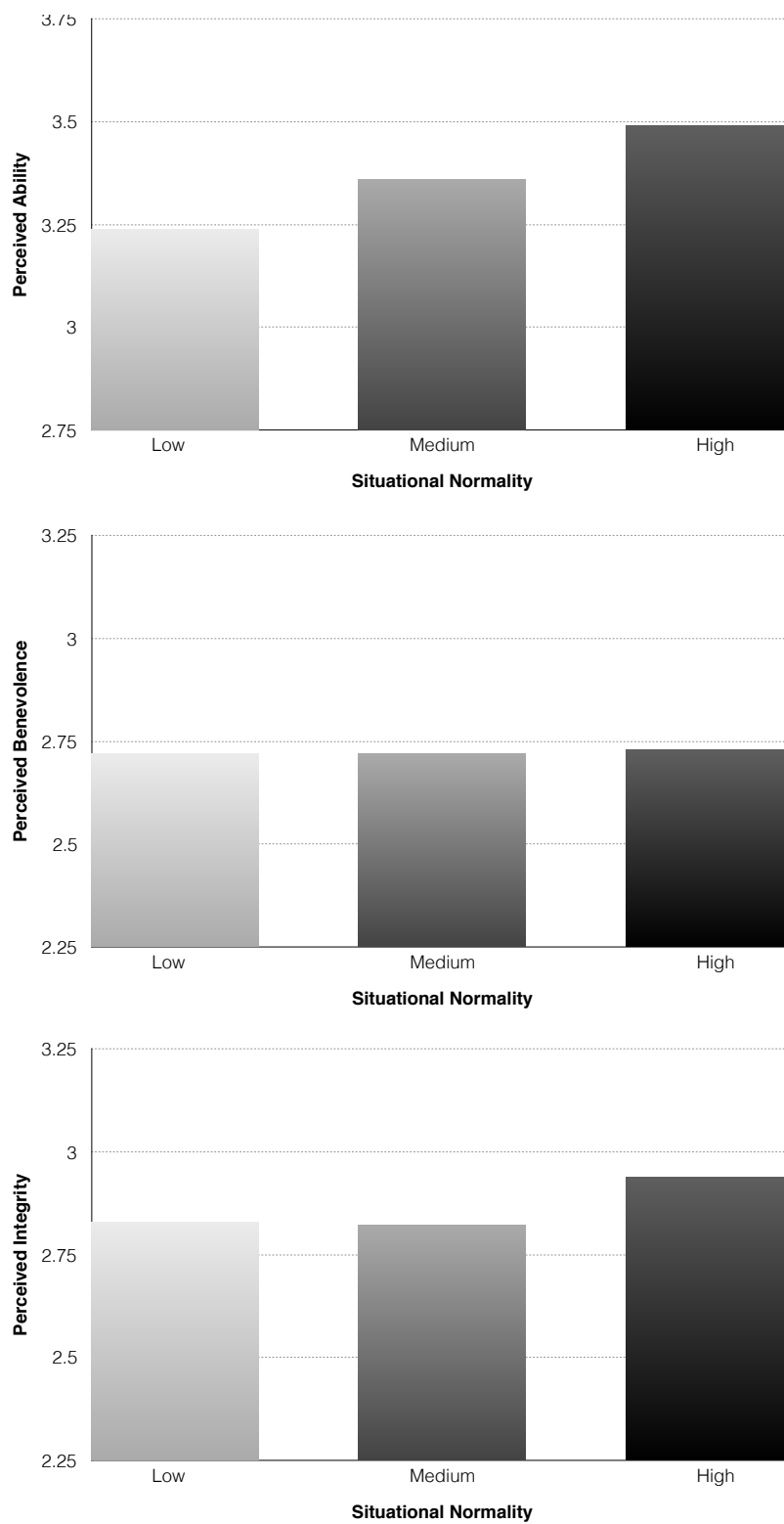


FIGURE 4

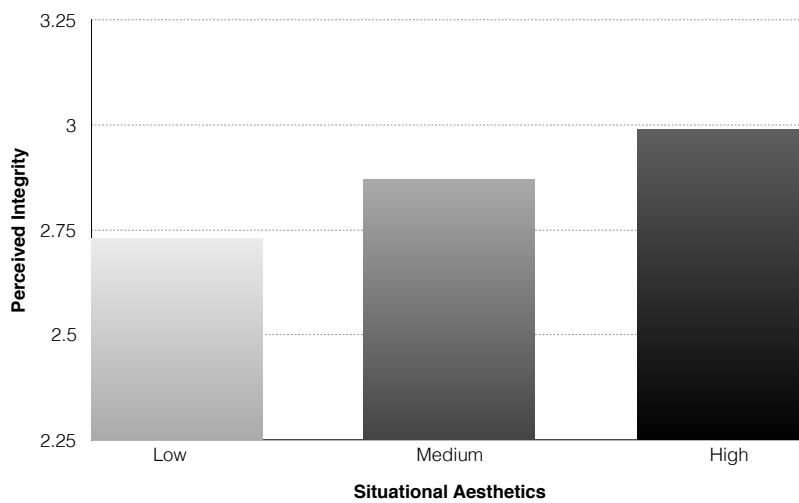
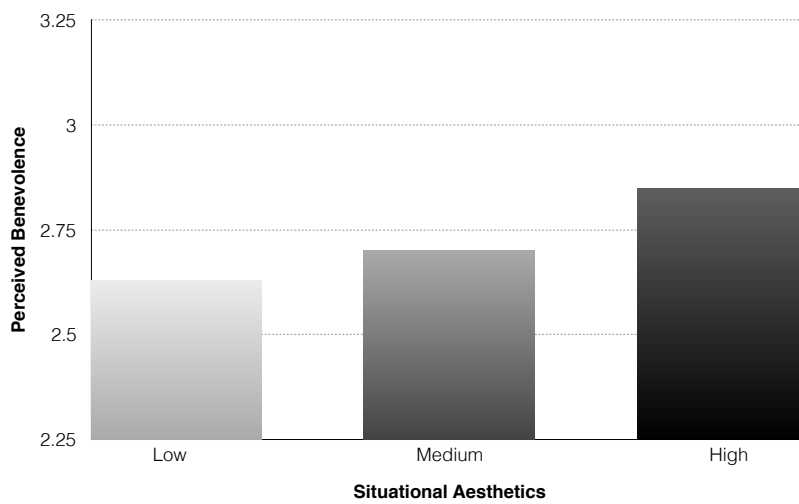
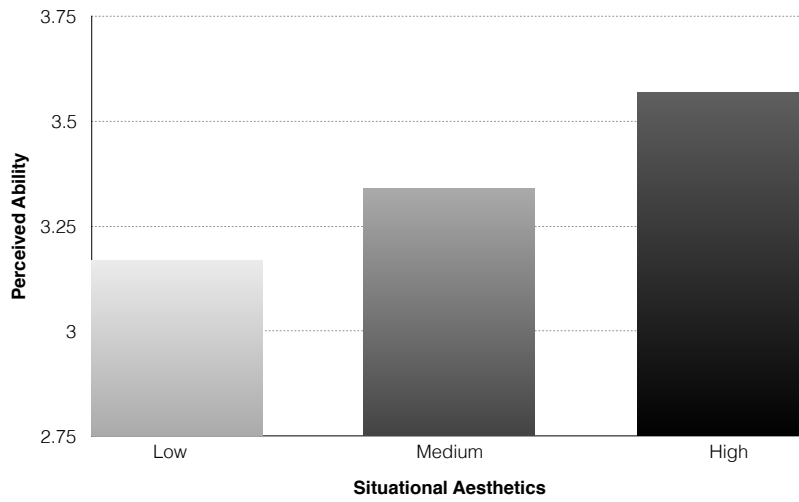
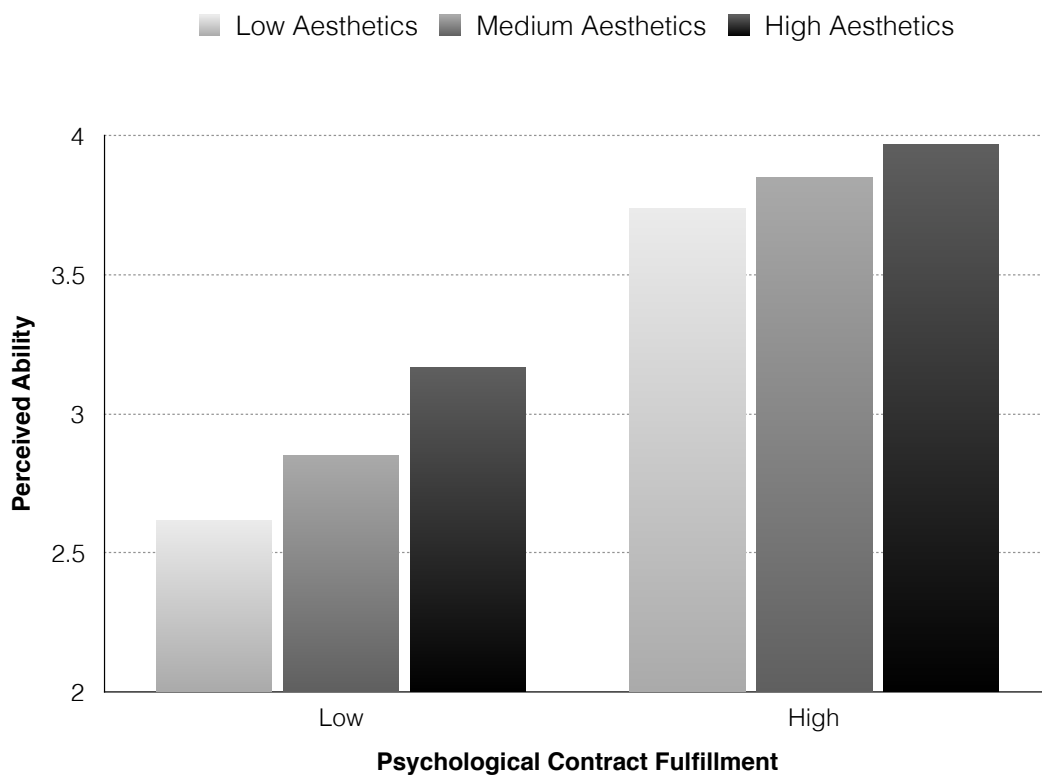
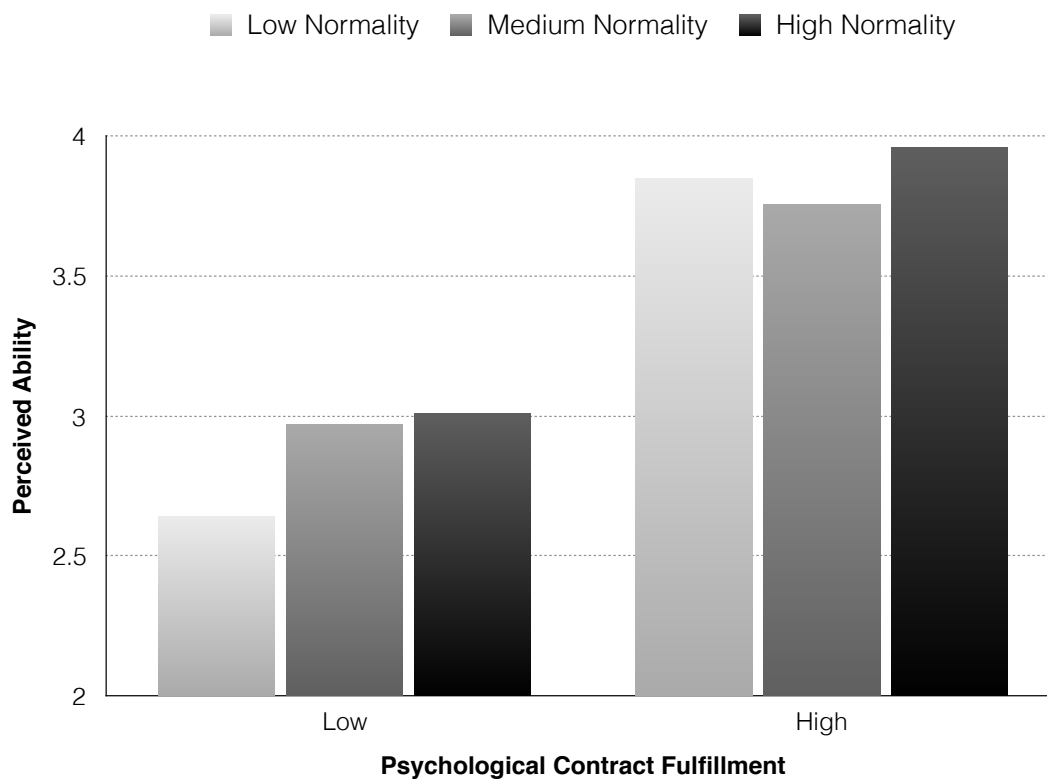
**Means Across Experimental Conditions for Situational Aesthetics**

FIGURE 5

## Interactions between Situational Variables and Psychological Contract Fulfillment



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