The interpersonal effects of emotion intensity in customer service: Perceived appropriateness and authenticity of attendants’ emotional displays shape customer trust and satisfaction

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\textbf{A B S T R A C T}

Emotional expressions have a pervasive impact on organizational behavior. However, it is unclear how such effects are modulated by the intensity of emotional displays. We investigated in online, laboratory, and field experiments how varying intensities of service providers’ emotional displays (expressed through text, intonation, or physical displays) influence customer service outcomes. We show that in mundane service interactions, displays of intense happiness or sadness are interpreted as inappropriate and inauthentic, and lead to reduced trust in the service provider. We further demonstrate the mediating effect of trust on satisfaction with the service (Study 1), expected satisfaction with the product (Studies 2 and 3), and actual product use (Study 4). The studies highlight perceptions of appropriateness and sincerity as mechanisms underlying the interpersonal effects of emotional intensity. We propose that emotional intensity be incorporated in theorizing and research on organizational behavior to arrive at a more complete understanding of emotional dynamics.

1. Introduction

Imagine you walk into a bookstore and ask for Jane Austin’s \textit{Sense and Sensibility}. After checking his stock, the service provider gives you a forlorn look, and with an air of intense sorrow says he is really, really sorry, but he only has \textit{Pride and Prejudice}. How would his excessive show of sadness make you feel? Would you be gratified, or a bit suspicious? Would your satisfaction with the service be different if the service provider had apologized less profusely, with a cheery tone and mild smile?

Emotions play an important role in customer service (Mattila & Enz, 2002). Service workers are instructed and trained to display particular emotions (e.g., “service with a smile”; Barger & Grandey, 2006; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987), and customers expect positive emotional displays from customer representatives as part of what constitutes “good” service (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015; Grove & Fisk, 1992). Service firms train their employees based on a general belief that appropriate (usually positive) emotion expressions improve customer assessments of service quality, customer satisfaction, and sales, whereas inappropriate emotion expressions have unfavorable outcomes (e.g., Clark & Taraban, 1991). But what kinds of emotional expressions, precisely, are appropriate? Is it only the positivity of the emotion that matters? Or does the magnitude or intensity of the expression also play a role?

This paper examines whether and how the intensity of emotional expressions shape customer service outcomes in routine, everyday service settings. We propose that in these settings, emotional expressions lead to diverging consequences based on the intensity with which they are displayed. Specifically, we suggest that in service settings, highly intense displays of emotion do not conform to prevailing “display rules” which prescribe emotional displays to be both positive and moderate (e.g., Diehlendorf, Morehart, & Gabriel, 2010). Hence, as with inappropriate emotional valence, we propose that expressions of inappropriate emotional intensity may backfire, undermining customers’ trust in the service provider and reducing satisfaction with the service and product. Moreover, we suggest that this effect is not limited to expressions of happiness (cf. Barger & Grandey, 2006; Wang, Mao, Li, & Liu, 2016), but also holds for emotions of negative valence. To test this proposition, we investigate the effects of intensity across two discrete emotions, happiness and sadness. In doing so, we extend past research on how service providers’ emotional displays influence customers’ judgments regarding the service provider, the service, and the product, and contribute to the ongoing line of inquiry on the social influence of emotions.
emotional expressions (e.g., Côté & Hideg, 2011; Hareli & Rafaeli, 2008; Van Klee, Van Doorn, Heerink, & Koning, 2011).

We chose to investigate the interpersonal effects of emotion display intensity in the context of customer service for several reasons. First, current theorizing on emotions in the service setting explicitly or implicitly assumes that particular emotional expressions have similar interpersonal effects regardless of their intensity level. Yet there are good reasons to suspect that the effects of emotional expressions are shaped by their intensity, and as long as this possibility is not addressed, further theory development is impeded. Second, most research on emotion in the service context has focused on the affective impact of service providers’ emotional expressions on customers (e.g., via emotional contagion). Here we draw attention to cognitive inferences as a route by which emotion displays can influence customers, thus contributing to a more complete understanding of the interpersonal effects of emotional expressions in the service context. Third, brief, mundane service interactions allow but do not necessarily require a prior relationship, enabling us to tease apart the effect of emotional displays from possible confounds such as prior knowledge or expected future relations. Fourth, the customer service setting allows us to examine the effects of intensity in relation to both positive and negative emotions in a credible way. Finally, from a practical perspective, service workers are commonly instructed and encouraged to express emotions in the workplace, but it is unclear how the intensity of such expressions influences critical outcomes such as trust and customer satisfaction. This study thus contributes to the literature on emotions as well as to the literature on customer service.

2. Theoretical background

The theoretical model and predictions we develop here pertain to the effects of expressions of emotions of different intensities. Emotions can be distinguished from more diffuse affective states such as moods (Crapanzano, Weiss, Hale, & Reb, 2003; Schwartz, 1990; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) in that they are relatively short-lived and tied to a particular triggering event (Ellenbein, 2007; Frijda, 1986). Specifically, we focus on happiness, which arises when a situation is appraised as conducive to attaining a particular goal, and sadness, which arises when one realizes that something of value has been lost and there is little one can do about it (Côté, 2005; Frijda, 1986).

Our model is situated at the interpersonal level of analysis. A growing body of research indicates that emotions do not only influence those who experience them (intrapersonal effects) but also those who perceive them (interpersonal effects; Van Kleef, Homan, & Cheshin, 2012). Indeed, emotional expressions have been shown to have important social consequences (e.g., Frijda & Mesquita, 1994; Hareli & Rafaeli, 2008; Kelmer & Haidt, 1999; Van Klee, 2009; Van Klee, Cheshin, Fischer, & Schneider, 2016). Numerous studies have established that emotional expressions can trigger affective responses in observers, such as emotional contagion and other forms of affective linkage between individuals (see Ellenbein, 2014, for an integrative review). Moreover, research has documented that emotional expressions can trigger inferential responses in perceivers, whereby perceivers derive information from another’s emotional expression about how that person appraises the situation (e.g., Van Klee, 2016).

When it comes to customer service and consumer behavior, most research to date has focused on the affective consequences of emotional expressions, casting customers’ moods and emotions as mediating mechanisms in the relationship between employee emotional displays and customers’ service evaluations. For instance, positive emotional displays by bank tellers and shoe salesmen were associated with more positive affect in customer reports (Pugh, 2001; Tsai & Huang, 2002), and ambiguous products were assessed more favorably when presented by a smiling person due to positive emotional linkage (Howard & Gengler, 2001). We extend this literature by investigating how inferences about the trustworthiness of service providers and concomitant customer satisfaction are shaped by the intensity of the service provider’s emotional displays – an issue that has received very limited empirical attention to date.

The intensity of an emotion refers to the magnitude or strength of the experienced or expressed emotion (Frijda, Ortony, Sonnemans, & Clore, 1992; Sonnemans & Frijda, 1994). Differences in emotion intensity are argued to result from different cognitive appraisals (Clore, 1994). According to appraisal theories of emotion, a particular emotional experience and/or expression should be stronger to the degree that the goal which is facilitated or obstructed by the event connected to the emotion is more important to the individual (Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988). Following this perspective, more intense expressions of happiness should reflect more important successes, and more intense expressions of sadness should reflect greater losses. Importantly, variations in emotion intensity can be reliably perceived and identified by observers. For instance, Banse and Scherer (1996) showed that individuals were able not only to identify discrete emotions from vocal expressions, but also recognized variance in intensity within these emotions.

That people can pick up on differences in the intensity of others’ emotional expressions is not to say that the intensity of others’ outwardly visible displays of emotion always reflects the intensity of their internal emotional states. Situational pressures or personal goals – e.g., an attempt to influence others, or to comply with prevailing norms or expectations – may lead individuals to exaggerate or suppress outward expressions of the emotions they feel (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Côté, 2005; Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983; Morris & Feldman, 1996). With its emphasis on service with a smile, the customer service setting is a clear case where emotional expressions are used to influence the service experience (Barger & Grandey, 2006; Grandey, Fisk, Mattila, Jansen, & Sideman, 2005; Groth, Hennig-Thurau, & Walsh, 2009; Wang et al., 2016). Yet, it remains unclear how the intensity of a service provider’s displayed emotion influences customers.

Barger and Grandey (2006) are among the few researchers who specifically examined how the intensity of emotion displays (specifically of happiness) by service providers can impact service quality appraisals and customer satisfaction. Their cross-sectional field study revealed that broader smiles were associated with higher customer satisfaction. However, even though broader smiles also improved customers’ moods, this contagion effect did not mediate the relationship between service providers’ emotion displays and customer satisfaction. This suggests that the effects of service providers’ emotional intensity on service outcomes are mediated by alternative processes that involve evaluations of (rather than emotional reactions to) service providers (Wang et al., 2016). Building on this idea, we develop and test a theoretical model that links the intensity of service providers’ emotional expressions to service outcomes via customers’ inferences of the service provider’s trustworthiness. In doing so, we further extend previous work by examining the effects of various degrees of intensity of both positive (happiness) and negative (sadness) emotional expressions in service encounters.

3. Theoretical model and hypotheses

3.1. Emotion intensity, appropriateness, authenticity, and trust

Various theoretical perspectives converge to suggest that responses to emotional expressions depend heavily on the degree to which the expressions are perceived as appropriate for the context (e.g., Ekman, 1993; Shields, 2005; Van Klee, 2009). All else being equal, emotional expressions that are deemed appropriate by perceivers are more likely to elicit favorable responses than expressions that are deemed inappropriate. Such perceptions of appropriateness are informed by prevailing norms and expectations concerning emotional expressions, which are referred to as “display rules” (Ekman, 1993; Shields, 2005). Display rules dictate which (types of) emotions are appropriate to
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