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Does the emotional labor of the service employee affect the self-concept of the consumer in service organization?

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Abstract

In service interactions the management of service employee's emotion through emotional labor has gained prominence and is becoming an active method to affect consumer's behavior. Several researches have indicated that self-concept of the consumer affects their buying behavior. However there is not much research to evaluate the effect of emotional labor of the service employee on the self-concept of the consumer. Based on review of literature, this paper tries to answer whether emotional labor of the service employee affects the self-concept of the consumer.

Introduction

With intensified competition the way in which a service is delivered has come to be perceived as central to organizational survival and success (Schneider & Bowen, 1985). Unlike manufacturing, service is characterized by relatively intangibility, heterogeneity, perishability and inseparability of production of service from its consumption (Cowell, 1984 as cited in Lashley, 1998). These characteristics of the service create difficulty for the consumer to isolate service quality from the quality of the service interaction. As a

result, consumer's evaluation of the nature of the service interaction, rather than just of the separate product being delivered, becomes central to the evaluation of the overall service experience and hence their buying behavior (Korczynski, 2001). Organizations, therefore, attempt to manage and control interaction between their service employees and consumers. As a result service employee has become the focus of considerable managerial intervention. Thus the focus of consumer service expands beyond the traditional economic rationales associated with the product (service) to more intangible part of the interaction i.e., the meaning and experience associated with the interaction. Since the service employee works on the boundary of the organization and performs boundary spanning roles (Tushman, 1977: 587; Friedman & Podolny, 1992), the organization has high stake on how the service employee behaves in service interactions. Recent empirical accounts of organizational initiatives in various service sector organizations have focused on the managerial attempts to mobilize the commitment of the service employee to the delivery of quality consumer service (Kinnie, et al., 2000). Since consumer's perception of the service quality is influenced by how the service employee expresses her/his emotion in service interactions (Pugh, 2001), organizations expect the service employee to manage her/his emotions to make them appropriate or consistent with a situation, a role, or a desired organizational behavior, which is called emotional labor (Mumby and Putnam, 1992: 472). Emotional labor is the effort put by the service employee to express emotions acceptable to the consumer (Hochschild, 2003; Morris and Feldman, 1996: 987; Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993: 90). Increasingly the service organizations are trying to gain competitive advantage through influencing the meaning and experience of the consumer by merchandising and performing deep

emotional labor through the service employee. In this sense, the new service firms rationalize emotional labor where service employee is expected to express appropriate emotions associated with the service. Consistent with the emotional labor of the service employee, service organizations are offering 'intangible dominant' (Lashley, 1998). Intangible dominant is the skill of the service employee in dealing with the consumer that differentiate themselves on many dimensions including, authentic service interactions. Emotional labor increasingly features in variety of services, for example, hotel and leisure (Bryman, 1999), supermarkets (Rafaeli, 1989), air travel (Hochschild, 2003), fast food (Hall, 1993), nursing home care (Lopez, 2006), and in academics (Ogbonna and Harris, 2004). In macro-level debate Gabriel and Lang (1995 as cited in Rosenthal, Peccei, and Hill, 2001) commented that consumers are identity seekers. Consistent with this assertion, recent efforts to understand the specific psychological and sociological aspects of the target consumer have resulted in research delving into the self-concept of the consumer. This paper tries to explore the effect of service employee's emotional labor on the self-concept of the consumer.

Self-Concept

The role of self-concept has been investigated in a number of areas, such as product perception (Hamm and Cundiff, 1969), advertising perception (Domzal and Kernan, 1993), implicit behavior patterns (Greeno *et al.*, 1973), specific behavior (Guttman, 1973), advertising effectiveness (Hong and Zinkhan, 1995) and symbolic interactionism (Leigh and Gable, 1992). Thus the self-concept is an important concept as far as the consumer behavior is concerned. An understanding of self-concept is important for

influencing the buying behavior of the consumer. Self-concept is treated in various manners in different theories. For example behavioral theory construes the self as a bundle of conditioned responses; organismic theory treats the self in a wholistic form; cognitive theory represents the self as a conceptual system, processing information about the self; symbolic interactionism, views the self as a function of interpersonal interactions (See Sirgy, 1982: 287). The researchers are divided whether self-concept is a unidimensional or a multidimensional construct. Historically, self-concept research focused almost exclusively on a unidimensional self-concept that minimized the role of specific dimensions and facets. However, in recent decades (See Hardy, and Moriarty, 2006: 377), researchers have placed an increasing emphasis on multiple dimensions of self-concept. Two features of self-concept are relevant to the present discussion.

First, self-concept develops out of social interaction: how we perceive ourselves is affected by how we perceive or have perceived others to perceive us (Higgins, 1987). Thus, most important for an individual's self-concept is the views of those with whom s (he) has close relationships (Bowlby, 1969 as cited in Hinde, Finkenauer, and Auhagenc, 2001). In a review of studies Schauger and Schoeneman (1979) found that one's self-concept is a reflection of other's perceptions and opinions of the self. Combs and Snygg (1959: 127) suggested that the self-concept consists of aspects that are vital or are truly important to the person. The self-concept is embedded in the sense of self that includes all those perceptions the person holds about herself/ himself. Second, self-concept is not a static structure, but changes with situation (Scheier & Carver, 1988). That is people see themselves differently according to the situation they are in. Gioia, Schultz, and Corley

(2000: 65) cited other authors to argue that how individual sees her/ him-self is a social construct and it is derived from repeated interactions with others. In other words, individual's self-concept is contextual in nature (Scott and Lane, 2000). Gioia et al. (2000: 65) conclude that Individual self is continuously formulated and preserved through interaction with others. Perry (1982: 108 as cited in Hinde et al., 2001) suggested that each person had as many self-concepts as (s) he has interpersonal relationships.

Self-Concept and Emotional Labor

As self-concept of the consumer is an important predictor of its buying behavior (Grubb & stern, 1971), from marketing point of view it is important to understand the factors that influence consumer's self-concept. In recent years various concepts have been used to explain the consumer behavior. For example, marketing strategy is described as an impression management (Fisk & Grove, 1996), consumption as "experience" (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Holt, 1995), and consumer transactions as "performances" (Deighton, 1992). The consumer self-concept as a product of emotional labor is another way to capture the process of the marketing enterprise. Recent studies have shown that emotional labor of the service employee is related to consumer's affect and also to the evaluations of service quality by the consumer (Pugh, 2001), task effectiveness (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993), increased sales (Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987), consumer revisit (Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987; Tsai, 2001), and consumer's willingness to pass positive comments to friends (Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987; Tsai, 2001). However there is little research to explore the effect of service employee's emotional labor on the self-concept of the consumer.

As the self-concept of an individual depends on the interpersonal relationships s (he) has, the importance of relationships on self-concept development is vital (Backman, 1988: 253). Thus, once the relationship no longer becomes important to the individual, self-concept ceases to exist. The interactionist approach suggests that emotion is at least partly socially constructed. Consequently, emotional experience (of the consumer) is subject to external influence (See Morris and Feldman, 1996). Rosenberg (1990: 8) argued that emotional expression is a purposive human activity, which focuses on producing intended effects on other people's phenomenal worlds. The expression of emotions is widely considered to be the hallmark of a close relationship (Fitzpatrick, 1988; Levinger & Senn, 1967 as cited in Aune, Aune, and Buller, 1994). Researchers argue that emotional expression is a vehicle for relationship development and the substance of interpersonal bonds (See Aune et al., 1994). Since emotional labor is how a service employee expresses her/ his emotions and relationship is the basic necessity for self-concept it is proposed that

Proposition: 1

Emotional labor influences the self-concept of the consumer.

From a broader, sociological viewpoint the symbolic interactionist paradigm considers whether human behavior is guided more by private consistency or public expressions, and considers society and the self-concept as an important, single unit of analysis. Cooley's (1902 as cited in Harter & Whitesell, 2003) view of self and society as being

twin-born was described in his *looking-glass self*, which reasoned that one's self-concept is critically influenced by what important others think of her/ him. Cooley defined the self-concept as a reflexive mirror born out of the interaction of the individual with her/ his relevant social relationships (like relatives, friends etc.). Though some research distinguishes service relationships that are functionally motivated from those that are socially (or dedication) motivated (Bendapudi and Berry, 1997), other services research suggests that certain service interactions are liable to be more similar to a meeting between friends than merely economic transactions (Price, Arnould, and Deibler, 1995; Siehl, Bowen, and Pearson, 1992). Without unpacking the meaning of the term friend, other researchers identified some consumers who think of service employee as a friend (Beatty, Mayer, Coleman, Reynolds, and Lee, 1996). Social support, listening, and genuine human contact sometimes are offered by service employee in retail contexts as an attempt to augment the core service (Mick, Demoss, and Faber, 1992; Otnes, Lowry, and Shrum, 1997). For Cooley, the primary components of the self-concept are various social selves with a driving motive of self-assessment. The critical premise of this paradigm is that people see themselves through the eyes of others and form self-concepts via the reactions of others. Thus how the other (service employee) behaves, has an effect on individual's (consumer's) self-concept. A study by Price et al. (1995) showed that extra attention by the service employee helps to create positive emotions in the consumer, while negative emotions are the result of failing to meet a minimum standard. Arguing in similar vein, when the service employee behaves in a caring manner and expresses positive emotions towards the consumer, the consumer may assess her-/ himself in a positive way.

Proposition: 2a

When the service employee displays positive emotions, it increases the self-concept of the consumer.

Proposition: 2b

When the service employee displays negative emotions, it decreases the self-concept of the consumer.

The fundamental thesis of the phenomenological approach is that the sense of self can not be observed directly rather can be inferred, and more importantly, may be viewed through someone's perception. Thus the phenomenological view of the self-concept makes difference between two distinct frames of reference: The objective service-employee and the thinking, perceiving, and behaving consumer. The major proposition of the phenomenological approach to the self is that behavior is not only influenced by individual experiences, but by the personal meanings each individual attaches to her/his perception of those experiences (Moustakas, 1956: 11-12). The basic tenet is that because the self is unobservable, it is derived from perceptions based on inference and interpretations of observed behavior. Therefore, perceptions from the external world are the basic content from which the self-concept is developed and maintained. Thus how the consumer perceives the service employee, affects her /his (consumer's) self-conception. In service interactions that require emotion work, it is important that service employee's emotions be perceived by the consumer as authentic (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Hochschild, 2003).

The service employee can express appropriate emotions either by deep acting or by surface acting (Hochschild, 2003). When engaged in deep acting, the service employee attempts to modify her/his inner feelings. As deep acting changes internal states of the service employee, the resulting expression is perceived as authentic. Grandey (2000 as cited in Gosserand & Diefendorff, 2005) suggested that because in deep acting the service employee try to experience the desired emotion, (s)he expresses the natural (authentic) emotion. In surface acting the service employee modifies her/his emotions without shaping inner feelings (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Hochschild, 2003). Deep acting has been called ‘faking in good faith’ as the intent is to help the consumer and surface acting is called ‘faking in bad faith’ because the service employee conforms to the display rules to keep the job, not to help the consumer or the organization (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987). As the perception of authenticity of the service employee increases the self-concept it can be proposed that

Proposition: 3a

When the service employee expresses appropriate emotions by deep acting, it increases the self-concept of the consumer.

Proposition: 3b

When the service employee expresses appropriate emotions by surface acting, it decreases the self-concept of the consumer.

Conclusion

Emotional labor has a potential effect on the self-concept of the consumer. This study elaborates the importance of expression of positive emotions by the service employee as well as the way s (he) manages her/his emotions on consumer's self-concept. Thus the service organizations should give importance not only to the display of positive emotions but also the way in which the positive emotions is managed by the service employee. Future study can test these propositions empirically. As there is research evidence that self-concept of the consumer affects her/his purchase behavior, further study can be done to explore how emotional labor of the service employee affects the purchase behavior of the consumer. To conclude, this paper has made an attempt to explore the effect of emotional labor on the consumer's self-concept. Based on the review of literature it is proposed that emotional labor helps in self-concept of the consumer. Also the display of positive emotions may increase and the display of negative emotions may decreases self-concept. Similarly how the service employee manages her/his emotion has great impact on the consumer's self-concept.

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