**Customer Emotion Management and Symmetrical Emotional Exchange in (Extended) Service Encounters**

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This study discusses the role of emotion display in service consumers’ self-presentation as part of their ongoing face-work and introduces the notion of customer emotion management as an integral part of their service interactions and experience. It suggests that in extended and complex service encounters, there is not necessarily an inequality in emotion control between service providers and customers but rather a more balanced and symmetric emotional exchange. The implications for consumer behavior and services marketing research are discussed.

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ABSTRACT
This study discusses the role of emotion display in service consumers’ self-presentation as part of their ongoing face-work and introduces the notion of customer emotion management as an integral part of their service interactions and experience. It suggests that in extended and complex service encounters, there is not necessarily an inequality in emotion control between service providers and customers but rather a more balanced and symmetric emotional exchange. The implications for consumer behavior and services marketing research are discussed.

BACKGROUND
Solomon et al. (1985) argue that in service encounters, customers and service providers play specific roles in order to achieve satisfying relationships. This approach is mainly based on Goffman’s symbolic interactionist theoretical perspective (1959, 1961, 1967, 1969) where he identifies two areas for performances. The frontstage is where the actual performance takes place and the back stage is where the individual contemplates and prepares for his or her performance. “Front” encompasses the expressive equipment by which an actor’s identity is supported and confirmed. In services marketing context, it is the frontstage where an airline stewardess interacts with a passenger or a McDonald’s worker with a customer. Back stages in both cases are the service areas or the kitchens where service providers do not interact with customers and where they are mostly away from their gazes. It is usually assumed that backstages should be separate and hidden from customers. However, Grayson (1998) identifies “perceived backstage” as an area that may be managed by managers in order to influence customers “through opening their doors.” This argument is also similar to that of MacCannell’s (1999) “staged authenticity.” He argues that the backstage-frontstage distinction is used by companies to generate mystification of the former since backstages suggest, “…there is something more than meets the eye” (p.93).

Following Goffman’s work, Hochschild (1983) focuses on “how institutions—such as corporations—control us [service employees] not through surveillance of our behavior but through surveillance of our feelings,” (p.218). Drawing upon Marx and combining labor, emotion, and display discourses, she argues that service workers become alienated from their jobs in a service-producing society, i.e., they have a reduced self-control over what Hochschild (1983) calls, “emotional labor”. She uses the term to mean “…the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labor is sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value” (p.7). She studied flight attendants and bill collectors as two extreme examples of service workers in order to illustrate commercial uses of feeling. The project of the flight attendant is to enhance the customer’s status, to heighten his or her importance; and that of a bill collector is to withhold empathy.

According to the author, jobs of this type have three common characteristics: 1) they have face to face, voice to voice contact; 2) they produce an emotional state in another person (gratitude or fear); and 3) they allow the employer, through training and supervision to exercise a degree of control over the emotional activities of employees. Control is achieved by peers and by clients. Close supervision fosters emotional labor and control over service jobs by the management, which in turn reduces the self-control over the service employee’s emotional labor. She argues that this estrangement from one’s own feelings has personal costs; consequences to the notions of self, since emotion is a way of knowing, like seeing or hearing (see Denzin 1984). Employees go through specific training about emotion management to learn about what Hochschild calls “feeling rules” during interactions with customers. Similarly, in his study of Disneyland culture, Van Maanen (1991) calls the park a “smile factory” with its rules for backstage, onstage, and staging regions (Goffman 1959).

Although the importance and consequences of service employee’s attitudes and behaviors have received great attention, the nature and the effects of customer’s attitudes and behaviors have been understudied (Risch-Rodie and Kleine 2000) with only few exceptions. Menon and Dubé (1999) suggest a repertoire of customer emotion information to be used in service design and employee training. According to this study, in such encounters, positive emotions include happiness and delight; while situation-attributed negative emotions include anxiety and fear and other-attributed negative emotions include anger, frustration, guilt, and shame. Ligas and Coulter (2001) identify customer’s roles in interactions with service providers after having negative experiences (see also Price, Arnould, and Sheila 1995). They find that the “contended customer” presents a happy face indicating his or her satisfaction while he or she may be hiding some level of dissatisfaction; the “helpful customer” presents a friendly face and indicates his or her willingness to solve the issue with a service provider; the “discontented customer” expresses his or her dissatisfaction; and finally the “disgusted customer” also communicates his or her dissatisfaction, but with anger. Although these studies acknowledge customers’ emotions (see also Richins 1997 for measuring consumer emotions in consumption experiences), they only label limited emotional categories as input to be used in service design and management. Thus, the purpose of this study is to understand customers’ full emotional involvement in the service encounter and reveal the emotional nature of their ongoing self-presentation.

Customers’ roles and interactions with service providers have been studied also through the framework of co-production or co-creation of the consumption experience, meanings, and value (Vargo and Lusch 2004, Arnould 2007, Penaloga and Venkatesh 2006). Research done on the active role of consumers identified several categories of consumer participation such as corporeal, oral, and symbolic co-production. Customers co-create the E-zone experience with the marketers in a retail environment through their corporeal presence and participation (Kozinets et al. 2004). River rafting participants co-create the magical rafting experience through forming a narrative with service providers (e.g., Arnould and Price 1993). In many other contexts consumers co-create the meanings and value of the products and services that they use (see Arnould and Thompson 2005 for a summary of related studies). This study adds consumer emotional control to the realm of co-creation of experience and meaning. This involves all these of the different and overlapping types of consumer participation (corporeal, oral, and symbolic) and adds the active emotional participation which shapes consumers’ interactions with service providers and other fellow customers.
THE SERVICE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY:
COMMERCIAL HIGH-ALTITUDE MOUNTAINEERING EXPEDITIONS

Service encounters are dynamic, and involve complex interactions among its participants (customers and service providers) and the service setting with experiential and emotional components. This study is based on an ethnographic research at the main (South) base camp of Mount Everest in Nepal (altitude of 17,700ft/5300m) and the service context studied is high-altitude mountaineering expeditions in the Himalayas. High-altitude mountains refer to mountains with an altitude of 5,500-6,000 meters or greater where significant lack of oxygen and unpredictable weather conditions prevail. This rather extreme context has the potential to reveal insights about customer and service provider performance since these expeditions are quite demanding activities with high-tech and expensive equipment now regarded as essential, along with lengthy pre-trip plans, including physical and mental exercise, manpower recruitment, and logistical support. As a famous high-altitude mountaineer put it in an interview for this research, it is “an environment for which the human body is not well designed... It just doesn’t function at that altitude... demands on the body are much higher...” (2003). The services of interest are provided in expeditions organized by adventure companies for three to nine or more weeks, with costs per person averaging between US$5,000 to US$65,000 depending on the altitude, region, and services included. Personal equipment expenses require an additional outlay of $7,000-$10,000. The adventure companies offer a variety of mountaineering services which include obtaining necessary permits, visas, guides, local accommodations, flights, local transportation, and transfer of all the necessary equipment including oxygen cylinders to the base camp and to the intermediary camps, as well as various kinds of guide and Sherpa services on the mountain throughout the duration of an expedition. Adams (1996) refers to high-altitude mountaineering expeditions as the “high-risk, high-profit, image-making, and body breaking business of mountaineering” (p.8).

METHODS

The ethnographic data collection at Everest base camp was carried out over a 2-month period. Reaching the site typically involves a 10-day long on mountain trails and that time is needed for acclimatization. People at the base camp live in tents on a moving glacier covered with piles of rock and ice, and spend weeks in these demanding conditions acclimatizing to the thin air of high altitudes. I stayed with three different expeditions out of about seventeen different companies (about 250 people in total) that were present at the Everest base camp during the spring 2004 climbing season. During my stay at the base camp, I observed the daily life and the evolution of interactions among service providers and clients. I conducted in-depth interviews following McCracken’s model of the long interview (1988), and following up with some after they left the mountain. I analyzed the interview transcripts and field notes as a whole using a hermeneutic (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1994) and iterative approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Arnould and Fischer 1994; Spiggle 1994). I tried to achieve a thick description (Geertz 1973) of this high-risk service encounter by including detailed, locally informed, and context sensitive information which correspond to a multi-layered and cultural ethnographic interpretation. In this paper, I only include the sections of my data and analysis that are relevant to the topic and purpose of this study.

CUSTOMER PERFORMANCE AND EMOTION MANAGEMENT

Climbing high-altitude mountains by paying extensive amounts of money is a very unique activity. Despite the thousands of dollars involved, participants in such experiences, both customers and service providers, have to be in excellent physical shape and ready to deal with the difficulties of living and climbing at high altitudes requiring strenuous physical and mental efforts. The challenge of high-altitude mountaineering originates not only from the characteristics of the climbing activity itself, but also from the conditions of living with relatively poor food, toilet, and shower facilities in a severe climate. Living in tents over a 2-month period in an attempt to acclimatize, meanwhile staying focused and healthy, and still able to climb, is a very demanding and stressful activity even for experienced mountaineers. High altitude mountaineering expeditions takes time since the body has to adapt to thin air and cold. It is hard to put on a staged performance due to braving the cold weather, feeling constantly tired, and being chronically sleepless. Problems arise even during the trekking part before reaching the base camp. It is an all-consuming activity as opposed to an extraordinary experience which does not require superior levels of effort (Arnould and Price 1993, p.25). As a guide and a client describe it:

Raymond (guide): The mental part of it points you in the right direction; without having, without thinking about it and focusing on the goal, you will never get there.... Then there is the physical part of it.... And again you control that, mentally.... You get so tired that just lifting your leg and putting in the next step rather than you are going up or down.... We’ll go up for a while because that is a totally different attitude than going down.... It is very difficult.... You take a step and you breathe really deeply about 3 times and it hurts. It really hurts.... And you keep going, because you have been there before and this, again if it was easy everybody would do it and then going down is probably 99 percent mental.... You are so tired, and you are focusing on putting your foot down just like this and then you’re putting your next foot down just like this and then you’re putting the next foot down just like this so it is like your whole world is one step at a time.... Please don’t make a mistake, and then it is all over....

Vera (client): I think being at altitude is emotional... it’s easier to be argumentative it’s also easier to cry... it’s like welcome to altitude... it happens it’s easy to get... cause you’re always under stress and you don’t realize it, just breathing for oxygen is stressing all the time.

The frontstage and backstage areas in service contexts like airlines, banks, restaurants, and hospitals are quite different from service encounter contexts in commercial high-risk sports such as high-altitude mountaineering. Backstages away from customers’ gaze (e.g., in a restaurant context, the kitchen) as opposed frontstages are the areas for service providers to be able to reflect and be emotional. In the case of high-altitude mountaineering expeditions, however, personal spaces or backstages are limited in the physical sense, as Drake and Philip’s comments illustrate:

Drake (guide): I don’t think it’s very easy [to find a personal space] but I think it’s important; some of the little things we do help a lot, like everybody has their private tent just to be able to put a wall between you and somebody else for a few hours a day is huge I think.

Interviewer: It’s a tent.
Drake: Yeah, it’s a piece of fabric between you and somebody who’s 6 inches away.

Philip (guide): you have to make the time [for yourself], because if you’re… if you’re working on the mountain you’re really engaged, really, you’re on 24 hours a day, but whether you’re actually having to deal with people on an hourly basis, and there’s also you have a lot of support with your other guides and with the Sherpa on the mountain that help you as well…

As these passages suggest, climbers engage in creating symbolic personal spaces or backstages. Listening to music, reading books, writing e-mails, and even talking to a loved one on a satellite phone, are some of the efforts Corry and Sam make:

Corry (client): … Base camp is probably the only place where most people have their own place because they don’t share [tents] at base camps. The other thing that I have is always take my mini player up the hill and at least I’ve got some of my own space with music…

Sam (client): … If you’re here you need to put all your attention into climbing the mountain and if you’re homesick you can’t do that… but I do need the support of my family to know that things at home are going to be ok…it’s not just like slipping back into the way things were you’ve got to work on it for awhile. I send emails every couple of days and I find emails quite good…

Hochschild (1983) argues that there is an inherent inequality in emotional management in service jobs. She says, “the airline passenger may choose not to smile” (p.19) while the steward or stewardess has to do so. In the public world he or she has to accept uneven exchanges and can get “treated with disrespect or anger by a client” (p.85). In the case of the high-risk service encounters explored here, however, such exchanges are expected to happen equally between service providers and clients. As one of the guides says:

Greg (guide): … We all suffer from the effects of altitude, and I think one of the things is that is really important, is um, being open and honest to people, and uh, as far as service is concerned you know we make an effort for people to understand that we are guides and [being] guides means showing people the way. That’s what the definition of guiding is, we’re not servants [emphasis added].

At 5,500 meters and above, it seems likely that activities are not only about pleasing the client, but are even more about staying alive while suffering from effects of high altitude both mentally and physically.

Applicants for most service positions go through initial screening. In the case of Hocschild’s flight attendants, the criteria may include weight, figure, straight teeth, capacity to work with a team, and capacity for being a good actor (1983). In a high-risk context where that outcome can be as significant as life versus death, it becomes a moral activity or rather a moral obligation to perform not only for the service providers but also for the customers. One ill-prepared or ill-suited client can jeopardize an entire group. This requires that customers for some adventure services may also go through some screening procedures. Adventure companies claim that they screen the customers based on their experiences, adaptability, and cooperativeness. This point is illustrated in Alex’s critique of some clients:

Alex (guide): Basically if people show up and they have the skills then there’s no problem—everybody seems to get along fairly well because of the core set of skills; if people show up and they don’t have the technical skills, people become resentful… Some people can’t put on their crampons and that’s annoying because they require more attention from the guide and you should basically show up and know how to do certain things—you should be able to put on your harness put on your down suit, put on your crampons. It’s annoying; it is, because it puts the group at risk.

Alex’s complaint illustrates how important it becomes to perform. And performance in such risky conditions is not limited to physical effort. Emotional performance is the crucial part of the activity for the participants including both service providers and customers. Consider the following observation:

Corry (client): … One of the things that leaders [guides, service providers] have to be is upbeat and positive although when [our guide] was sick she was a bit down about that but, and you can allow room for that, but basically you need a leader that is actually very positive most of the time; maybe not all the time but close to all the time because it’s bad enough if you’ve got a member that’s actually in a really negative space because they can suck everybody else into that negative space. We had two guys [clients] go home and every time that happens everybody else [other clients] is thinking ‘oh home,’ it changes your focus from getting to the summit to going home because these guys are escaping they’re going to go down and have good food and be warm and breathe easy and they’re going to go home to their families; but it’s hard enough when a member goes home or is negative and if a leader is low that would just destroy the trip [emphasis added].

Corry, like other customers in a service encounter, expresses his expectation for face work from the service provider. But when his fellow clients fail in their own face work, a problem arises for him. The customers’ lack of emotion work creates as much of a distraction for him as if the service provider had failed him. Thus it can be argued that, emotion control by customers may help the other participants to remain psychologically engaged in the co-production of the service. In another instance, Vera’s comments on how her physical struggle led to emotions which she was able to restrain with the help of the service provider and thus helped her go through a difficult situation:

Vera (client): … I’ve been caught in a very very bad storm in Antarctica and that was very interesting in terms of team dynamics there and how people were thinking, and we all thought we were going to die, and just how people reacted in those circumstances. I fell off um I um was coming down a big a steep ridge and I was carrying about 60 pounds on my back but because it was so much a lot of the stuff was hanging on the outside of my pack and I had forgotten at altitude that my pack was so wide and I was going around an edge near some rocks, my pack just rubbed against the rocks, it just nudged me off, so I put myself out to save myself and it was midair that I feel, but I was on a rope, so I only fell about 12 feet, but it was about 3 or 4000 feet sheer drop and I couldn’t get back up because the pack was too heavy and there’s 2 people standing holding
the rope, I couldn’t see them there, that was quite critical… It is a funny story, but eventually I managed to get back onto this ledge, and the person in front of me [guide] felt that the weight was off the rope and therefore he knew I was on the ledge, so he started to pull the rope, obviously meaning come on, get going, and at that time I remember I was shaking obliviously and I remember thinking he was a horrid person because he wasn’t stopping to ask me how I was, and all he did was he pulled we’ve got to go, we’ve got to go, and I went straight on down, and they never asked me how I was, ever, and looking back on it they did exactly the right thing, because if they’d asked me how I was I would’ve collapsed, and then I would’ve been incapable of getting myself together to go on [emphasis added].

The passage above suggests that sometimes the service provider also has to manage the client’s emotions since failing in emotional management effects the other clients, the service providers, and the experience as a whole negatively. Emotional and physical performance affecting the focus; or even the lives of the others (clients and service providers) is complementary and mutually reinforcing. Furthermore, it is more important for customers to be able to manage their emotions at least until the day they reach their summit goal. Corry’s quotation illustrates this point:

Corry (client): … I’m happy to be as emotional as possible after we summited as a team that’s the time for emotions but now I’m going to stay really tightly focused on the goal because we’ve been here for 30 days already we’ll be here for another 20 days if not more, maybe another 25 days, and every day that goes by here it gets harder and harder to focus on the goal because more and more time’s gone by so I don’t want my feelings and emotions to get in the way whether that’s homesickness or I’m quite happy to be excited about things or anxious about things but I don’t want my emotions to get in the way from my focus on the goal [emphasis added].

There are a lot of uncertainties (e.g., a moving icefall, weather, and avalanches among many others) inherent in the activity and the guides want to be able to reduce the anxieties their customers might have as much as possible. Communication is important to prepare customers for flexible schedules and potential outcomes. The services provided are vital and they help to provide some comfort and to reduce the stress the customers may constantly feel. In many other contexts service providers are required by management and expected by customers to be smiling and pleasant during the service encounters (e.g., Hoczchild 1983, Sharpe 2005). If the duration of the encounter is short, it is easier to manage emotions. The characteristics of the service setting also affect the performance of participants (e.g., Bitner 1992, Sherry 1998). The management of airline companies often suggests that their employees see the plane as their living room and the passengers as their guests to be able to engage in emotion management. However, such an illusion would be virtually impossible to sustain on Mt. Everest. Likewise, since the performance of the client affects other clients and the entire team’s chances of success, they too are engaged in emotion work on a slippery stage fraught with danger even under the best of conditions. As a result, the co-construction of the service experience becomes a complex choreography. Given the high stakes of the expedition, not to mention the high investment of its participants, managing relationships and emotions takes on even greater significance not only for guides, but for clients as well.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The display and control of emotions by service providers have been studied mainly for their effects on customers’ assessment of service quality (Bitner et al. 1990, Grayson 1995). Solomon et al. (1985) argued that consumption of a service is a process that is created and maintained by both the customer and the service provider; that is, consumers are enrolled into the service provider’s production as co-producers (Grove and Fisk 1983; Langeard et al. 1981; Solomon et al. 1985). Production and consumption take place simultaneously and the customer is an integral part of the service process. In organizational behavior and management fields, it has been suggested that the consumer should be regarded as part of the service organization (Schenider 1980) and as a “partial employee” (Mills and Morris 1985) in an effort to acknowledge customer involvement in service production.

Research done on the active role of consumers identified several categories of consumer participation including corporeal, oral, and symbolic. This study adds consumer emotional control to the realm of co-creation of experience and meaning. This involves all these different and overlapping types of co-production and adds the active emotional participation which shapes consumers’ interactions with service providers and other fellow customers. It is not only in high-risk contexts like Mt. Everest that these sorts of consumer emotion management can be critical. Consider tour groups, restaurant patrons, theater-goers, and many other group contexts in which one customer can change the nature of the experience for all of those present. Emotional displays may consist of angry outbursts, inappropriate laughter, loud talk, or even stoic behavior when the context requires more emotive engagement. Such reactions affect the service experience for all the participants. As this study shows, emotion management serves social functions such as impression management, relationship management, and self-preservation in social settings. Although emotion management in this context may have similarities with consumer coping or may be considered as one manifestation of it (see Duhacheck 2005), it differs from it mainly through its strategic and social nature. In other words, emotion management is more important as part of a social interaction and is about producing the proper state of mind in others. On the other hand, coping is more about bringing forth more desirable states in one’s own mind.

This study has several implications for consumer behavior and services marketing research. It has been argued that, in the public world of work, it is often part of an employee’s job to accept uneven exchanges, to be treated with disrespect or anger by a client, since the customer doesn’t have to smile back (Hoczchild 1983). The findings here contradict the assumption of an asymmetric relation between customers and service providers and suggest that there can exist more balanced exchanges in extended and complex contexts. Emotion control by customers may be more important and have greater consequences in extended relational service encounters then in discrete ones (see Grayson 1998 and Price et al. 1995). Furthermore, emotion control may help all customers to achieve feelings of satisfaction. Future research should include other contexts to test the applicability of these findings. Although the particular context of this study will not exactly overlap with any other, complex service industries such as healthcare, education, law, and consultancy services may be potentially relevant since in these contexts service providers and their clients also interact over long periods of time and invest a substantial amounts of time, money, and effort in managing their self-presentation in these encounters.
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