



Research Paper

Hospitality service employees' flirting displays: Emotional labor or commercial friendship?

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the flirtation phenomenon in hospitality services, particularly whether flirting displays comprise an expression of emotional labor or a manifestation of commercial friendship. The study explored two samples. Forty structured in-depth interviews were conducted, 20 with hospitality employees and 20 with customers, eliciting their respective views of flirting during bar interactions. Findings suggest that flirting derives from mixed motives aimed at establishing a special atmosphere. Unlike emotional labor, flirting requires a prior acquaintance with the customer. Managers indirectly encourage hospitality employees to flirt to maintain an appropriate customer feeling. Customers saw flirting as a kind of game employees 'play' to increase profits. Flirting comprises an element of hospitality employees' informal protocol, irrespective of the customer's message. Customers perceived flirting as a blatant violation of the normative commercial friendship. Benefits and costs of flirting to both employee and customer are discussed. Practical implications are offered.

1. Introduction

In service economies, the link between financial and social exchanges is frequently close; occasionally, no distinct border can be discerned between them. Service exchanges are transformed into a form of commercial friendships (Lashley and Morrison, 2003). While these commercial friendships have been observed in the service literature as an instrumental marketing tool to improve relationships with customers, it has several characteristics in common with close friendship, in particular, reciprocal displays of affection, closeness, social support, mutual commitment, and loyalty (Price and Arnould, 1999; Hultman and Andersson-Cederholm, 2010). Consequently, service organizations have highlighted the importance of maintaining long-lasting relationships with customers (Liao and Chuang, 2004). To promote customer satisfaction, service employees are required to express emotions appropriate (Chi et al., 2011) for enhancing customers' positive attitudes (Barger and Grandey, 2006). Thus, hospitality service employees' emotional expressions are expected to be positive, this process is known as 'emotional labor' (Grandey, 2003).

Bars have been identified in the service literature as a significant business sector of the hospitality industry. The current study explored how bartenders adjust the boundaries between commercial friendship and intimate friendship, use flirting behaviors to promote the instrumental business economy. This study contributes to the hospitality

service literature, which has surprisingly ignored hospitality employees' flirting displays. This study examined whether hospitality service employees' flirting displays are perceived as merely part of "doing their job" (i.e., in the framework of emotional labor) or whether they are spontaneously unconstructed emotional employee responses as an element of a commercial friendship. We aim to explore the role the role of flirting displays in commercial friendship: its modes, motivations, and outcomes as perceived by bartender and customers.

2. Research framework

2.1. Flirting while serving

Flirting is indicative of an affiliative desire to attract the attention of the target (e.g., Moore, 2002). Flirting displays can be verbal as well as nonverbal, and this ambiguity appears to be a key component due to the (calculated) risk of miscommunication. Flirting may be sexually motivated at times and not so at others (Henningesen et al., 2008). In general, Henningesen (2004) classified motives for flirting as planned or spontaneous emotional expressions. For instance, the *fun motivation* refers to engaging in playful social interactions for their entertainment value. Alternatively, if flirts receive positive feedback when flirting, they may do so because such feedback is rewarding and fosters self-esteem; this is known as *esteem motivation*. All these types of flirting are

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spontaneous.

Hall (1993) pointed out that service providers engage in *job flirting* as part of their efforts to provide good service (i.e., emotional labor). This view of flirting corresponds to *instrumental motivation*, when flirterers seek to encourage the target (customer) to do something that benefits the company (Henningsen, 2004). The question remains: Do flirting displays represent emotional labor efforts or are they stretching the boundaries within the commercial friendship context when expressed between customers and hospitality employees (i.e., bartenders)?

2.2. Commercial friendship

Commercial friendship is a term coined by Price and Arnould (1999) and used in the field of hospitality services by Lashley and Morrison (2003) and by others (see Rosenbaum, 2006, 2008, 2009; Rosenbaum et al., 2015) to describe social relations between hospitality providers and customers. Such relations may be seen as an outcome of plain strategic actions on the part of the provider to serve instrumental goals (Price and Arnould, 1999). Price and Arnould (1999) argued that commercial friendship is characterized by a practical progression, with the providers and customers not knowing each other at first, but with the passage of time, gradually increase their acquaintance and eventually establish a long-term commercial friendship. The nature of the service will determine if commercial friendship will be of an intimate nature. In this form, the commercial friendship becomes more personal and less instrumental. Thus, it can be expected that in an intimate atmosphere, such as at a bar, encompassing alcoholic beverages, hospitality, and entertainment, commercial friendship can be expected to be more intimate than in conventional daily service encounters.

Service employees play a key role in their customers' lives (Kang and Ridgway, 1996; Price et al., 1995). For instance, bartenders were found to frequently demonstrate empathy to customers by providing harmonizing social support (Cowen, 1982, cited in Rosenbaum, 2009). Indeed, commercial friendship in hospitality contexts seems to be situated in a place characterized by a tension between intimacy and distance (Hultman and Andersson-Cederholm, 2010). Providers may offer customers emotional and social support (i.e., a willingness to listen to personal and private issues) in the form of commercial friendship as well as instrumental support (i.e., assistance with tasks, such as cleaning or transportation) through verbal communication (Rosenbaum, 2006, 2008). In commercial friendships, when customers reciprocate companionship feelings with employees, both enjoy social benefits in which reciprocal disclosures between employees and their customers are encouraged (Price and Arnould, 1999), eventually leading to feelings of affection (Garzaniti et al., 2011, cited in Rosenbaum et al., 2015).

Commercial friendship literature emphasizes the link between this friendship and positive customer outcomes (e.g., loyalty, word of mouth; Gremler and Gwinner, 2000; Gwinner et al., 1998). There has been less of a focus in the literature on the possible costs of commercial friendship. Given the affection characterizing these relationships, do hospitality employees use flirting behaviors as commercial friendships for their employer's financial gain, thus exploiting this affinity? The question posed by the current study is whether flirting displays are expressed as part of bartenders' personal genuine affection toward customers, or do they comprise an abuse of the existing commercial friendships to advance financial profit?

2.3. The nature of hospitality service and emotional labor

Various studies have illustrated the importance of having service employees express the 'right emotion' toward customers (Hochschild, 1983). Customer satisfaction was found to be dependent on the emotional connection with the service employee (Barger and Grandey, 2006). Since the basic nature of hospitality services is to provide customer leisure, Jain and Jain (2005) argued that hospitality services are

more likely able to provide this kind of emotional connection than are other service sectors. Nevertheless, hospitality employees need to comply with emotional rules that govern their emotional displays (Pizam, 2004; Medler-Liraz, 2014). They are required to express the appropriate emotions (Chi et al., 2011) to enhance customers' positive attitudes (Barger and Grandey, 2006). This process is known as *emotional labor* (Grandey, 2003).

Two strategies are typically used by service employees to manage their emotions toward customers. In *surface acting*, service employees deliberately conceal their inner negative feelings and mask them with bogus positive expressions ("in bad faith"). In *deep acting*, employees truly believe ("in good faith") that expressing positive emotions toward customers is essential and thus manifest positive expressions that result from genuine inner change (Grandey, 2003). This study examines ways of flirting, its motive, and its outcomes from two points of view: employees' and customers'. It has already been noted that flirting behaviors belong more to the interpersonal arena than to exchange relationships, yet are flirting displays entirely subsumed under the concept of emotional labor (as just another strategy), or do they represent a blurring of boundaries, given the context of commercial friendships?

3. Method

3.1. Participants and procedure

To answer the above question, we carried out a phenomenological qualitative study aimed at describing the experience of a phenomenon (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). All participants were volunteers, recruited for the study through personal contacts (convenient sample). The initial stages of data collection comprised 20 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with bartenders (Sample 1). Of the participants, 55% were female and 45% male; age range was 21–38 ($M_{age} = 28$). In Sample 2, 20 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with customers. Of the participants, 60% were female and 40% male; age range was 22–55 ($M_{age} = 31$).

3.2. Data collection

Both bartender and customer interviews were conducted by experienced interviewers and took place at different times of day, at the convenience of the interviewees. The interviews lasted for an average of 45 min. Data were collected over six months. Questions dealt with bartenders' reasons for flirting and its outcomes. This gave the informants a sense of legitimacy and confidence to talk about their flirting experiences as service employees. The interview continued with questions about how they viewed the organization's response to the service providers' use of flirting behavior.

At the next stage, customers were queried about their perceptions of employees' manner of flirting (modes of flirting). Additionally, customers' perceptions of the reasons or motives for flirting and their response to this phenomenon were explored.

3.3. Data analysis

Each of the forty interviews was audio-taped and transcribed. Field notes and self-transcribed interviews were analyzed to capture and classify significant themes. The data were structured thematically around emerging first and second order categories and aggregated themes. Consistent with the tenets of grounded theory methodology (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), the next step was to carry out substantive coding by linking the conceptual categories in a conceptual framework. The brief presentation of the results below provides interviewee excerpts of the major themes that emerged regarding flirting displays in these hospitality service encounters.

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