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The Nature and Outcomes of Emotion Work in Customer Service Management

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore views of call centre employees working in Nigeria on the nature and consequences of emotional labour management during customer service interactions. Literature reveals lack of knowledge of this research area in an African context while a significant number of similar studies exist in Anglo-Saxon countries. Thus, this study was conducted in one of the Nigerian call centres. Using a social constructivist paradigm for the research analysis, semi-structured interviews were carried out among 50 Nigerian call centre agents. Findings revealed differences in terms of how affective delivery experiences were conceptualised and also perceived as a predictor of work stress when emotions are excessively regulated. In addition, organisationally-based solutions that can extenuate the negative after-effects of affective delivery that impairs well-being were suggested. In essence, the implication of the study is to unveil how call centre organisations existing in non-Western regions can better target and improve emotion work intrinsic of these frontline jobs.

Keywords: *Affective delivery; Emotional labour management; Nigerian call centres; African context; Non-Western regions*

JEL Classification: *M5*

Introduction

This study focuses on accounts of call centre employees on the impact of communicating normative emotions through vocal cues during customer service interactions within the Nigerian call centre context. There has been a growing interest in emotional labour dynamics especially within the customer service sector, although, as a social concept with origins from the Western countries, it is not a novel phenomenon within organisational behaviour literature and has been at the forefront of research for over three decades (see Hochschild, 1983; Lewig and Dollard, 2003; Mann, 2007; Kinman, 2009; Wang, Zhan and Shi, 2011). Thus, Kinman (2009, p. 118) pointed out that expressions of politeness and friendliness in customer oriented jobs are codified into norms of regulating personal feelings and prescribed frames of emotions “that should be

experienced” and those that must be suppressed during service encounters (Hochschild, 1983; Grandy, 2003).

However, a review of literature reveals a significant number of theoretical contributions and research on emotional labour originating from industrialised nations while there appears to be paucity of similar research focused on developing countries despite the fruitful development of call centre stations in these regions (Jaiswal, 2008). Against this backdrop, the objectives of this study aims to achieve the following: First, is to extend boundaries of knowledge in academia by disseminating novel information about how Nigerian call centre employees define and conceptualise emotional labour. Secondly, the study attempts to unveil how regulated emotions affects employee well-being while the third objective is to gather views of best practices that can moderate detrimental outcomes of this essential aspect of call centre work. It is believed that this research will be of benefit to occupational health professionals, human resources personnel, junior and middle managers of the various existing telecommunication multinationals in Nigeria and other foreign potential entrants intending to engage in call centre businesses on how affective deliveries can be effectively managed for better workplace well-being.

Literature Review

In broad terms, emotional labour (EL) theory deals with the degree of expression or disguise of an individual’s inner feelings and behaviour in conformity to organisational display rules especially within customer service roles (Walsh and Bartikowski, 2013). The concept was first conceived by Hoshchild in her classical book titled “The managed heart: commercialisation of human feelings” published in 1983. Focusing on the airline industry, she captured the deep EL involvement of flight attendants mandated to manage their feelings appropriately by creating a publicly observable facial and bodily display that portray pleasantness during customer contact (Hochschild, 1983: 7). This means the nature of positive affective delivery is integral to this service role for purposes of customer satisfaction and retention agendas. On one hand, Mann (2007: 555) claims that compliance with social norms of EL “facilitates task accomplishment and effectiveness” since it allows the service worker to “maintain objectivity and emotional equilibrium by cognitively distancing [themselves] from any implicated emotion” (Lewig and Dollard, 2003). On the flipside, there is also a contention that the continuous intensity of emotional regulation can have negative draining effects on an employee’s behaviour, performance and well-being (Kasabov and Warlow, 2010). To this end, two ways of performing EL often reported in literature are surface acting and deep display of feelings (see Kinman, 2009; Wegge, Dick and Bernstorff, 2010; Grandey, Diefendorff and Rupp, 2013). Surface acting is theorised as pretending or faking to have desired emotions to help a customer. Kinman (2009) argued that feigning such behaviour during service operations may suggest lack of interest in the job or organisation and often found to lead to emotional dissonance and burnout.

However, deep acting involves the actual display of sincere emotions in compliance with organisational norms of expressions and appropriate for customer service management (Lam and Chen, 2012). The use of electronic monitoring systems by managers ensures that all service workers are compliant. Drawing from this functional and dysfunctional arguments of the sub-conscious nature involved in authenticating or falsifying expressions in accordance to organisational rules of display, the present research explores how call centre employees perceive these emotional labour realities in Nigeria. Hence, the theoretical significance of this study is to examine if emotional labour practices is operationalised in similar ways that it is been reported in call centre samples existing in advanced economies (Jaarsveld and Poster, 2013:167). We focused on the Nigerian telecommunications sector because the industry emerged as one of the fastest growing sectors in Nigeria after the National Government decided to deregulate the sector in 2001 (Pyramid, 2010). Consequently, the deregulation of the Nigerian telecommunications attracted indigenous and international ICT investors to invest in

operating licenses to carry out mobile phone sales and services popularly known as Global System for Mobile (GSM) telecommunications for wireless business in Nigeria (Adebisi, 2011). With a population of over 160 million (Investors Resources, 2012), the Nigerian GSM telecommunications services was described as one of the fastest growing markets in Africa with over 129 million mobile phone subscribers on various networks (Pyramid, 2010). The market is saturated with leading brands such as Mobile Telecommunications Network (MTN), Nigeria, Globacom, Etisalat, Mtel, Zain, Airtel amongst a host of others. Thus, call centre activities became contact point for all Nigerian mobile phone users. These centres handle queries ranging from basic services such as customers purchasing phone credits to complex customer complaints and these frontline services of these various network providers grew rapidly across the nation.

Methodology and Research Design

Methodologically, this qualitative study drew from the social constructionism epistemology that is based on the notion that social realities are constructed by detailed narratives from people's lived experiences (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). Therefore, in obtaining in-depth understanding of the research phenomenon under investigation, semi-structured interviews were conducted with all the participants comprising of 26 females and 24 males aged between 26-35 years and working in a medium scale call centre located in one of the densely commercial areas of Lagos, Nigeria. The centre consist of about 500-600 full and part-time service employees on various twenty-four hours shift schedules. Access was gain through a top management staff and all the individual interviews were conducted on days when inbound calls were at its lowest levels.

A judgmental sampling procedure was used to recruit all interviewees who have worked as service agents for at least a year and were graduates. Consents were formalised with all those selected while each of the face to face interview interactions conducted by the three researchers lasted for about 40-50 minutes. Open ended questions were asked and centred on individual career stories relevant to the research objectives. Throughout the data collection process, confidentiality and anonymity were strictly observed while all interviews were tape recorded. The interpretative method utilised to analyse the data was thematic analysis that is a well-known naturalistic paradigm used in identifying, deconstructing, evaluating and reporting patterns within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This was done by condensing the transcribed data into summative codes representing emergent themes relevant to the research enquiry. Thereafter, all the list of codes were re-evaluated, consolidated and categorised into a coherent story that captured new and unique understanding of the research topic from all the participants' narratives.

Findings

Overall, eight key themes emerged from the study data. Significantly, an overwhelming majority of all the participants defined emotional labour (EL) as follows:

1. Service standardisation

Approximately 50% of participants shared views that the nature of EL within the context of their call centre roles were perceived as a management tool designed to focus on the extent to which all call handling procedures are controlled and leveraged. These agents narrated that since almost all their working time is spent in talking to customers over the integrated phoning systems, greater emphasis is placed by call centre management on the level of uniformity of expressive behaviours expected from all agents during service interactions. For example, the following quotation typifies shared views from the interviewees:

“As for me, the meaning of EL is how management wants all our customers to be treated politely and courteously by any advisor they are speaking to”.

Some of the participants reiterated how their dialogue is scripted while telephone manners such as courtesy, friendliness, temperance, use of proper and fit language are remotely or intentionally monitored at the background by team supervisors. This procedural assessments were said to be formal with pre-determined score sheets used by managers to mark every aspect of how all calls are answered. One male participant spoke of how their employers’ wants customers to feel as if it is only one delighted and helpful person they always speak to anytime they call in. So all contact agents must maintain the same attitude and gracious tone irrespective of any inbound customer that is been attended to and at any time within the twenty-four hours working shifts. Another male participant stated that “positive affective display is how our managers gets us to put up a good mental front for purposes of organisational profitability because when a customer is satisfied with the level of service rendered when they call in, they will want to stay longer with our mobile phone network”.

Thus, there was a general feeling that EL demands are mainly tailored to satisfy the customer focus objective of call centre businesses in Nigeria (Mukherjee and Malhotra, 2006). Subsequently, there was a general concession that the absence of face-to-face contact with customers in call centre occupation is the main reason for the greater and stricter regulation on the conveyance of positive emotions in this mode of service delivery (Jaarsveld and Poster, 2013).

2. Manipulation

On the contrary, some other participants were of the opinion that EL displays are a self-constrained phenomenon that focuses on trying to exert influence on customers through ingratiation. Two of those interviewed with these similar views explained that EL actions are compelling feelings that occurs in the sub-conscious mind and dramatized in tone and language expressed during service encounter often directed by the organisation. A female agent said: “EL is determined by the level of effort invested to transform our feelings at all cost”. Specifically, some of the participants mentioned there are some days when they find that their true emotions do not naturally conform to their service roles. On these days, a female participant said:

“Maintaining desired pleasantries on the phone in accordance with emotional labour practices will always need me to pay more attention to twisting my inner feelings to match the way I should always sound happy on phone”

Thus, a total number of 24 participants hold corresponding beliefs that whether the call centre agent is saturated with the right emotions for purposes of making customers happy or sounds false and unauthentic will still involve conscious efforts of modifying inner sentiments. It was established further that divergent passions in regulating both feelings and expressions for organisational profits comes with profound manipulation of intrinsic urges to either win the sympathy of the customer or organisation. On this point, one of the agents said:

“I perceive EL regulation is an individualistic issue. I know how to make my engagement with a customer either superfluous or genuine depending on the type of customer I am dealing with. Some customers naturally make my work easy by been nice and I am always glad to reciprocate while for some others, all I need to do is to pretend to be nice especially when the customer is proving very difficult”.

From the above perspective, it was further derived from some participants (n=8) that individual differences and change reactions are dominant features that affects the nature and extent of transforming emotional displays identical to either surface or deep acting. According to these sets of interviewees, numerous individual motives underlie such manipulative displays, including power to dominate customer behaviour, a desire for conformity, maintaining

professionalism, economic interests and identification with customer focus goals of the organisation. However, about 60% of all participants shared sentiments that EL could be tiring, drawing considerable energy from the actor, and carrying potentials that can lead to burnout on the long run. According to our findings, when questions were asked about the consequences of constantly engaging in this compulsory service norm, the following themes emerged.

3. Lassitude

Twenty of the participants vividly described the various degrees of mental friction encountered as they over-play emotions during service interactions. There were claims that surface acting is inevitable because of the unpredictable nature of inbound calls. This was perceived to affect their ability to constantly comply with display rules. Thus, one of the participants said: “I sometimes feel stressed when I have to always sound to impress the customer even if he or she doesn’t appreciate my effort”. Four other females’ interviewees shared views of how continuous role acting can result into emotional fatigue caused by discrepancies between feelings and expressions. The service workers explained that their routinized work schedules, scripted dialogue, low job control and repetitive call handling precipitates feelings of mental exhaustion which is the commonest symptom of burnout (Helms and Mayo, 2008). Further, some described how compliance with these publicly perceptible display rules causes expressive discordance that most times affects their physical health (Choi, Cheong and Feinberg, 2012). These participants made elaborate descriptions of how the continuous discrepancies between objective display requirements and subjective mood swings leads to emotional dissonance (Hochschild, 1983) that sometimes causes slight headaches and other musculoskeletal symptoms affecting the neck, arms, eyes, shoulders and ears of these service agents.

4. Work inconstancy

This theme emerged out of the various shared views of how EL can also have a negative outcome on employees in relation to the various levels of emotional work demands that can decrease job commitment. Some participants expressed concerns of how their efforts to constantly feign emotions to suit organisational needs can backfire and cause what is a functional necessity for the organisation to be dysfunctional condition to employees (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). For example, a female agent said “since I always need to portray a nature of friendliness even in the face of customer aggression, sometimes I only conform to my job specifications just to get a pass mark in my performance scores and not that I enjoy those moments of interactions”. Another female disclosed that she is more after the salary she receives from the job especially in Nigeria where the rate of unemployment is high. To some of the agents, they feel a weak identification with their call centre jobs in Nigeria. It was gathered that some are in the job for financial reasons while others felt compelled to remain on the job because of the limited work spaces in the Nigerian service sector. In general, the views were that since they must endlessly attend to customers on the telephone, sustaining active emotions can sometimes induce psychological tension.

5. Role conflict

A few of the participants (n=5) highlighted how under the intense necessity to comply with the rules of EL can make their service role become obscure when they are simultaneously required to meet the dual business objective of customer satisfaction and speed in service delivery. An excerpt from one of the interviews was:

“I am sometimes caught between two opposing service roles of dealing with a contract phone user who is calling in with an elaborate complaint about unfair charges on his monthly subscription [...] of which I have to empathise with the customer and sound helpful in resolving the customer complaint. But some customers will want the problem solved right there and then while they are still on the phone which is time consuming because I would need to go into various

system applications to investigate, but sometimes, my manager jumps on his feet, leans over my desk and sternly advises that I have already passed my average talk time with that customer and I need to begin to wrap up the call because of the high volume of customers on the queue. This puts me in a difficult position trying to finish the present call satisfactorily and moving to the next call swiftly with the same level of emotional balance needed to attend to the new caller”.

Two other agents corroborated stories of such emotional clashes that occur when there is a feeling that their role expectations of productivity demands from team managers and adequately attending to customer needs becomes ‘incongruent and incompatible’ (Ackfeldt and Malhotra, 2013). More interviews revealed further that some call centre managers will sometimes prefer agents to arrange call backs with demanding customers in order to keep up with the quantitative stats and key performance indicators (KPIs) set by the organisation. One of the interviewees who also expressed similar concerns on role conflict mentioned how he wishes that management pay more attention to service quality rather than quantification and standardisation practices because some customer requests are always bound to need longer attention and processes. Given the challenges of EL highlighted above, a few solutions suggested by all the participants converged at the following:

6. Delegation and enablement

Out of the 50 participants, 18 of them were almost sharing similar views that EL practices will yield positive outcomes if management allow more room for individual rights to control call handling procedures. Given the unpredictable and unprecedented nature of inbound calls, participants were of the opinion that the delegation of discretion over the content and pace on some calls can enable agents deal sufficiently with the emotional demands of their job. On this note, excerpts from a male participant revealed: “I believe one of the ways of relieving us from the hardship of EL is for team managers monitoring our calls to allow us use our skill and abilities to make informed decisions on effectively dealing with customer calls especially when it is a complaint. Scripted dialogue should be made flexible on some occasions”.

There was general consensus that most customers are discerning and can identify when an agent is pretending to be helpful. It was said that most customers are always willing to speak to deep actors even if it means requesting to speak to another customer advisor or superior. Although, one interviewee agreed that the production-line approach of managing call centre workflow is an efficient way of reporting quantitative stats, but it was also pointed out that it most times obscures managers from evaluating the mental state of the employee and how they thought the customer felt after the call. Thus, these participants suggested that offering call centre advisors the choice to engage in authenticating emotions will allow them the opportunity to assert their own customer focus personalities on each call.

7. Prioritising teamwork

Another solution that emerged in extenuating the negative impact of EL was gathered from 40% of agents proposing that their employers should prioritise call centre collegiality. To a large extent, some of this Nigerian frontline employees perceived that since the bulk of their call centre role resides in mental stabilities during call handling, tacit knowledge in attaining the requisite expertise in affective capacities approved by the organisation should occur either by learning the self-regulatory frames of deep acting and socialisation structures provided by teamwork support. Some suggested that managerial flexibility in team collaboration should be allowed. For example, it was mentioned that the more experienced advisors should provide emotional support for either the inexperienced or struggling agents. For example, a female agent commented that:

“Our team managers should not be the only one we are mandated to direct our difficult calls to, because sometimes, the manager is also on another call and I will have to put the customer on a long hold till my manager is available to take the call. This situation frustrates the customer further and put me under tension since other customers are on the queue. I feel experienced team members who may be free at that moment should be allowed to support at such moments”.

In addition, one participant identified that this structure of employees' team social support means that team integration can help build emotional fortification since team mates can easily turn to each other for help. Such integrative and spontaneous support was also perceived as a form of active coping method that can mitigate emotional drain and strain. Thus, forming these informal cooperative communities was found to facilitate time management in call handling. Thus, it was agreed that “the communities of coping were an important social process in these workplaces, creating informal, dense cultures among the workforce” (Korczyński, 2003).

8. Rewards and recognition

A handful of participants gave evidence suggesting that incorporating organisational structures and processes of rewarding positive affective delivery will play an important outcome in facilitating employee emotional engagements with customers. One of the male agent thinks if he receives adequate recognition for always complying with normative emotions, this can generate more incentive for him to always engage in self-expressions that are non-mechanical. Some agents suggested that rewards such as of cash bonuses, role recognition, a day off work, early finish, and free meals for agents who provides exceptional customer service are valuable ways of dissolving emotional dissonance.

Discussions

This research set out to explore the conceptualisations of EL within the Nigerian call centre profession – a context where literature is scarce. The study also evaluated the negative consequences and some best practices that the study subjects perceived as solutions that can favourably affect employees' EL presentations. More specifically, the existing study contributes to EL research in three ways. First, the findings provided valuable insights into individual meanings and definitions of EL. Thus, one gap that this study sought to address is that most EL research often concentrates on impacts and outcomes of EL without initially contextualising the interpretations and meaning service employees hold about the concept. Therefore, our findings unveiled that from some participant's definitions, EL is an organisationally designed system of controlling the subconscious aptitude of employees during service interactions. This results generally supports prior studies that the primary aim of EL is for achieving a firm's competitive advantage (Chang and Chiu, 2009; Lam and Chen, 2012). Secondly, findings corroborated some EL literature that have developed a theory on the aspect of EL strategy on surface acting found to be a job stressor which often leads to employee psychological resource depletion (Mann, 2007). However, additional knowledge emerged from the present study that revealed the negative impact of overplaying emotions in service interactions can influence job commitment levels that creates employees wanting to stay with their employers either out of fear for financial loss (i.e. continuance commitment) or sense of obligation to stay in employment (i.e. normative commitment) given the astronomical unemployment rates in Nigeria and not so much out of feelings of solidarity and attachment that binds and foster employee intrinsic motivation to remain in call centre employment (Allen and Meyer, 1990). The third contribution of the study was the assessment of managerial initiatives that can moderate the adverse outcomes of EL demands. This were organisational support practices such as employee empowerment, team working, rewards and recognition found to be potential buffers that can diffuse negative feelings and psychological strain associated with EL performance.

Conclusion

The study has explored EL realities beyond the traditional Western context by providing a context specific account of how Nigerian call centre agents perceive EL. Given the corporate concerns also raised by call centre employees in this non-Western context about surface acting, it has become extremely important for call centre executives, HR practitioners, junior and middle-line managers to appreciate the fact that emotion work is an integral part of everyday organisational life in call centre jobs (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). As such, workplace training and development should be geared towards improving and celebrating mutual emotional exchanges between customers and organisational representatives. Yet, one of the limitations of this study is the small sample size that limits generalizability of findings. However, the study has provided preliminary insights that can be followed up using survey-based research design to test the validity and objectivity of this contextual findings in future research.

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