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Emotions As A Form Of Customer Resource In Service Encounters

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Abstract

Studies in consumer resources hold that customers are required to be equipped with a set of knowledge and aptitude in order to play their role in a service exchange. While extant studies focus primarily on cognitive resources of customers, no study has yet to conceptualise the ability to manage and control emotions as a form of customer resource.

This conceptual paper integrates theories from the literature to show that emotions elicited exert a dynamic impact on the service encounter. It is posited that customers’ ability to manage service-related emotions may influence the outcome of the service experience. One avenue of utilising emotions as a form of customer resource is through Emotional Intelligence – a concept largely overlooked in marketing. Emotional Intelligence suggests that emotions can be managed and controlled. Emotionally intelligent customers may respond to negative emotions in service encounters more effectively through greater awareness of and capacity to cope with affective pressures. This paper presents a conceptual platform for future research in the area of emotion management as an antecedent to customer response in service encounters.

Introduction

In order for customers to perform their role as co-producers in services, they are required to be equipped with the necessary information, skill, experience, aptitude, time and monetary assets to facilitate their part in the service delivery. This collective source of supporting knowledge and skill is coined by the term consumer resources (Gabbott & Hogg, 1998). Although consumer resource is comprised of many aspects; from aptitude to tangible assets, cognitive resource, also known as consumer knowledge (Cordell, 1997), remains the most popular construct in consumer behaviour studies (e.g. Berning & Jacoby, 1974; Bettman & Park, 1980; Cordell, 1997).

Apart from cognitive resources, emotions also play a critical role in customers’ response to the service environment (Smith & Bolton, 2002). However, no study has yet to explore customer management of emotions as a form of resource. It is posited that emotions can also be conceptualised as a form of customer resource from which customers can tap into and utilise to facilitate their roles in service encounters. This conceptual paper is in line with the growing interest in the role of emotion as a central element in understanding the consumption experience (Bagozzi, Gopinath, & Nyer, 1999; Smith & Bolton, 2002). Conceptualisations in this paper will contribute to knowledge by providing the basis for future research in the area of emotion management as an antecedent to customer response in service encounters.

Emotions in Services

Studies that relate emotions to services focus primarily on emotions elicit from the service encounter that influences service evaluation (Andreasen, 1999; Hui & Tse, 1996) and emotions as part of a cognitive-emotive predictor of complaint behaviour (Blodgett & Anderson, 2000; Davidow & Dacin, 1997; Stephens & Gwinner, 1998). For the majority of these studies, emotions as a construct have been conceptualised as a uni-directional variable that moderates the comparison between customer predictions and evaluation (e.g. Mano & Oliver, 1993; Menon & Dube, 2000; Smith & Bolton, 2002). The customer experience of emotions follows a linear process, where emotions elicited from service-related objects (e.g. direct interaction with the service provider) are sequentially experienced by the customer (figure 1).
This general conceptualisation assumes that emotions are essentially internal and personal reactions to external objects (Parkinson, 1996). From this perspective, most theoretical approaches to emotions have remained at the physiological level (e.g. Cacioppo, Berntson, & Klein, 1992) or at a cognitive perspective (e.g. Lazarus, 1991). The latter, allows this model of emotions elicitation to fit well with the disconfirmation school, where emotions become a moderator in the comparison between prior service expectations and perceived service delivery (e.g. Hui & Tse, 1996; Smith & Bolton, 2002). However, emotions, unlike service expectations, may not necessarily be formed prior to the service encounter. As some scholars have argued, emotions exert a purposeful and dynamic function in the phenomenon of consumption experience and the impact of emotions may be exerted throughout the development of the service encounter (Arnould & Price, 1993; Fournier & Mick, 1999). The service encounter is a dyadic interaction between the service provider and the customer (Solomon, Surpremant, Czepiel, & Gutman, 1985) as well as being an interaction with other customers in the servicescape (Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990). This raises questions to the general conceptualisation of emotions as a private experience elicited from the interaction with the service provider at a critical moment. It is in the opinion that a more holistic and accurate appreciation of emotions in services may be taken from the perspective of emotions as an interpersonal phenomenon.

Interpersonal View of Emotions

In addition to mood and emotional effects, recent research points to the importance of understanding the interpersonal processes that are at the core of consumption emotions (Menon & Dube, 2000; Pugh, 2001). The interpersonal view of emotions posits that emotions are inherently communicative, and that interpersonal processes are an integral part of the emotion experience (Parkinson, 1995). Parkinson (1996) argued that emotions are not necessarily dependent on events that directly impact on the individual experience. Emotions may be communicated without specific interpretation of transmitted signals, such as facial and bodily feedback, and are reciprocated in synchrony of the social context (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1992). Menon and Dube (2000) differentiated normative expectations of salesperson response from observed response to indicate the different avenues of emotion elicitation in a service. From the interpersonal perspective, the nature of emotions in a service encounter may not necessarily be elicited from direct communication between the service provider and the customer, but may also be transmitted by the mere presence of the actors in the service environment.

Interpersonal theories of emotion stress the ongoing, dynamic role played by the social context in not only eliciting intrapsychic emotion experiences, but also in shaping the emotion episode (Menon & Dube, 2000). In other words, emotions are social rather than isolated, individual processes. Under this view, not only are social factors such as the provider’s behaviour serves as elicitors of customer emotions, the emotion experience is communicated to the contact personnel, and the response determines how the episode unfolds. For example, prior to direct communication with the service provider, the customer may have established various preconceptions, expectations as well as initial emotions about the interaction with the contact personnel. These initial emotions may be reflected in the customer’s verbal as well as non-verbal behaviour which in turn affects the service provider’s response, creating a cyclical response progression that influences the overall encounter.
From this perspective, the role of emotions in a service failure will be more than a moderator in the customer evaluative outcome of a uni-directional linear comparison between prior expectations and perceived service delivery. The impact of emotions in a service breakdown may be a cyclical process that involves the dynamics of continuous interaction between the service provider and the customer through the length of the encounter. This is in contrast with the general models of negative emotions and moods elicited at a particular critical moment (Andreassen, 1999; Fedorikhin & Cole, 2004). The interpersonal view of emotions also supports arguments that emotional response to service failure has a strong impact on recovery effort (Smith & Bolton, 2002), in that the dynamic elicitation of negative emotions in the progression of the service encounter creates a cumulative emotional tension that may influence the perceived recovery effort. This raises various issues as to how consumers are able to manage their roles in service encounters given the dynamism elicitation of service-related emotions.

**Emotions as a Customer Resource**

The notion that customers are able to harness and draw on emotions as a form of resource rests on the assumption that emotions can be managed and controlled. This assumption in itself challenges conventional conceptualisations of emotions as a form of instinctive response to appraise an event of personal relevance. Bagozzi and colleagues (1999) suggest that emotion is a mental state of readiness that arises from cognitive appraisals of events. In other words, emotions are evoked and initiated by cognitive processes and not within the conscious control of consumers. Along the same line of argument, prior research in service failure suggests that consumers’ affective response is instinctively evoked by provocation of the service breakdown (Folkes, Koletsky, & Graham, 1987; Hui & Tse, 1996; Taylor, 1994). As such, these studies explain emotional inflictions as intrinsic to the service encounter and have little indication that emotions can be managed by customers to influence the service outcome.

In affective science, emotions have been conceptualised as a product of social evolution. As such, not just the manifestations of an emotion, but the actual emotion itself can be controlled through social experience (Averill, LeDoux, Levenson, Ekman, & Davidson, 1994). Studies that break away from the conventional school in consumption behaviour suggest that customer emotions may not be entirely dependent on instinctive response. Fournier and Mick (1999) proposed an alternative model to satisfaction called the balancing paradigm. The balancing paradigm posits that satisfaction may be derived as a result of successful management of paradoxical qualities intrinsic of consumption. Such paradoxes may include conflicting emotions towards possession and ownership, which indicates that successful management of affective attributes towards consumption, may alter the experiential outcome. Arnould and Price (1993) showed in their study of extraordinary service encounter that customers deliberately adjust their mental states to prepare for negative emotions that may arise out of the consumption experience. A prior study also argued that positive experiential outcome may derive out of strategic actions by customers to cope, improvise, mitigate and improve the service encounter (Mok & Hendry, 2003). The study moves away from the conventional research orientation by highlighting that the service outcome is not driven by the actions of the service provider alone.
Since customers are not passive entities in a service encounter (Solomon et al., 1985), it may be logical to expect customers to deliberately share the responsibility of engineering a successful service outcome. The alteration and management of emotional states may be one avenue of doing so.

The literature on managing emotions intrinsic of commercial exchanges focuses primarily on the seller’s aptitude (e.g. Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990; Gronroos, 1996; Manna & Smith, 2004; Rozell, Pettijohn, & Parker, 2004). Since service transactions are a dyadic exchange, it is rather surprising to find a lack of research that theorises the concept of affective control and management as a customer competence. From the previous discussion, emotions elicited have a significant influence on service encounters. As such, it will be reasonable to argue that customer’s ability to manage these emotions will impact on their service experience. It is therefore posited that conceptualising emotions as a customer resource may reveal important implications to critical incidents in services, and especially in service failure and recovery.

### Emotional Intelligence

The argument that emotions can be controlled and harnessed as a form of consumer resource directs the discussion towards the theory of *Emotional Intelligence* (EI). An appropriate definition of emotional intelligence is taken from Mayer and Salovey (1997, p. 5) and Martinez (1997, p. 342):

Emotional intelligence is “the ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to cope with environmental demands and pressures.”

The widespread interest in the topic of emotional intelligence can be traced from Goleman (1996) who asserted that EI explains a higher proportion of variance in individual success that Intelligence Quotient (IQ). Research in the commercial implications of emotional intelligence has focus predominantly in management literature, largely as a predictor of managers competency and leadership roles (e.g. Barling, Slater, & Kelloway, 2000; Goleman, 1998; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002; Kaluzniacky, 2004; Sosik & Megerian, 1999). The concept of emotional intelligence has also been related to marketing, although research is scarce, it focuses solely on customer-oriented selling (Chang, 2003; Manna & Smith, 2004; Rozell et al., 2004) and service provider competency (Bardzil & Slaski, 2003). However, there has been a lack of research that associates emotional intelligence with customers’ consumption behaviour. Much like the predominant school in services marketing literature, research emphasis has generally been based on the aptitude and activities of the service provider, often neglecting the affective and cognitive contributions to the experiential outcome by customers themselves.

### Emotional Intelligence and the Service Encounter

In an exploratory study, Nathan, a University tutor described his service experience at a bookstore. The sales assistant was reportedly rude to Nathan when she insisted that he could not browse the magazines unless he was buying.

“I gave it to her. I told her, look firstly there are no signs that say ‘No Browsing’. Secondly if you can get everyone here (pointing to other customers), to stop browsing, maybe, just maybe I might consider to put this magazine back.”

Jared, Nathan’s brother who was present during the incident explained,

“I didn’t think it was such a big deal. I just smiled at her. I was a bit embarrassed actually. If Nathan wanted to hold back, he could, but he just wanted to give it to her.”
This anecdote describes two persons in a given service encounter who managed their emotions and responded differently to the service staff. The brothers came from the same family and cultural background and educated at a tertiary level. Their different responses towards the service failure can be attributed to their intrinsic characteristics and from an emotive resource point of view, their emotional management traits or EI. Their different responses eventuated to a different evaluative outcome. Jared thought that the sales assistant’s actions were “no big deal,” whereas Nathan commented, “that was the last time I visited the bookshop.”

From an interpersonal view of emotions, affective attributes are dynamic and prevalent throughout the entire service encounter (see Menon & Dube, 2000; Parkinson, 1995, 1996). The concept of emotional intelligences presents the basis to posit that customers can utilise their ability to manage emotions to shape and influence the experiential outcome of services. Especially in a service failure, the disparity between customer’s expectations and perceived delivery of service may create negative emotions which customers have to cope with (Hui & Tse, 1996; Smith & Bolton, 2002). The ability to cope with these affective tensions, along with other cognitive processes of service evaluation (e.g. Boshoff & Leong, 1998; Spreng, Harrell, & Mackoy, 1995; Weun, Beatty, & Jones, 2004) may collectively influence the evaluative outcome of the service failure as well as recovery efforts.

The degree of customer emotional involvement influences the development of the service encounter as well as the experiential outcome (Mudie, Cottam, & Raeside, 2003). Given the argument that customers may assume responsibility and actively improve the service encounter for a successful exchange (Mok & Hendry, 2003), emotional intelligences may present the means for customers to manage affective facets of the encounter to realise the desired outcome. Rozell and colleagues (2004) highlighted that emotionally intelligent individuals may be more aware of their own feelings as well as the feelings of others, better able to identify them and better able to communicate them when appropriate. Salovey and Mayer (1989) also highlighted that through emotional intelligence, one can regulate their own emotions as well as the emotions of others, through maintenance of positive moods and relieving from negative affective states. Therefore, in the event of a service failure, emotionally intelligent customers may be better equipped with the means to cope with negative emotions elicited in the encounter. Since emotions influence behavioural choices and can undermine rational selection of optimal courses of action (Leith & Baumeister, 1996), emotionally intelligent customers may have a better control on their behavioural response manifest from service-related emotions. With a better awareness of their own emotional state as well as empathy for the service provider, their affective response in a service failure may be shaped towards their desired experiential outcome.

Conclusion and Direction for Future Research
The literature in emotions in services is still in its infancy and there is a call for a need of greater understanding in the role of emotions in consumption experience (Bagozzi et al., 1999; Price, Arnould, & Deibler, 1995; Smith & Bolton, 2002). In services, the interpersonal perspective suggests that emotions are dynamically elicited throughout the service encounter. These affective attributes have a significant impact on customers’ cognitive and behavioural processes. As such, the ability for customers to manage and control emotions within and from external sources may have important implications on their service experience.

The theory of customer resource holds that in order for customers to perform their role, they must have the necessary skill and resources to do so. However, studies in customer resources focus primarily on cognitive resources, and there is a lack of research that conceptualises emotions as another form of resource that customers may utilise. Review in the literature of Emotional Intelligence suggests that emotions can be managed and controlled. Emotionally
intelligent customers may respond to negative emotions in service encounters more effectively through greater awareness of and capacity to cope with affective pressures.

The conceptualising of emotions as a form of customer resource is relatively unexplored and it is anticipated this theory may present new avenues of research in consumption behaviour in services. Additional research is first needed to further articulate how emotions can be conceptualised as a form of customer resource, what emotive resource constitutes, before establishing how emotive resource influences the service encounter. Future study may establish and test relationships between emotive resource and customer response, as well as the impact of emotive resource on the experiential outcome (such as satisfaction) in different service scenario, such as service encounters involving service failure and recovery.
REFERENCES


