

EMPLOYEE SMILE IN SERVICE ENCOUNTERS: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE AND RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Gianfranco Walsh, Institute for Management, University Koblenz-Landau, Germany
Thomas Kilian, Institute for Management, University Koblenz-Landau, Germany
Urs Kuhlmann, Institute for Management, University Koblenz-Landau, Germany
Mehul Garg, University of Strathclyde Business School, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

Emotions in service encounters transmitted via nonverbal communication have become an increasingly researched topic in the services marketing and consumer behavior literature. The purpose of this research is to explore the literature on verbal and nonverbal communication involving emotions conveyed through facial expressions such as smile (e.g., Guenzi and Pelloni 2004; Sundaram and Webster 2000). Nonverbal components of communication tend to be viewed as important as verbal components in shaping the outcome of employee-customer interactions (e.g., Barnum and Wolniansky 1989; Burgoon et al. 1990; Gabbott and Hogg 2000). Due to their interactive nature, service deliveries involve emotions to a greater extent than many other jobs (Bailey et al. 2001; Liljander and Strandvik 1997) and, arguably, the display of nonverbal emotions, especially smile, is the most important cue in emotional contagion (Howard and Gengler 2001).

In their literature review, the authors show that whilst previous studies explored the overall impact of emotions on relevant outcome variables such as customer satisfaction, the role of service employees' nonverbal communication, specifically facial expressions, during service interactions is less well understood. Moreover, the authors highlight conceptual and methodological issues of extant consumer services research on smile.

The measurement approaches of existing empirical studies into the effects of smile on consumer behavior broadly fall into two categories, representing observational and experimental approaches both in combination with questionnaires. Although some studies measured employee's emotional display by observation, the disadvantage of this method is that the researcher observes natural behavior, but participants' thoughts and true feelings have to be inferred.

Other researchers used experimental approaches, which do not tend to emulate real life settings. Potential problems like observation and analysis bias (e.g., Malhotra and Birch 2006) are addressed by intense training of observers (e.g., Hennig-Thurau et al. 2006; Mattila and Enz 2002). Due to the predominant observational and experimental research approaches, only few studies measured the feelings of customers after the encounter (e.g., Hennig-Thurau et al. 2006; Luong 2005) which can be seen as a shortcoming in existent empirical studies. Furthermore there is a gap in questionnaire-based approaches that measure smile as a distinct phenomenon from a customer perspective.

There is growing evidence for the positive consequences of emotional display on consumer outcome variables. The consequences in the studies reviewed can be grouped into factors associated with the perception of service quality, and customer related organizational outcomes such as customer satisfaction and loyalty. The relationship between employee smile and customer perceived service quality is posited to be moderated by three variables – contact intensity, culture, and individual characteristics of customers.

The purpose of this research was to review the literature on nonverbal communication-related and smile-related services marketing research, to highlight and discuss conceptual and methodological issues, and to make recommendations for future research regarding the interplay of employee smile during the service delivery process and customer outcomes.

The identified and discussed limitations of previous studies give rise to the desirability of future work on the topic of nonverbal emotion in service encounters. For example, to effectively manage employee nonverbal behavior and smile, it needs to be measured accurately. Therefore, future studies could try to develop and validate a scale that captures employees' level of smile. Such a scale would enable researchers and practitioners to examine the postulated relationships in the conceptual model.

References are available upon request from.