Understanding hotel employees' service sabotage: Emotional labor perspective based on conservation of resources theory

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ABSTRACT

Although hospitality employees' service sabotage behavior in service encounters is not only, more seriously prevailed than generally presumed but also detrimental to the organizations' growth, and profitability, the topic has not been a major topic in hospitality research. Thus, this study aims to, provide answers to the questions "Why do hospitality employees engage in service sabotage, behaviors?" and "What can hospitality organizations do to mitigate them?" Based on conservation of, resources (COR) theory, we hypothesized hospitality employees' emotional labor, specifically, emotional dissonance, to be a major source of service sabotage. We also hypothesized burnout to have, a mediating effect, while emotional intelligence has a buffering effect on the mediated relationship, between emotional dissonance and service sabotage via burnout. The results of moderated mediation, regression analyses of the data from 309 customer-contact hotel employees in the U.S. supported all, the hypotheses in this study. The implications of the findings and future research directions were, discussed.

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1. Introduction

Service sabotage is service employees' misbehavior that is intentionally designed to negatively affect service (Harris and Ogbonna, 2006). Retaliatory actions, altering the speed of service, playing pranks, and expressing frustration or aggression to customers are examples of service sabotage. Service sabotage is more prevalent at hospitality workplaces than generally assumed (Harris and Ogbonna, 2002, 2009). According to Harris and Ogbonna's (2002) study of the hospitality industry, more than 85% of customer-contact employees reported having engaged in some forms of service sabotage within the week before the survey, and 100% of the frontline employees in the study reported that service sabotage occurs every day in their workplace. Service sabotage also damages the organizations' growth and profitability as it negatively impact customers' perceptions of service quality, willingness to return, and the word of mouth behavior to others. Murphy (1993) suggested that such behaviors cost businesses up to $200 billion annually in the U.S.

The topic of service sabotage is particularly important in the hospitality industry because the perceived quality of the service is often profoundly affected by how the service provider acts and speaks with the customer (Schneider and Bowen, 1992).

However, the topic has been overlooked in the hospitality industry and academia. To date, only a few studies have been conducted in the non-hospitality settings like manufacturing (Harris and Ogbonna, 2012). Further, these studies were done in the form of opinion-based, anecdotal evidence or single case studies after interviews, lacking empirical analysis using extensive survey. Most importantly, review of the service sabotage literature shows that little research has shed light on the motives of service sabotage and how it can be prevented (Harris and Ogbonna, 2012).

Given this, the purpose of this study was to expand the body of knowledge to the hospitality industry by empirically investigating why hotel employees engage in service sabotage and how their misbehavior can be prevented. More specifically, the first objective of the present study was to provide theoretical logic and empirical evidence of why customer-contact hospitality employees undertake the negative service sabotage behaviors. For this objective, we hypothesized employee burnout to be the leading reason that hospitality employees are willing to sabotage the service encounter.

Increased competition among many hotel properties and brands has forced hotel organizations to focus greater attention on the quality of services provided to customers (Schneider and Bowen, 1992; Zeithaml et al., 1996). However, excessive pursuing a philosophy of "customer is king" or "friendly service with a smile" also remains a priority for hospitality companies. Because the quality of the interpersonal interaction between customers and hotel employees is critical to customer satisfaction (Gremler and

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Gwinner, 2000), most companies focus on managing their employees' emotional expressions toward customers (Diefendorff and Richard, 2003). The companies implicitly or explicitly prescribe appropriate expressions of emotions used by their employees during interactions with customers (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). As a result, service employees are required to hide or suppress displaying any negative emotion and express positive emotions to customers. Employees must put their genuine inner feelings and emotions aside for the sake of customer satisfaction. Previous research indicates that suppressing or faking emotion may be a source of deviant behaviors. For example, according to Cordes and Dougherty (1993), when an individual does not inwardly feel the emotions he/she must display and, thus, choose to fake the display, he/she may experience emotional dissonance (ED), a psychological discrepancy between inner feelings and outward expressions. Repeated experience of ED then can build up feelings of inauthenticity, deplete emotional resources, and create emotional distress, all of which are the major sources of reduced levels of performance, productivity, and job dissatisfaction (Cropanzano et al., 2004). When employees attribute their poor job outcomes to emotional factors related to their job, their work-related attitudes and behaviors can be negatively affected to the point of service sabotage (Giardini and Frese, 2006).

The second objective of this study is to provide an answer to the question "how emotional intelligence (EI) mitigates the dysfunctional effects of ED on service sabotage." For these objectives, it was hypothesized that an employee's EI may decrease the likelihood of ED, neutralize the development of burnout, and therefore help employees experience less ED and avoid service sabotage during service interactions. Recently, the concept of EI has attracted a great deal of interest from researchers and practitioners alike, due to its meaningful implications for managing emotional labor. EI involves a set of social abilities for recognizing and understanding one's own and others' emotional states and for using and regulating those feelings to facilitate performance (Mayer and Salovey, 1997). Research has shown that EI is the foundational ability for emotional labor. For example, EI helps people handle frustration and control their emotions because it functions as a psychological resource that allows the employee to deal effectively with emotional demand (Giardini and Frese, 2006). EI also helps people adaptively regulate their emotions and, thus, handle social encounters more skillfully (Mayer and Salovey, 1995). Given that emotional labor is the process of managing one's own emotion for required emotions and ED occurs due to the lack of emotional resources (Mastracci et al., 2010), the functionality of EI as an underlying ability may interact with emotional labor and, thus, may lower ED, burnout, and service sabotage.

We drew upon Hobfoll's (1989) conservation of resources (COR) theory to explain the hypothesized relationships. COR theory provides important implications for how hospitality employees react in customer service interactions; it suggests that involuntary regulation of emotions and attitudes to match with organizational customer service rules may require employees to use psychological resources and thus lose those resources. At the same time, growing body of literature reveals that involuntary emotional labor may generate negative consequences to customer service, so we explored service sabotage from the emotional labor perspectives among hospitality employees. Thus, the ultimate goal and contribution of this study is to advance understanding service sabotage among hospitality employees using the emotional labor model, which is based on COR theory. We will first review the conceptual background of emotional labor and service sabotage. Following this, we will use COR theory as our theoretical lens to integrate these concepts and justify the hypotheses using burnout and EI.

2. Conceptual background and hypotheses

2.1. Emotional labor

Emotional labor is defined as the labor to enhance, fake, or suppress emotions to express the emotions an organization desires during interpersonal transactions (Morris and Feldman, 1996). To teach or dictate to employees how to present proper emotions to customers, organizations explicitly or implicitly prescribe the standard of emotional display and require employees to express a certain blend of positive emotions like friendliness, positiveness, compassion, or warmth even in emotionally negative situations. Employees are also required to suppress negative emotions like anger, indifference, or frustration during interaction with customers (Albecht and Zemke, 1985).

In previous research, two forms of compliance to display rules have been identified as dimensions of emotional labor: surface acting and deep acting. Surface acting refers to managing observable expressions by feigning unfelt emotions and/or hiding felt emotions (Hochschild, 1983). Surface acting occurs when employees choose to merely mask their feelings, presenting an outward appearance that does not match their genuine feelings (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). An example of surface acting is a hotel guest service agent who must maintain a smile even though he or she feels anger or frustration with rude customers. Deep acting refers to employees' attempt to sincerely feel and show the emotions that must be displayed. Unlike surface acting, deep acting occurs when employees make an effort to regulate and control their inward thoughts and feelings to match the emotions an organization desires (Hochschild, 1983). Thus, employees choose to engage in deep acting by consciously modifying their genuine feelings so they understand customers, have empathy with the situations, and feel customers' feelings as part of their own (England and Farkas, 1986). Research has found that these positive characteristics of deep acting generally increase employees' sense of accomplishment and job satisfaction (Zapf, 2002).

ED refers to the discrepancy between genuinely felt emotion and feigned emotion (Kruml and Geddes, 1998). ED occurs when an employee must avoid displaying any form of negative emotion toward customers and express positive emotions contrary to the employees' true feelings. Thus, in some research, surface acting has been identified with ED because employees feel the discrepancy between inner feeling and outward expression to some degree while engaging in surface acting (Kruml and Geddes, 1998). On the other hand, Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) and Johnson and Spector (2007) view ED as a consequence of surface acting. They argue that ED is primarily created by inauthentic emotional behavior in surface acting.

ED is largely blamed as a major source of detrimental consequences of emotional labor, such as feelings of inauthenticity, psychological distress, and job satisfaction (Bakker and Heuven, 2006; Johnson and Spector, 2007; Hochschild, 1983; Zapf, 2002). According to Hochschild's (1983) alienation hypothesis, alienation from one's emotion triggered by continuous loss of control over one's emotions and emotional display, emotive dissonance between felt emotions and displayed emotions, may cause job stress and lead to detrimental psychological and interpersonal problems. In line with this theory, Zapf (2002) found that when employees must fake emotions or suppress genuine emotions in their contacts with other people, they may experience psychological strain including feelings of self-alienation and emotional estrangement. As this uncomfortable emotional reaction continues, employees may feel psychological distress and frustration. The findings of previous emotional labor studies revealed that, in the long run, ED may have negative effects on employee job satisfaction. Bakker and Heuven (2006) found that employees who choose