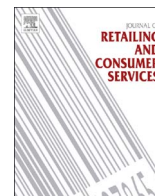




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Employee display of burnout in the service encounter and its impact on customer satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

This study examines if employee display of burnout symptoms in service encounters has an impact on customer satisfaction. An experimental approach was used in which the employee's display of burnout (absent vs. present) and the service performance level (low vs. high) were the manipulated factors. The results show that employee display of burnout had a negative impact on customer satisfaction, that this effect was mediated by customers' appraisals of the employee's emotional state, and that the effect was stronger under the condition of low service performance.

1. Introduction

Work comprising face-to-face encounters with customers is challenging, because it involves balancing a complex set of demands from co-workers, managers, and customers. At the same time, many employees who deal with customers are poorly paid, undertrained, and sometimes abused by customers (Chen and Kao, 2012; Zemke and Anderson, 1990). It is not surprising, then, that customer contact employees run the risk of job burnout (Cho et al., 2013; Cordes and Dougherty, 1993; Lings et al., 2014; Singh et al., 1994; Singh, 2000; Yagil, 2006; Yavas et al., 2013).

The toxic consequences of burnout, a negatively charged state of exhaustion and emotional depletion (Grandey et al., 2012), are well-documented at the individual employee level. They include (a) mental and physical health problems such as depression, anxiety, distress, decreased self-esteem, fatigue, and insomnia (Chen and Kao, 2012; Cordes and Dougherty, 1993; Kristensen et al., 2005; Maslach et al., 2001; Schaufeli et al., 2008); (b) deterioration of social and family relationships (Cordes and Dougherty, 1993; Maslach et al., 2001); and (c) dysfunctional outcomes in the individual's relation to the employer, such as lower organizational commitment, more absenteeism, reduced job satisfaction, intentions to leave, and attenuated job performance (Babakus et al., 1999; Chen and Kao, 2012; Cho et al., 2013; Cordes and Dougherty, 1993; Deery et al., 2002; Han et al., 2016; Karl and Peluchette, 2006; Kristensen et al., 2005; Low et al., 2001; Maslach et al., 2001; Schaufeli et al., 2008; Singh, 2000; Singh et al., 1994; Taris, 2006).

Given such consequences, it is unlikely that employees with high

levels of burnout would be able to produce a positive experience for the customers with whom they interact. Some existing studies suggest that this is indeed the case, thus implying that employee burnout has implications not only from a human relations perspective but also from a marketing perspective in which the customer's reactions are in focus. For example, Singh (2000) found a negative association between service employee burnout and performance quality, a dependent variable that included some customer-related aspects. Yagil (2012), who examined dyads of first-line service employees and customers, identified a negative association between service employee burnout and customer satisfaction. Similar results have also been obtained for health care employees and patients (Argentero et al., 2008; Garman et al., 2002). It should be noted, however, that these studies were based on (a) employees' self-ratings of burnout, (b) assessments of the burnout-customer evaluation association in aggregated terms (i.e., the aggregated history of employee-customer interactions), and (c) questionnaire data without a clear time asymmetry between cause and effect variables.

In the present study, we apply a different perspective to the link between employee burnout and customer reactions. First, given that burnout is a variable that can take on values ranging from low to high, we assume that contemporary customers are more likely to encounter employees with relatively mild levels of burnout rather than employees with burnout at such critical levels that they would require treatment and even hospitalization. Second, we assume that burnout symptoms at the relatively mild level are likely to "leak" in service encounters (i.e., clues about the employee's state are transmitted to the customer through employee behaviors), and that such leaks influence customers'

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information processing activities so that overall evaluations are affected. Focus here is on customer satisfaction as the main dependent variable, because it has become a key construct for many firms, and it has been shown to positively affect many firm performance-related variables (Luo and Homburg, 2007; Vargo et al., 2007). Third, the present study is an attempt to focus on the potential for an impact of the employee's display of burnout symptoms per se on customer satisfaction, and we examine this in an experimental setting allowing for (1) a time asymmetry between display of burnout symptoms and customer satisfaction and (2) control of other factors.

The specific purpose of this study, then, is to examine – in a service encounter context – if employee display of burnout symptoms has an impact on customer satisfaction. Given that humans in general are sensitive to other humans' emotional states (and given that this sensitivity is a causally potent factor with respect to overall evaluations), we expect a negative association between employee display of burnout symptoms and customer satisfaction. We also expect that the association is mediated by customers' appraisals of the employee's emotional state, and that it is moderated by the level of service provided by the employee. Our moderation hypothesis is based on a view of the customer as relatively egoistic; we assume that employee burnout symptoms are likely to have a reduced negative impact on customer satisfaction when service performance is at a high as opposed to a low level. The reason is that a high performance level would make it more likely that the customer gets what was expected, and this would overshadow concerns about the employee's negatively charged state and attenuate its causal potency. In methodological terms, we employed a between-subjects experimental design comprising a retail setting (a shoe store) in which employee display of burnout (absent vs. present) and the service level (low vs. high) were the manipulated factors. Customer satisfaction was the dependent variable.

An assessment along these lines of the employee burnout-customer satisfaction link contributes to previous researchers' effort to build theories regarding employee behaviors and characteristics with an impact on customer satisfaction (e.g., Bitner et al., 1990; Delcourt et al., 2013; Hartline and Jones, 1996; Keh et al., 2013; Smith et al., 1999; Söderlund and Colliander, 2015; Winsted, 2000), because the influence of employee display of burnout symptoms on customer satisfaction has hitherto not been examined. Moreover, many researchers acknowledge that service encounters are emotion-inducing and that emotion-related variables mediate the customer's evaluations of an offer (e.g., Collishaw et al., 2008; Doucet, 2004; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006; Mattila and Enz, 2002; Price et al., 1995a; Sherman et al., 1997; Söderlund and Rosengren, 2008; Yoo et al., 1998; Wirtz and Bateson, 1999). So far, however, researchers have not examined such mediating aspects in the context of employee display of burnout symptoms. The present study should therefore be seen as an attempt to contribute not only to research on employee burnout and customer satisfaction, but also to a general stream of research acknowledging that emotional variables mediate customers' reactions to an offer. In addition, research on burnout has resulted in copious models of antecedents of employee burnout (e.g., Babakus et al., 1999; Cordes and Dougherty, 1993; Heuven and Bakker, 2003; Hsieh and Hsieh, 2003; Leiter and Maslach, 2001; Low et al., 2001; Maslach et al., 2001; Schaufeli et al., 2008; Yagil, 2006). Incidentally, customer-related variables, such as customers' negative behaviors, appear as antecedents to burnout in some models (e.g., Ben-Zur and Yagil, 2005; Deery et al., 2002; Yagil et al., 2008). Yet what we address in this study is customer-related *consequences* of employee burnout, which is a less well-researched area.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Overview of the framework

The context for our assessment of employee display of burnout symptoms and its impact on customer satisfaction is the service

encounter; that is to say, the dyadic interaction between a service employee and a customer (Bitner et al., 1990; Surprenant and Solomon, 1987). Given that this interaction is the service from the customer's point of view, the interaction is an essential determination of customer satisfaction (Bitner et al., 1990). Consequently, copious studies have generated a long list of specific service employee behaviors in the service encounter with an impact on customer satisfaction (e.g., Bitner et al., 1990; Smith et al., 1999; Winsted, 2000). Attempts to specify the conditions for this link (i.e., when it is weak and strong) have been made in previous research and, in tune with Price et al. (1995b), we assume that the link will be stronger given that the interaction has a relative long duration, has affective content, and involves relatively close proximity between the employee and the customer. In our attempt to add satisfaction-inducing behaviors of the employee to the list produced by previous authors, and given a service encounter with non-negligible levels of duration, affect, and proximity, we assume that employee burnout symptoms are likely to leak in service encounters with customers, and that customers are motivated to use such symptoms as clues for appraisals of the employee's overall emotional state. We also assume that this appraisal affects customers' overall evaluations (such as customer satisfaction) by means of emotional contagion and affect infusion, in such a way that that employee display of burnout symptoms has a negative impact on customer satisfaction. Yet we assume that this negative impact is moderated by the level of performance by the employee; we expect a stronger negative effect when the employee is performing at a low as opposed to a high level.

2.2. Burnout and its facets

Burnout, which has been described as “a modern disease” (Golembiewski et al., 1998), “a particular type of job stress” (Cordes and Dougherty, 1993), “a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job” (Maslach et al., 2001), and “a state of mental weariness” (Schaufeli et al., 2008), is typically conceived of as a psychological syndrome comprising three facets.

The first facet is *emotional exhaustion*: feelings of being over-extended, depleted of energy, and drained of sensation. Fatigue, often co-existing with frustration and tension, is a key word for this facet. In addition, “a flat battery” is sometimes used as a metaphor. The second facet is *depersonalization*, defined in terms of a tendency to de-individualize and dehumanize others – particularly clients, who are treated as objects rather than people. This facet also comprises a negative, callous, or excessively detached response to various aspects of the job. The third facet is *reduced personal accomplishment*, which is characterized by attributions of inefficacy, reduced motivation, and low self-esteem (Argentero et al., 2008; Babakus et al., 1999; Cordes and Dougherty, 1993; Hsieh and Hsieh, 2003; Lee and Ashforth, 1990; Maslach et al., 2001; Singh et al., 1994). It should be noted that some researchers question if the third facet is a part of the burnout construct; it has been suggested that emotional exhaustion and depersonalization represent the most prominent burnout dimensions (Cox et al., 2005; Kristensen et al., 2005; Schaufeli et al., 2008), and that emotional exhaustion is really the core of burnout (Cho et al., 2013; Cox et al., 2005; Demerouti et al., 2001; Garman et al., 2002; Grandey et al., 2012; Lings et al., 2014; Maslach et al., 2001). Indeed, in some recent research, emotional exhaustion is seen as the cause of depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment (Lings et al., 2014).

Moreover, burnout is generally conceptualized (and operationalized) in continuous terms, ranging from “low” to “high” for each facet, and thus not as a dichotomy. At the same time, however, models have been developed allowing for the classification of a specific individual into one of several categories reflecting different levels of overall burnout. The phase model of burnout, for example, contains eight phases (Golembiewski et al., 1998). As already noticed, in this paper we focus on the effects of a relatively mild level of employee burnout.

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