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You Are Forgiven: Cause Uncontrollability and Negative Emotional Contagion

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You are Forgiven: Cause Uncontrollability and Negative Emotional Contagion

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The role of emotions displayed by customer contact employees for customer emotions has received increasing attention in recent consumer behavior literature. Several studies find that customers tend to catch positive (Howard and Gengler 2001; Luong 2005; Pugh 2001) and negative emotions (Barsade 2002; Dallimore, Sparks, and Butcher 2007; Du, Fan, and Feng 2011) experienced by frontline employees—a phenomenon referred to as emotional contagion (Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson 1994). While the majority of research in this area has focused on which emotions are caught by customers (e.g., happy service display; Howard and Gengler 2001), fairly little is known about boundary conditions of emotional contagion.

Against this background, we explore how customers catch negative emotions of employees and how customers' attributions for these negative emotions impact the extent of emotional contagion. Specifically, we propose that the extent of emotional contagion depends on whether customers can attribute causes for the negative emotional display as uncontrollable by the customer contact employee.

The present research integrates two literature streams: emotional contagion (Hatfield et al. 1994) and attribution theory (Weiner 1985). The emotional contagion literature focuses on a specific type of social influence and proposes that "a person or group influences the emotions or behavior of another person or group through the conscious or unconscious induction of emotion states and behavioral attitudes" (Schoenewolf 1990, p. 50). This interpersonal influence results from individuals' tendency to catch facial expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements of another individual automatically (Hatfield et al. 1994). However, research on negative emotional contagion is still in its infancy and provides mixed results. While some studies find evidence for successful interpersonal catch of emotions, others fail to provide evidence for the occurrence of emotional contagion effects (e.g., Caughlin, Huston, and Houts 2000; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2006).

On the basis of attribution theory, we argue that customers' attribution of uncontrollability for the emotions' cause may moderate the contagion of frontline employees' negative emotional display on customers (Weiner 1985). Attribution theory (Weiner 1985) states that people seek for causal explanations for actions and behaviors of others and adjust their own response accordingly (Harvey and Martinko 2009). The theory rests on the assumption that cognitions determine how far particular stimuli result in emotional or behavioral responses (Weiner 2000). In the context of employee-customer interactions, attribution theory suggests that if customers can attribute the negative emotions displayed by an employee to uncontrollable causes, negative emotional contagion to the customer should be less likely since these may experience sympathy, offer help, and forgive (Weiner 1985). Thus, we propose:

Hypothesis 1: Attribution of uncontrollability moderates the relationship between a customer contact employee's negative emotional display and customers' negative emotion in a way that when customers can attribute uncontrollability of causes, negative emotional contagion is less pronounced than when customers cannot attribute uncontrollability.

We use a typical customer service interaction in a hardware store as our context (Merrilees and Miller 2001). Holding actual service level constant and controlling for customers' susceptibility to catching strong negative emotions and gender, we investigate the impact of a frontline employee's stress display as a type of negative emotion on customers' stress as the dependent variable. A total of one hundred and ninety-six persons participated in this experiment (42.9% male; mean age = 33.50). We employed a 2 (stress display of customer contact employee: display vs. no display) x 2 (external stressor: provided vs. not provided) between-subjects design, where participants were randomly assigned to one of the four scenarios. In line with prior research on emotional contagion (e.g., Dallimore, Sparks, and Butcher 2007; Du, Fan, and Feng 2011), we used videotaped scenarios as stimulus material and produced four videotapes that provided the manipulation of the frontline employee's stress display and the existence of an external stressor. In particular, we employed a scenario role-play-based experimental design (Du et al. 2011). To provide a realistic-looking setting and to minimize confounding effects, we implemented several steps to standardize central aspects of the scenarios (e.g., Dallimore, Sparks, and Butcher 2007; Grandey et al. 2005), including a professional cinematographer filming the stimulus material in a local hardware store operating nationwide and a professional actor playing the frontline employee. Different pretests and manipulation checks ensured the effectiveness of videotapes to represent realistic manipulations of an employee-customer interaction.

Results of a 2 x 2 ANCOVA reveal a significant main effect for the customer contact employee's stress display. Participants who experienced stress display of the frontline employee tended to report higher levels of customer stress as compared to participants who were not in the stress display condition. We found no main effect for the external stressor manipulation. Thus, customer stress did not simply occur as a result of the external circumstances where a stressor was provided. Importantly, the main effect of stress display was qualified by a significant interaction with external stressor provision. As expected, when participants were exposed to the stress display condition, those participants who were provided with an external stressor reported a significantly lower stress level than participants who were not exposed to such information. In the no stress display condition, the external stressor provision did not cause different levels of customer stress. These results thus provide support for our hypothesis.

These results make an important theoretical contribution to the emotional contagion literature. This study is the first to provide a theoretically and empirically sound explanation for the existing mixed findings on emotional contagion. Relying on attribution theory, which suggests that cognitions determine the degree to which particular stimuli result in emotional or behavioral responses (Weiner 1985), we show that the strength of emotional contagion depends on whether the customer has access to information about the uncontrollability of the cause of the employee's negative emotional display.

Further, we provide a deeper understanding of the effect of cause uncontrollability. We show that the effect of customer contact employees' negative emotional display is significantly lower in situations where customers can attribute uncontrollability of affect to external causes than in situations where customers have no access to

information on affect cause. This finding provides further evidence for the applicability of the fundamental attribution error in customer-employee relationships (Harvey and Weary 1984), which suggests that customers attribute greater control to the customer contact employee when no explanation is provided for the display of negative emotion.

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