Gender and Consumer Personality as Moderators of Customer Responses to Positive Emotions by Contact Personnel

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Abstract

Previous research examines the role of displayed positive emotions by contact personnel (DPE) impact on consumers’ service satisfaction and behavioral intention. However, little work has been done on determining the origins of other differences in consumer characteristic responses to DPE, along with customers’ satisfaction and patronage intention. This work focuses on the moderator role (i.e. gender and consumer’s compliant personality) of consumer response to DPE Laboratory experiment results reveal females as generally more satisfied with contact personnel than males in DPE condition. Furthermore, male and female degree of compliance leads to decidedly different DPE consumer reactions. Highly compliant females respond more positively to DPE than less compliant females. In addition, highly compliant males respond less negatively to non-DPE than less compliant males. This study discusses implications for customized services theory and practitioners, and derives possible directions for future research.

Keywords: Displayed emotions, emotional labors, gender, compliant personality

1. Introduction

Service contact is an inevitable part of modern life. Nevertheless, increased competition among service providers along with overall service industry growth, has forced service firms to pay more attention to customized services to achieve a competitive advantage (Jain and Jain, 2005). A service organization can provide customized customer contact service to communicate their understanding of, and ability to meet, individual customer needs (Spencer-Matthews and Lawley, 2006). Therefore, customized service is a potential source of distinctive competencies that offers superior value and psychological benefits to customers (Lacey 2007). In view of this trend, management theoreticians and practitioners are also trying to understand, and improve, customized service contexts. How the service provider interacts with the individual customer has become a much more salient management concern.

Different customers may expect and respond uniquely to different types of employee behaviors. Contact personnel have the opportunity to tailor the services offered and delivered to consumer’s individual needs and particular requirements. The suggestion is that customer satisfaction, which is achieved through meeting individual consumer expectations, requires contact personnel to adjust their behavior for different customers (Bettencourt and Gwinner, 1996).

Previous research shows that positive interpersonal contact between consumers and contact personnel has a favorable influence on customer evaluations of the service experience (Bettencourt and Gwinner, 1996). Appropriate emotional expression on the part of employees...
assumably creates more favorable consumer reactions, and several studies have examined the positive relationship between displayed positive emotions by contact personnel (DPE hereafter) and consumers’ positive emotions (Pugh, 2001), satisfaction with the service employee (Tan et al., 2004), and consumer behavioral intention (Tsai and Huang, 2002). Therefore, employees engaging in emotional labor to influence customer emotions, better achieve goals for selling products (Diefendorff and Gosserand, 2003). Even though existing literature on this topic is rich with studies on the direct effects of DPE, little work has been done on determining the origins of other differences in consumer characteristic responses to DPE, along with customers’ satisfaction and patronage intention. Understanding the different consumer preferences for service performance is a critical pre-procedure for designing a customized program.

This study examines relationship moderators between DPE and satisfaction/patronage intention, focusing on consumer characteristics such as gender and personality on this relationship. This work attempts to add incrementally to previous works in two ways. First, most studies relate to DPE in western consumer settings (e.g. Mattila et al., 2003). Investigating consumer behavior pattern applicability to other cultures is paramount (Durvasula et al., 1993) as service organizations continue to expand internationally (Javalgi et al., 2006); understanding DPE moderator effect is necessary with any variation in Asian culture (Mattila et al., 2003). Hence, the objective of this study is to broaden the existing research scope by reexamining such studies in Taiwan. Second, this work further investigates the role of two moderating variables; gender and consumer personality, in terms of compliance, on the relationship between DPE and customer patronage intention. This study hopes to draft a customization strategy by adopting a DPE presentation, and additionally by examining gender and consumer personality moderator impact on personal intention.

2. Literature review

Personal interaction importance in the service encounter is generally clearly recognized in service marketing literature (Constanti and Gibbs, 2005). Service literature has introduced the term “emotional labor,” defined as the effort, planning, and control needed to express organizationally desired emotion during interpersonal transactions (Morris and Feldman, 1996). “Emotional labor” is core to the work role of employees in the delivery of services (Zeithaml and Bittner, 2000). Therefore, emotional labor is a form of emotional regulation in which workers are expected to manage feeling and to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display (Hochschild, 1983). Service firms may specify emotional display rules that identify appropriate emotions in the service process, such as an opening statement by contact personnel, smiling, and eye contact and saying thank you.

Emotional labor may influence the affective response level associated with customer interaction of a service business (Millar and Tesser, 1986; Bickart and Schwarz, 2001). Briggs et al. (2007) finds that social interactions have positive effects on service performance and patronage intention. Prior research on emotional labor shows that exposure to a person displaying emotions can result in a corresponding change in the observer’s emotional state (Tan et al., 2004). Underlying this relationship is a process called primitive emotional contagion (Luong, 2005). Positive perceived performances generally induce positive emotions, and negative perceived performances generally induce negative emotions (Dube and Menon, 2000).

Individual characteristics during a service encounter may induce different service satisfactions as a result of employee DPE. Females are generally more sensitive than males to affective displays (Mattila et al., 2003). A compliant consumer personality also expects to be part of others’ lives, to be loved, appreciated, and needed, and overemphasizes friendship and
love (Wen and Peng, 2002), resulting in sensitivity and compassion. Insight from additional relevant research recommends that different customers’ personality demonstrate different consumers’ service satisfaction (e.g. Bearden et al., 1998).

The concept of customizing service refers to a firm’s efforts to personalize and individualize service delivery (Rust and Chung, 2006). Therefore, research dealing with personal interaction in service delivery is becoming increasingly important due to increased demand for customized service performance for (almost) every customer. Individual personality differences become a viable basis for customizing service presentation and consumers’ personality expectedly plays an important role when designing contact personnel performance such as a DPE service encounter.

3. Development of research hypotheses

3.1 Gender

Previous research suggests that gender differences influence individual responses to environmental stimuli (Shao et al., 2004). Sociological studies/research also identifies gender as an important variable in group interaction processes (Ilie et al., 2005). Noble et al. (2006) suggest that shopping in a service context might afford females the opportunity for social interactions with contact personnel. In addition, females are generally more expressive than males, and tend to focus on socially-oriented activities (Ilie et al., 2005) that involve intimate, personal, or psychosocial exchanges (Bu and Roy, 2005). A previous study indicates that communicating emotion is gender-related, and that females are more emotionally expressive than males (e.g. Searle and Meara, 1999). As discussed above, emotional labor’s DPE can cause a corresponding change in a consumer’s emotional state. Further, male and female DPE responses may differ since females are more expressive and receptive to emotional communication in their personal lives (Mattila et al., 2003). Female customers, more than male customers, pay attention to the process or relational aspect of the encounter, such as how polite the service employee was (Luong, 2007). Furthermore, in typical service exchanges, females are more sensitive to affective displays than males and females are more motivated by DPE than males, as males and females perceive satisfaction differently (Mattila et al., 2003). Therefore, service encounter DPE is more likely to positively influence females than males.

\[ H1a: \text{Consumer satisfaction is higher for females than for males in DPE condition.} \]

Previous studies also explore the fact that females are more likely than males to report, more frequently and with greater levels of intensity, their feelings of positive emotions (Fischer et al., 2004) and negative emotions (Oliver et al., 2000). These findings indicate that females will report stronger emotions than males when exposed to affective stimuli (Moore, 2007). Therefore, females, more than males, are expected to be satisfied with positive affective displays and dissatisfied with negative displays (Mattila et al., 2003). Female customers may show more negative affective responses to contact personnel than males in non-DPE condition, and therefore express lower levels of consumer satisfaction. Hence,

\[ H1b: \text{Consumer satisfaction is lower for females than for males in non-DPE condition.} \]

3.2 Compliant personality

Researchers have reported that different personality types are associated with various tendencies to show positive emotions, and the frequency and intensity of personal interactions (Bakker et al., 2006). For instance, some consumers may willingly avoid personal interactions with service employees, such as eye contact and emotional interaction. These consumers tend to be isolated, and generally have very low expectations of the service encounter. Compliance,
on the other hand, is associated with “the need for intimacy,” and the recurrent preference in
thought and behavior for experiences of warmth, closeness, and communicative interactions
with others.

Previous research indicates that consumer personality is a key driver of service adoption
(Fenech and O’Cass, 2001). Compliant individuals desire activities with others. Highly
compliant individuals exhibit traits of goodness, sympathy, love, unselfishness, and humility
(Noerager, 1979). Therefore, compliant individuals may mimic a contact person’s expressive
behavior during an interaction, although the customer is probably not conscious of this
mimicry or its influence on his/her affective state. Bearden et al. (1998) further suggests that
the degree to which individuals differ in terms of compliance influences the effectiveness
of contact variations on service satisfaction. Therefore, it is expected that a compliant
personality can encourage service adoption. As discussed above, females are more sensitive to
relevant social information when making judgments, causing subsequent repurchase attitudes
and intentions according to variations in “compliant” characteristics. In addition, previous
studies suggest that female personality differences may affect attitudes more significantly than
male personality differences (Strauss and Connerley, 2003). Therefore, in DPE condition, a
highly compliant female consumer may report higher positive behavioral intention than a
slightly compliant female.

\[ H_{2a}: \text{Consumer patronage intention is significantly different in females with high compliant personality versus females with low compliant personality in DPE condition.} \]

Females lean toward a higher level of socio-emotional behavior, whereas males are more
task-oriented (Karakowsky and Miller, 2006; Yavas et al., 2008). Males tend to emerge in the
more task-oriented aspects of interaction (Barbuto Jr, et al., 2007). Empirical research also
suggests that males place more emphasis on accomplishment (Ilie et al, 2005). Therefore,
females may prefer to spend their time and money in stores more thoughtfully, while male
shoppers may prefer to just get it done. In addition, previous studies suggests that highly
compliant personalities exhibit low aggressive tendencies (Mervielde et al., 2005), and a low
aggressive personality is negatively correlated with reactionary behavior (Nestor 2002).
Therefore, male customers care more about core services such as efficiency and accuracy
(Luong, 2007), and may not be distracted from their core buying behavior in non-DPE
condition. Therefore, it is logical to expect that individual’s degree of compliance may
amplify non-DPE effect among males. A male with a highly compliant personality tends to be
more meek about a service process failure than a male with low compliant personality.

\[ H_{2b}: \text{In non-DPE condition, consumer patronage intention is significantly different among males with different levels of compliant personality.} \]

4. Research methodology

4.1 Research design and procedure

\( H_1 \) and \( H_2 \) were tested via \( 2 \times 2 \times 2 \) mixed-factor MANOVAs (Multivariate analyses
of variance), with DPE/non-DPE conditions (i.e. present or absent) and gender treated as
between-subject factors, and consumer compliant characteristic (high and low) as a within-
subjects factor; the dependent variable was satisfaction with contact personnel (\( H_1 \)) and
patronage intention (\( H_2 \)). Three hundred sixty undergraduate students participating in a
marketing course from the College of Business at three universities in Taiwan were used as
experiment subjects. Data was collected during classes, and no remuneration or other
incentive was provided to the students. Subjects included 124 males (34.4 percent) and 236
females (65.6 percent). Subjects were randomly assigned to one of two DPE-related
conditions (DPE; non-DPE). Students were selected for this study because students are recognized as one of the greatest current and future markets for services industries (Carpenter et al., 2005). In addition, choosing a homogeneous sample helps reduce the impact of non-controllable intervening variables (Matzler et al., 2006). Thus, using a more homogeneous sample where respondents have a desired background characteristic may be preferable to a non-student sample (Brady et al., 2005).

This study follows the exploratory approach developed by Kelly and Hutson-Comeaux (1999; 2000) and Hutson-Comeaux and Kelly (2002) with regard to written scenarios of interpersonal interaction. The current study used a service encounter scenario to generate responses in terms of hypotheses variables, and scenarios in an experimental context to generate discrete responses. Subjects were first asked to imagine actively seeking to purchase a bottle of water from a convenience store. The scenario description of the present employee-displayed positive emotions (e.g. DPE condition) were assessed according to the contact personnel’s engaging in the following behaviors toward the customer: greeting, smiling at, making eye contact with, and expressing thanks. The description of the absent employee-displayed positive emotions (e.g. non-DPE condition) in a convenience store within the above key scene was abandoned, and remained invariant. The full descriptions of two scenarios are presented in the Appendix. Subjects, after reading the described scenarios, responded to a set of items measuring their positive emotions, satisfaction with contact personnel, patronage intention to shop, compliant personality, and gender.

4.2 Measurements and measures

This study collects research construct measurements from existing literature and employs a five-point Likert-scale in all cases, anchored by a strong agree/disagree combination. This work employs positive motions from the work of Pugh (2001), including six items (“elated,” “peppy,” “enthusiastic,” “excited,” “strong,” “active”), and asks participants to respond in terms of “how they feel” after reading the scenario. Two items adapted from Tan et al. (2004) measure customer satisfaction with contact personnel: “I feel the contact personnel did a good job attending to my needs,” and “I am satisfied with the contact personnel’s level of friendliness.” Three items adapted from Baker et al. (2002) measure store patronage intention: “willing to recommend”, “willing to buy”, and “shopping likelihood”. A six-item scale derived from Noerager (1979) forms the basis of consumer compliance: “humble,” “trust,” “apprehensive,” “conservative,” “group-tied,” “responsive.” The compliant consumer characteristic dichotomizes with respect to the median, 3.33. The lower level mean of 2.90 and the higher level mean of 3.78 create two levels of compliant consumer characteristics. The levels of compliant consumer characteristic have 173 and 187 respondents, respectively, and the difference between the two level means is statistically significant ($t = 23.10; p < .001$).

5. Data analysis and results

5.1 Scale reliabilities and manipulation checks

Scale reliability was estimated using Cronbach’s alpha and the alpha values for customer positive emotions, customer satisfaction with a contact personnel, store patronage intention, and consumer compliant characteristic were 0.92, 0.91, 0.85, and 0.75, respectively. Reliability analyses indicate that the terms are suitable scale items, with Cronbach alpha levels in excess of 0.7 in all cases.

This work measured participant positive emotions to ensure that subjects perceived more positive emotions after reading the DPE description. Participants responded to manipulation check questions for measuring their level of positive emotions after finishing the survey, and
ANOVAs (analyses of variance) determined whether participants’ positive emotions of non-DPE and DPE conditions differed significantly to assess manipulation success. Results indicate that the manipulations worked as intended. As expected, respondents felt significantly more positive emotions after DPE than after non-DPE (F = 49.9; p < .001); a significant difference indicates successful experimental manipulations.

5.2 Hypotheses tests

H1a and H1b predicted that gender would moderate DPE/non-DPE effect on consumer satisfaction with contact personnel, with stronger/less effect for females. Preliminary support for these hypotheses are indicated by the significant interaction between DPE/non-DPE and gender in the full factorial MANOVA model (F = 6.05; p < .05). As shown in Figure 1, the level of satisfaction with contact personnel for female subjects was higher (M = 3.93) than for males (M = 3.55) in the DPE condition, and this difference in means was statistically significant (t = 2.50; p < .001). This finding is consistent with H1a. In contrast, although the satisfaction level for female subjects (M = 2.63) was slightly lower than for males (M = 2.75) in the non-DPE condition, this difference was insignificant (t = .82; p < .21). Hence, the H1b is not supported.

H2 was concerned with patronage intentions made under DPE. The three-way interaction between DPE condition, gender, and compliant consumer characteristics is significant (F = 11.1, p < .001), as expected. The cell means are shown in Table 1. The DPE condition shows highly compliant participants (M = 3.91) demonstrating greater patronage intention than less compliant participants (M = 3.54, t = 4.0; p < .001). However, the difference was not marginally significant in non-DPE condition (respective M = 3.08 and 2.86; t = 1.84; p < 0.051). Patronage intentions of male participants under DPE also remained at the same level regardless of the compliant characteristic, M = 3.61 for high compliance characteristic participants, M = 3.64 for low compliance characteristic participants (t = .19; p < 0.43). However, DPE effect on patronage intention was different for the female participant compliance characteristic: M = 4.01 for high compliance characteristic participants, M = 3.48 for low compliance characteristic participants (t = 4.90; p < 0.001). Hence, H2a is supported. Furthermore, patronage intention level for male subjects was significantly different between high compliance (M = 3.37) and low compliance characteristic participants (M = 2.81) in the
non-DPE condition, and this difference in means was statistically significant ($t = 2.61; p < .01$). This finding is congruent with our predictions in $H2b$.

Table 1. Cell means and standard deviations by DEP, gender and compliant characteristic of participants on patronage intention.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>DEP</th>
<th>non-DEP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High compliant</td>
<td>4.01(.50)</td>
<td>2.96(.85)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low compliant</td>
<td>3.48(.63)</td>
<td>2.93(.73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High compliant</td>
<td>3.61(.79)</td>
<td>3.37(.87)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low compliant</td>
<td>3.64(.64)</td>
<td>2.81(.85)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Numbers are means and numbers in parentheses are standard deviations.

6. Discussion

This research attempts to understand and explain moderators influencing displayed positive emotions by contact personnel, on consumer satisfaction with contact personnel and patronage intention in Asian culture. The current study provides partial support for the similar studies conducted in western cultures (e.g. Mattila et al., 2003). Consistent with the view of previous authors, this study maintains that females are generally more satisfied than males with contact personnel in positive emotional-display conditions. However, the results of this study are not consistent with other results regarding females consumers being less satisfied than males with contact personnel in emotional-displays were absent conditions. The results of this study do not find significant differences based on gender responses to non-DPE condition. The reason for this result may lie in gender role differences between cultures. Prior study suggests that Korean women have lower expectations in terms of “friendly conversation” offered by employees of nail salons than Western females (Mann, 2007). In addition, in contrast to the relative importance of emotional expression in Western societies, Chinese society generally discourages open expressions of emotion (Epstein et al., 2005), and Chinese females are expected to suppress their emotions in Chinese culture (Leung, 2003). This variance in societal norms across cultures may explain why Asian females are more likely than Western females to tolerate or accept service failure in shopping encounters.

Furthermore, this is the first study to examine the nature of consumer’s compliant personality responses to DPE by contact personnel. The study shows that an individual’s degree of compliance, based on gender, creates decidedly different reactions to DPE conditions. Highly compliant females respond with higher patronage intention to DPE than less compliant females. In addition, the degree of compliance among males does affect the mean response of purchase intention in non-DPE conditions. The statistical results of this study reveal that highly compliant males respond with higher patronage intention to non-DPE than low compliant males.

6.1 Managerial and research implications

Previous studies suggest that understanding moderating variables that impact DPE effect help predict service satisfaction, which influences consumer behavioral intentions (Mattila et al., 2003). The study extends our understanding of consumer gender and compliance characteristic roles in the interface between displayed emotions by contact personnel and their
service satisfaction and patronage intention. The study reinforces the argument by Mattila et al. (2003) regarding gender interplay, who examines different gender responses to displayed positive emotions by contact personnel, in particular and the substantial impact on the way females evaluate service satisfaction. This study broadens the existing research scope by reexamining such studies in Asian consumer (i.e. Taiwanese) settings. This empirical study highlights the fact that Asian females tend to restrain their emotional reactions to the service failure in shopping encounters. However, Asian females are sensitive to employees who display positive emotions. This suggests that Asian females prefer displayed positive emotions by contact personnel in the service encounter, and are more satisfied than males with positive affective-display encounters. Therefore, service firms may anticipate the critical role of displayed positive emotions by contact personnel in order to better retain the females consumer. Service firms, whose main consumers are females, should carefully monitor their contact personnel to ensure that they display positive emotional behavior.

This study further examines if gender with personality characteristic moderates the effect of displayed positive emotions by contact personnel on consumer patronage intention. This work explores compliant personality, and presents empirical evidence to support that personality could be used to assign individual differences to customize service. Findings reveal that highly compliant males respond less negatively to non-DPE conditions than low compliant males, and highly compliant females respond more positively to DPE than less compliant females. To achieve high consumer patronage intention, service firms should better understand the critical role of consumer personality in service encounters. This is particularly true for highly compliant females, who may require more attention.

Different consumers will express varying levels of service satisfaction or patronage intention for the same experience or service encounter. Understanding how consumer responses vary based on gender and personality differences will enable service firms to develop customization strategies to align employee performance and consumer preferences, thereby improving consumer satisfaction and patronage intention. Service firms should therefore observe different customer personalities through previous service interaction to better present displayed positive emotions by contact personnel in service encounters for these consumers. Through interactions with customer, the service firm may learn how they want to be treated based on their personalities, and can adjust service delivery to better suit customer needs (i.e. provide customized services). Furthermore, because culture acts as a lens that filters the perceptions of individuals, the role of culture is significant in customer satisfaction ratings (Ueltschy et al., 2007). Based on the findings in this study, firms that extend their services to Asian markets should consider the consumer characteristics and cultural differences and their impact on any effective customized service performance.

Overall, the study argues that displayed positive emotions by contact personnel play an important role in consumer evaluation both in satisfaction with contact personnel and patronage intention. These results provide guidance as to why managers should focus on training adaptable contact personnel. Marketers must select contact personnel who possess and display positive emotions to effectively induce consumer satisfaction with contact personnel, and positive patronage intention.

6.2 Conclusion, limitations and future research

In an increasingly competitive business environment, retaining consumers is becoming more important (Lee et al., 2007). Given the lack of research in this growing field, further research is necessary to better understand various consumer characteristics in service encounters. Further research should address the following issues: First, other consumer characteristics, contact personnel or service characteristics influence the response to displayed positive emotions by contact personnel. For instance, Bearden et al. (1998) suggests that the
extent to which individuals differ in terms of being detached, that is, the desire to put emotional distance between themselves and others, influences the effectiveness of contact variations on service satisfaction. Customers may also enter into a service encounter with certain expectations regarding how the contact person, depending on his or her gender, should express emotions. Such gender-based emotional stereotypes may effect customer evaluations of male and female contact personnel (Luong, 2007). In addition, companies can monitor service characteristics such as service complexity, convenience, and professionalism for different episodes with different customers. Hence, further research can extend this analysis to other moderating factors such as customer characteristics, contact personnel characteristics, and service characteristics.

Second, previous research shows that the Taiwanese society is basically a compliant society (Wen and Peng, 2002). Therefore, future study should determine the validity of the current research findings for other cultures in term of consumer personality. The third and final caveat of this study is that it uses a student sample. Although the research context of the service encounter setting is applicable and relevant to homogeneous undergraduate samples enhanced construct validity at the expense of external validity (Fiegenbaum et al., 2004). Nonetheless, the findings presented here should be interpreted with the awareness that the sample is a relatively homogenous group of respondents in terms of educational background. The extent of generalizability of the results reported here needs to be tested with other populations and customers belonging to different socio-economic groups. A deeper understanding of such differences should make marketers more aware of possible effects of displayed positive emotions, thereby enabling them to take advantage of this insight.

References


APPENDIX

In the studies, participants were asked two conditions separately:

Please imagine that the following is a description of you walking into a convenience chain store and buying a drink:

**Condition 1. The present employee-displayed positive emotions.**

The moment you walk in, the store clerk makes eye contact, nods, and says hello with a smile. You walk over to the beverage section, find the beverage you want, and then walk around to see if there is anything else you would like to buy. Afterwards, you take the beverage to the counter to pay. The clerk swipes the product barcode in a very routine fashion, as if he had done it a million times, then tells you the price of the beverage. After you give him the money, the clerk hands you your change and receipt, and also says “Thank You”! When you are about to walk out the automatic door, besides the music, you also hear the clerk thanking you again for coming, and hoping that you will come again soon.

**Condition 2. The absent employee-displayed positive emotions.**

When you walk in, the clerk doesn’t even notice your presence. You walk over to the beverage section, find the beverage you want, and then walk around to see if there is anything else you would like to buy. Afterwards, you take the beverage to the counter to pay. The clerk swipes the product barcode in a very routine fashion, as if he had done it a million times, and then tells you the price of the beverage. After you give him the money, the clerk hands you your change and receipt. When the automatic doors open and you leave the store, all that you hear is the sound of the music recording, nothing else.