



# The happy versus unhappy service worker in the service encounter: Assessing the impact on customer satisfaction

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## ABSTRACT

This paper assesses the impact of the service worker's display of emotions (i.e., one aspect of functional service quality) on customer satisfaction under the conditions of different levels of technical service quality by means of an experimental approach ( $N=600$ ), in which display of emotions (unhappiness vs. happiness) and technical service quality (poor vs. good) were manipulated. The results indicate that the impact of the service worker's emotional display behavior on customer satisfaction is contingent on the level of technical service quality, in the sense that customer satisfaction is affected only when technical service quality is good rather than poor. Encouraging a positive display (e.g., by a smile policy), which many service firms do, is thus not a panacea for improved customer satisfaction. The moderating effect is explained in terms of service encounter congruency, which influences the mediated process by which emotional displays by service workers come to affect customer satisfaction.

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## 1. Introduction

Several studies of service encounters show that the service worker's display of emotions, particularly in terms of smiling behavior, has a positive impact on customer satisfaction (Barger and Grandey, 2006; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006; Söderlund and Rosengren, 2004, 2008). These results are consonant with what appears to be the received view in service firms, because many such firms instruct their employees to smile while involved in service encounters (Bryman, 2004). More research, however, remains to be done before the final word can be said about the association between the service worker's display of emotions and customer satisfaction.

One issue has to do with researchers' conceptualization (and operationalization) of the service worker's display of emotions: such display behavior is typically examined in terms of smile behavior, referring to a dichotomy in which a smile is either displayed or "no smile" is displayed. Moreover, this "no smile" state is typically described as "neutral" from an emotion point of view (Barger and Grandey, 2006; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006; Söderlund and Rosengren, 2008). This approach, however, neglects that emotions can be displayed by also other means (such as comments to customers and eye contact), and it produces a risk that a neutral facial expression may co-with either the display of negative emotions by non-facial means or the display of positive emotions by non-facial means. In addition, a narrow

focus on only the presence or absence of smiles may be a poor indicator of a displaying person's emotional state along an unhappiness–happiness continuum, because many other different emotions than happiness are expressed by smiles (indeed, only one out of nineteen different ways of smiling expresses happiness; Klein, 2006). In other words, display behavior that is allowed (e.g., in experimental manipulations) to take on only the values "smile" and "no smile" is unlikely to capture in a precise way a person's display of emotions on a full unhappiness–happiness continuum. We are particularly concerned with the smile–no smile approach with regard to its inability to capture the displayer's negative state of mind. Indeed, a sad fact is that burnout (a negatively valenced state of mind) is highly prevalent among service workers (Singh et al., 1994; Yagil, 2006). It also appears to be on the rise (Shirom, 2005). We therefore expect that many service encounters comprise a service worker who is in a negative state of mind and who also displays it. This, then, we argue, calls for research on the display of emotions–customer satisfaction association, allowing for both (a) emotional clues from also other display behaviors than smiles (b) and negative emotional displays.

Another issue is that the display of emotions is only one among several service worker behaviors in a service encounter; such displays are embedded in a context of other factors, which may affect customer satisfaction (Bitner et al., 1990, 1994; Hartline and Jones, 1996; Winsted, 2000). Such factors, we believe, are likely to impose conditions for the effects of the service worker's emotional displays on customer satisfaction. In this paper, and with Grönroos' classical distinction between functional service quality ("how you get it") and technical service quality ("what

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you get”) as a point of reference (Grönroos, 1998, 2001), we view the service worker’s display of emotions as an aspect of functional service quality, and we examine its impact on customer satisfaction in terms of a context of technical service quality factors. The potential for technical service quality, which may vary from poor to good, to provide conditions for the service worker’s display of emotions impact on customer satisfaction has basically been ignored in existing research (Barger and Grandey, 2006; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006; Söderlund and Rosengren, 2004, 2008). In fact, a closer inspection of these studies reveals that they were carried out in a good technical service quality context. This is indeed a fruitful first step for the development of theory on the effects of the service worker’s display of emotions. Yet technical service quality may be poor in service encounters, so this situation needs to be incorporated in existing theory building efforts. Some other studies, however, have touched on the poor technical quality issue in a display of emotions setting, and taken together they suggest conflicting patterns of influence. For example, Grandey et al. (2005), who examined the impact of authenticity of positive emotional displays on satisfaction, found that satisfaction was *not affected* differently by authentic or inauthentic displays under the condition of poor service performance. Given that emotional displays affect liking (e.g., a smiling person is typically liked better than a non-smiling person), more confusion is added by literature dealing with the effects of liking of a person on evaluations of this person: this literature (e.g., Singh and Tor, 2008) suggests that liking has a particularly salient *positive* effect on evaluations under the condition of poor competence (e.g., low general intellectual ability, which seems to be related to “technical” qualities of a person).

Translating existing results into the service worker’s display of unhappiness or happiness in a service encounter, then, means that the display of emotions–customer satisfaction link is particularly unclear under the poor service quality condition. In other words, does a service worker who produces poor technical service quality, and who displays happiness, increase or decrease the level of customer satisfaction compared to when this person displays unhappiness? Different answers to this question offer very different implications for service management in terms of emotional labor instructions and particularly for service recovery efforts. That is to say, when things go wrong, such as when a service failure occurs, should the service worker strive to display happiness or unhappiness?

Given the lack of studies of allowing for the service worker’s display of emotions to comprise both unhappy and happy emotional displays, a dearth of studies dealing directly with the display of emotions–customer satisfaction link under different levels of technical service quality, and conflicting findings and their different implications in related research, the specific purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of the service worker’s display of unhappiness and happiness in the service encounter on customer satisfaction given different levels of technical service quality.

Moreover, we also make an attempt to explain *why* different levels of technical service quality are likely to affect the display of emotions–customer satisfaction link. Our explanation focuses on one particular step in the process assumed to mediate the effects of the service worker’s display of emotions on customer satisfaction, namely emotional contagion (cf. Collishaw et al., 2008, Lin et al., 2008, Söderlund and Rosengren, 2008), which is at hand when one person “catches” the emotion displayed by another person with whom s/he interacts (Hatfield et al., 1992; Hess et al., 1998; Neumann and Strack, 2000; Pugh, 2001). In a service encounter setting, we argue that the customer’s perception of the congruency of a specific service encounter vis-à-vis the service encounter prototype stored in memory is one particularly

relevant factor, which has hitherto not been examined as having the potential of affecting the extent to which emotional contagion occurs. By explicitly examining this factor, and linking it to technical service quality, we make an attempt to enrich theory on the process by which a service worker’s display of emotions comes to affect customer satisfaction.

## 2. Conceptual framework

### 2.1. Technical vs. functional service quality and customer satisfaction

Our point of departure is that there are two main quality dimensions of a service: technical and functional service quality (Grönroos, 1998, 2001). Technical service quality (“what you get”) is what the service comprises in a “technical” or outcome sense; this is typically considered the “core” of service quality. Examples of specific technical service factors are promptness, accurateness, and the extent to which the customer is offered several alternatives and individualized solutions. Functional service quality (“how you get it”) has to do with the interpersonal, relational part of the service process. Examples of functional service quality factors are friendliness, trustworthiness, courtesy, and display of emotions (Doucet, 2004; Iacobucci and Ostrom, 1993, 1996).

It should be noted that many factors from both dimensions have been shown to enhance customer satisfaction after a service encounter. With regard to functional service quality, which we thus see as comprising the service worker’s display of emotions, we have already mentioned that several studies show that a smiling service worker produces more satisfaction than a non-smiling service worker (Barger and Grandey, 2006; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006; Söderlund and Rosengren, 2004, 2008). Other satisfaction-enhancing aspects of functional service quality are establishing a personal connection (Gremler and Gwinner, 2000) and caring, nice, and courteous behaviors (Winsted, 2000). Copious studies have also shown that various technical service quality aspects, such as individualizing the offer (Bitner et al., 1990), availability of the service worker (Mittal et al., 1998) and assortment (Westbrook, 1981), have a positive impact on customer satisfaction. In addition, these two factors have been shown to interact: Iacobucci and Ostrom (1993) found that functional quality (defined in their study in terms of politeness, friendliness, trustworthiness, and helpfulness) had a stronger impact on overall evaluations when technical quality is good as opposed to poor, yet functional quality had a positive impact on overall evaluations also under the condition of poor technical quality.

The main task in our paper, however, is to assess the hitherto neglected potential for an impact of the display of unhappiness versus happiness (thus one particular aspect of functional quality) on customer satisfaction, given different levels of technical service quality (poor vs. good). In other words, the potential for an interaction between the service worker’s display of emotions and technical service quality is our focal issue. We are interested in this interaction from a display of emotions point of view, which means that the specific nature of an interaction can be framed in terms of one specific question: what happens with the impact of the service worker’s display of emotion on customer satisfaction when (a) technical service quality is good and (b) technical service quality is poor? In order to explore the answer to this question, we first need to address the underlying process by which the service worker’s display of emotions can have an impact on customer satisfaction.

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