Joking with customers in the service encounter has a negative impact on customer satisfaction: Replication and extension

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A B S T R A C T

Previous research has indicated that employee joke-telling in the service encounter can have a negative impact on customer satisfaction, particularly with respect to perceived overall message relevance as a mediating variable. The present study is an attempt to examine if these results would be replicated in service encounter settings with other characteristics. Two experiments were conducted, and the previous pattern was reproduced: customer satisfaction was reduced when employees told jokes compared to when jokes were not told. The results also indicate that employee joke-telling reduced both perceived relevance and positive affect, and that these two variables mediated the association between employee joke-telling and customer satisfaction. The results should be seen in contrast to several humor studies in an advertising context showing that humor-comprising ads can have positive effects on the receiver. One main reason for the differences is that a service encounter typically includes also other elements than humor in the employee’s communication with a customer, and that employee humor usage attenuates the customer’s attention to and comprehension of those other elements.

1. Introduction

Our point of departure is a set of recent studies by Söderlund et al. (2017) showing that when employees tell jokes to customers in service encounters, customer satisfaction is affected negatively. These results, however, should be seen in contrast to the suggestion that employee use of humor in service encounters can generate positive customer responses (Robert and Wilbanks, 2012). The Söderlund et al. (2017) results also appear to be at odds with findings in studies of the impact of humor in an educational context, indicating that educators who use humor in their classes are more positively rated and produce enhanced learning (Garner, 2006; Wanzer and Frymier, 1999). Moreover, the Söderlund et al. (2017) results seem to be in conflict with advertising research in which ad humor typically produces positive effects on several variables related to the ad itself and the advertised product (Eisen, 2009; Muehling and McCann, 1993; Smith, 1993; Sternhal and Craig, 1973; Weinberger and Gulas, 1992). In addition, it may be noted that some authors have claimed that humor can distract receivers from counterarguing (Cline and Kellaris, 1999; Cline et al., 2003) and reduce resistance (Strick et al., 2012), and therefore humor would have a positive persuasive potential (Lyttle, 2001).

The main explanation for negative effects in a service encounter setting offered by Söderlund et al. (2017) was that customer-employee conversations comprise also other content than jokes (typically, the share of this other content is larger in a service encounter conversation compared to an ad), that jokes reduce the perceived relevance of the employee’s overall message, and that this in turn attenuates customer satisfaction. Thus, a main argument (and an empirical finding) in Söderlund et al. (2017) was that perceived message relevance mediated the impact of employee joke-telling on customer satisfaction. These results, however, were obtained in service encounter settings with several specific characteristics, which calls for more research. The present two studies (Study 1 and Study 2) should be seen as attempts to replicate and extend the previous findings in the context of other service encounter settings along the lines indicated below.

First, the Söderlund et al. (2017) service encounter manipulations comprised employee joke-telling in the pre-purchase phase of the consumer’s decision-making process. In conceptual terms, however, it is unclear if jokes from an employee would have the same impact before and during the consumption of services. For example, consumers may be particularly sensitive to interference by incongruent elements (such as humor) once consumption has started, and if this is the case the Söderlund et al. (2017) results may have underestimated the negative impact of employee joke-telling. To examine the potential for different effects due to when employee humor usage occurs in relation to the customer’s purchase process, both Study 1 and Study 2 in the present
study were carried out in a context in which jokes were delivered by employees once the service consumption had started. Second, the Söderlund et al. (2017) results were generated by an examination of service encounters with relatively long customer-employee conversations comprising an overall theme. Such settings are likely to boost the negative influence of employee joke-telling, in the sense that jokes (which by definition comprise incongruence and demand more elaborated information processing) can interfere with the customer’s understanding given that a particular theme calls for attention. Yet many service encounters are brief (Ketrow, 1991) with no room for a theme to be communicated. In such settings, jokes may not have a negative impact on customer satisfaction. To assess this in the present study, Study 1 comprised employee joke-telling in a short service encounter in which no theme was communicated.

Third, the humor manipulations in Söderlund et al. (2017) comprised jokes in terms of stories about third parties. That is to say, employee X told customer Y a funny story about person Z. However, this introduces the mindstates of others than the joke-teller and the listener, and there is a limit to how many such mindstates one can deal with before becoming overtaxed (Dunbar et al., 2016). Moreover, when a joke is a story, it may stand out as a particularly distinct – and incongruent – element in relation to the other elements in a conversation. The story format may also result in receiver absorption (Green and Brock, 2000), which means that other information than the story itself is likely to receive less attention (Agarwal and Karahanna, 2000; Busselle and Bilandzic, 2009). It is thus possible that joking in the specific form of story-telling has a particularly strong potential to reduce perceived relevance and, in the next step, to reduce customer satisfaction. To assess the replicability of the Söderlund et al. (2017) with respect to this aspect, the present Study 1 examined employee jokes in terms of storytelling. Moreover, to assess if the result would be the same for other types of jokes, Study 2 comprised jokes in terms of employee remarks here and there with the intention of being fun rather than storytelling.

Fourth, the Söderlund et al. (2017) findings were obtained in settings comprising a traditional service encounter in which the employee and the customer are the only interacting parties. In many service contexts, however, several customers are present and consume the service together (e.g., a group of tourists with the same guide and a group of gym class participants with one instructor). That is to say, in some service contexts customers are a (temporary) group. In such situations, particularly when coaching and counseling are parts of the service offer, it is possible that employee joke-telling can have positive effects on various group-related variables (e.g., perceived team spirit and perceived employee support for team members), and they can affect customer satisfaction positively. The present Study 2 was an attempt to examine this aspect.

In addition, Söderlund et al. (2017) found that employee joke-telling did not have a significant impact on customer affect. This finding is in contrast with several previous studies suggesting that humor is positively associated with positive affect (Eisend, 2009, 2011; Lee and Mason, 1999; Moran and Massam, 1999; Skalski et al., 2009). The reason why a humor-affect link did not materialize in Söderlund et al. (2017) may be the combination of (a) relatively long conversations with much other content than humor and (b) humor appearing as a discrete element in a specific part of the employee-customer conversation. Given that affect is an ephemeral state of mind, these conditions may have caused affect to disappear while additional content (without humor) appeared in the employee-customer conversations. To address this in the present study, we re-examine the possibility of an employee humor-customer affect link in both Study 1 (in which the conversation was short) and Study 2 (in which the employee use of humor appeared at several points in the conversation).

The purpose of the present study, then, is to re-examine the link between employee joke-telling and customer satisfaction in additional service encounter settings by taking the aspects above into account. The present study is a response to the call for replications made by several authors (e.g., Easley et al., 2000; Evanschitzky et al., 2007). This call should be seen in the light of recent concerns that many findings in management-related areas may not be replicable (Evanschitzky and Armstrong, 2013). To this end, and as already indicated, two empirical studies (Study 1 and Study 2) were conducted. Since the service encounter settings explored in these experiments comprise other specific characteristics than in Söderlund et al. (2017), they should not be seen as duplications of the previous studies but as an attempt to see if the previous results would generalize to humor usage and service encounters with different characteristics. One main rationale for re-addressing the impact of employee humor usage in service encounters is that several authors have observed that humor is often a part of what the employee says in conversations with customers (Gilliam et al., 2014; Gwinner et al., 1998; Locke, 1996; Pearce, 2009). So far, however, there have been few empirical attempts to assess how employee humor influences customers.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Humor, joke-telling, and incongruity

There are many types of humor (Bryant et al., 1980; Speck, 1991; Weinberger and Spotts, 1989), so employee humor usage in a service encounter can express itself in several ways. Here, our focus is on joke-telling embedded in a conversation in the course of normal interactions (Boxer and Cortés-Condes, 1997; Norrick, 1994; Robert and Wilbanks, 2012), because this appears to be a particularly common form for employees to joke with customers (Gilliam et al., 2014; Gwinner et al., 1998; Locke, 1996). Moreover, for our purposes here, jokes are any communication with a witty or funny intent known in advance by the teller (Duncan, 1982). In our two empirical studies, we examine the impact of two types of employee joke-telling embedded in conversations: (1) a joke in the form of a story about a third party appearing once, in the midst of a conversation (Study 1), and (2) brief comments intended to be fun that appear in several places within the same conversation (Study 2). In conceptual terms, however, and in this section, we assume that both types affect the same response variables.

Our main assumption, thus for both types of jokes in focus here, is that joke-telling in a conversation involves incongruity. We also assume that there are two ways for incongruity to manifest itself. First, it is assumed that jokes share a main component with other forms of humor, namely incongruity in terms of deviations from expectations (Alden and Hoyer, 1993; Duncan and Feisal, 1989; Lee and Mason, 1999; Meyer, 2000; Spotts et al., 1997). This thus means that joke-telling in a conversation comprises incongruity in the sense that jokes per se, by definition, are characterized by incongruity. Second, a joke represents a bounded speech act (Boxer and Cortés-Condes, 1997), and when it appears in a conversation it can be seen as a discrete conversational element in relation to other elements. This, then, introduces a potential incongruity aspect also with respect to the relation between the joke and other things said by a joke-teller in a conversation.

2.2. Incongruity, information processing, and perceived relevance

Several authors have argued that humor-based incongruity leads to increased attention (Cline and Kellaris, 1999; Cline et al., 2003; Eisend, 2011; van Kuilenburg et al., 2011; Smith, 1993) and more elaborated cognitive processing (Cline and Kellaris, 1999; van Dolen et al., 2008; Eisend, 2011). Given the effort involved in processing incongruent stimuli (Heckler and Childers, 1992), and given limited cognitive resources and effort-avoidance tendencies in information processing (Garbarino and Edell, 1997), however, humor elements in a message can reduce attention to and comprehension of other elements appearing in the same message (Cline et al., 2003; Krishnan and Chakravarti, 2003; Lyttle, 2007; Smith, 1993; Strick et al., 2012; Wood...
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