Emotional labor as a means of influencing the self-concept of consumers in service organization

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Abstract

In service interactions the management of service employees' emotion through emotional labor has gained prominence and is becoming an active method to affect consumers' behavior. Several researches have indicated that self-concept of consumers affect their buying behavior. However there is not much research to explore the effect of emotional labor of the service employees on the self-concept of consumers. Based on literature, I have explored how emotional labor of the service employees influences the self-concept of consumers.
Keywords: Self-concept, Emotional labor, Deep Acting, Surface Acting, Consumer, Service employee

Introduction

The relative intangibility, heterogeneity, perishability and inseparability of production of service from its consumption (Cowell, 1984 as cited in Lashley, 1998) create difficulty for consumers to isolate service quality from the quality of the interaction during service delivery (i.e. service interaction). As a result, consumers' evaluation of service interaction, rather than just the separate product (service) being delivered, becomes central to the evaluation of the overall service experience (Korczynski, 2001). Schneider & Bowen (1985) argued that the way in which service is delivered is perceived as important for the survival and success of the organization. Similarly, du Gay (2000) argued that not only are consumers dependent on products and services, generated by organizations, but increasingly organizations are structured around the image of the consumers. Further, du Gay (2000: 70-71) explained that consumers represent individuals, who are in search of meaning and self enhancement. As a result, the focus of consumer service has expanded 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. In macro-level debate Gabriel & Lang (1995, as cited in Rosenthal, Pecci & Hill, 2001) commented that consumers are identity seekers. Consequently, the service organizations are focusing their attention to influence the self-concept of consumers. Studies have shown that the manner in which employees present themselves to consumers, including the emotions they display during interactions are related to consumers' affect (Pugh, 2001), consumers' evaluation of service quality (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Morris & Feldman, 1996; Pugh, 2001), consumers' revisit (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987; Tsai, 2001), consumers' willingness to pass positive comments to friends (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987; Tsai, 2001), increased sales (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987), and task effectiveness (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). Since the display of emotions affects consumers' behavior, organizations are increasingly rationalize the emotions of their employees by merchandising and displaying appropriate emotions to consumers, which is called emotional labor (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). However there is little research to explore the effect of service employees' (employees of the organization who provide the service) display of emotion on the self-concept of the consumers. Drawing from literature, I have argued that the emotional labor of the service employees affect the self-concept of the consumers and therefore have strong implications for the organizations.

Self-concept

Self-concept of consumers have been investigated in number of areas, such as product perception (Hamm & Cundiff, 1969), advertising perception (Domzal & Kernan, 1993), implicit behavior patterns (Greeno et al., 1973), specific behavior (Guttman, 1973), advertising effectiveness (Hong &Zinkhan, 1995) and symbolic interactionism (Leigh & Gable, 1992). Thus an understanding of

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consumers' self-concept is important for influencing their buying behaviors. Self-concept is defined variously by 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). Scholars 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 & Moriarty, 2006: 377; Roberts, 2005) researchers have placed an increasing emphasis on multiple dimensions of self-concept.

I have considered two features of self-concept for the present paper. 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 & Auhagenc, 2001). In a review of studies Schauger & Schoeneman (1979) found that one's self-concept is a reflection of other's perceptions and opinions of the self. Combs & Snygg (1959: 127) suggested that the self-concept consists of aspects that are vital or are truly important to the person and it 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 & Corley (2000: 65) cited other authors to argue that how individual sees herself/ himself 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 & 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

Emotional labor is conceptualized as impression management of service employees (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Hochschild, 2003), to make them appropriate or consistent with a situation, role, or an expected organizational behavior (Mumby & Putnam, 1992). This labor requires effort, planning, and control to express organizationally desired emotion during interpersonal transactions (Morris & Feldman, 1996: 987). 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), academics (Ogbonna & Harris, 2004) etc. As self-concept of consumers is an important predictor of their buying behavior (Grubb & Stern, 1971), from marketing point of view it is important to understand the factors that influence consumers' 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 & Hirschman, 1982; Holt, 1995), and consumer transactions as "performances" (Deighton, 1992). The consumers' self-concept as a product of emotional labor is another way to capture the process of the service enterprise.

As discussed before, emotional labor is how the service employees express organizationally desired emotions, irrespective of their felt emotions (Hochschild, 2003), with the intention to influence the consumers. In similar vein, Rosenberg (1990: 8) argued that emotional display is a purposive human activity, which focuses on producing intended effects on other people's phenomenal worlds. Since, emotion is at least partly socially constructed (Morris & Feldman, 1996), from consumers' point of view their experience is subject to external influence. That is, the service provider can influence the experience of the consumers. Hochschild (2003) stated that emotional display of the service employees acts as a signal function; i.e. emotions directed at consumers define the status of that consumer according to the organization's objective. Arguing

from the relational perspective, scholars (Aron, 2003; Collins & Miller, 1994, as cited in Roberts, 2005) have argued that relationships tend to develop by a process of gradually escalating self-disclosure; people are more likely to disclose information to those they like initially and after disclosing intimate information, people like more and are liked more by those to whom they disclose. Aune et al. (1994) stated that the display of emotions is the hallmark of a close relationship, a vehicle for relationship development and the substance of interpersonal bonds. Since the self-concept of an individual depends on the interpersonal relationships s/he has, and relationships is vital for the development of self-concept (Backman, 1988: 253), we can argue that emotional display of the service provider can influence the self-concept of the consumers.

Proposition: 1
The emotional display of service employees influences the self-concept of consumers.

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 & 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, & Deibler, 1995; Siehl, Bowen, & Pearson, 1992). Without unpacking the meaning of the term friend, other researchers identified some consumers who think of service provider as a friend (Beatty, Mayer, Coleman, Reynolds, & Lee, 1996). Social support, listening, and genuine human contact sometimes are offered by service employees in retail contexts is an attempt to augment the core service (Mick, Demoss, & Faber, 1992; Otnes, Lowry, & Shrum, 1997). For Cooley (1902), 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 others (service employees) behave, and express emotions have an effect on individual's (consumer's) self-concept. Arguing in similar lines, when the service employees display positive emotions towards the consumers, it enhances the self-concept of the consumers. However, display of negative emotions by service employees indicates non caring attitude of the service employees and thus spoils the meaning and experience of the consumers. Price et al. (1995) showed that negative emotions of the consumers are the result of the service employees failing to meet a minimum standard. Roberts (2005) stated that when one presents oneself in negative manner, s/he is likely to experience negative consequences on relationships, and performance. Also, display of negative emotions affects the relational element of the transaction and as relationship is the essential element of self-concept, the negative emotion decreases the self-concept of the consumers.

Proposition: 2a
When the service employees display positive emotions, it enhances the self-concept of consumers.

Proposition: 2b
When the service employees display negative emotions, it reduces the self-concept of consumers.

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: a) The objective service employees and b) The thinking, perceiving, and behaving consumers. 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 argument 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 consumers perceive the service employees, affects their (consumers') self-conception. The purpose of emotional labor is to influence the perception of the consumers during service interactions (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Hochschild, 2003) either by deep acting or surface acting.

In surface acting the service employees modifies her/his emotions without shaping inner feelings (Ashforth & Humprey, 1993; Hochschild, 2003). Zapf (2002) suggested that surface acting is the physical attempt to conceal the felt emotions. surface acting is called 'faking in bad faith' because the service employees conforms to the display rules to keep the job, not to help the consumers nor their organization (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987). Surface acting often is interpreted as superficial and insincere (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Zapf, 2002). Such perceptions of consumers are detrimental to the organization-consumer relationship. Hochschild (2003) considered deep acting a step above surface acting in that the service employees not only attempts to fool the consumers with their emotional display, but also considers it an attempt at self-deception. The employee not only controls his or her physical display, but endeavors to modify internal thoughts and feelings (i.e., emotional dissonance) in order to fulfill expectations of emotional display (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002). This form of deep acting is termed active because some amount of emotional management is necessary due to the emotional dissonance felt as the interaction occurs. It requires cognitive manipulation of feelings in order to fulfill emotional labor requirements. Grandey, 2000, as cited in Gosserand & Diefendorff, 2005) suggested that because in deep acting the service employees try to experience the desired emotion, they display the natural emotion. Deep acting has been called 'faking in good faith' as the intent is to help the consumers (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987).

Proposition: 3a

When the service employees display appropriate emotions by deep acting, it enhances the self-concept of the consumers.

Proposition: 3b

When the service employees display appropriate emotions by surface acting, it does not enhance the self-concept of the consumers.

Conclusion

Organizations are trying their level best to attract and retain its consumers. Influencing the self-concept of the consumers is one way of attracting and retaining the consumers. This study elaborates the importance of display of positive emotions by the service employee and argues that the manner in which the service employees express their emotions has effect on the self-concept of consumers. Thus the service organizations should give importance not only to the display of positive emotions but also the way in which the positive emotions are managed by the service employee. Future study can test these propositions empirically. As there is research evidence that self-concept of the consumers affect their purchase behaviors, further study can be done to explore how emotional labor of the service employee affects the purchase behavior of the consumers. To conclude, this paper has made an attempt to explore the effect of emotional labor on the consumers' self-concept. Based on the review of literature I have proposed that emotional labor helps in building the self-concept of consumers.

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