

Emotional Labour: A Case of Fast Food Employees in Klang Valley, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the level of agreement on emotional labour strategies that include standard scripts, dress code and acting and the roles of socio-demographic towards emotion supervision of fast food employees. A survey questionnaire was used to underpin this study with participation of 170 respondents among fast food employees in Klang Valley area. Data were analysed by using SPSS version 19 and the results found that the use of standard scripts, dress code and acting had from moderate to high level of agreement on employees' emotion. This study was hoped to give information and deeper insights about emotional labour. Managers can take an initiative to guide employees in order to provide good services and smooth interaction between employees and customers where it benefited both parties.

Key Words: *Emotional labour; Standard scripts; Dress codes; Acting; Fast food industry; Kuala Lumpur*

INTRODUCTION

Emotional labour is relatively a new concept that has only been given attention in recent years. Fundamentally, emotional labour is the responsibility of service staff in managing their emotions, feelings and behaviours in the workplace (Diefendorff & Richard, 2003). They were expected to be an actor in order to convey the positive emotions, such as friendliness and kindness to enhance

customer loyalty and experiences (Ashkanasy, Hartel, & Daus, 2002; Hochschild, 1979; Kim, 2008). The frontline workers who engaged in emotional labours are required to handle the feelings of their customers and themselves (Hochschild, 1983). For example, they are required to present smiles, creating eye contacts and performing real caring to customers' demands. Nevertheless, they should not always display their actual emotions and feelings, whereas they have to reveal the emotions that more benefits to the establishment and less consider their true feeling (Groth, Hennig-Thurau, & Walsh, 2009; Hochschild, 1983).

This study arises because the majority of the researches were done in other countries especially in Western countries. In Malaysia, researches on 'emotional labour' have not yet widely explored. The most helpful piece was done by Motaghi-Pisheh and Harianto (2011). They carried out a research about emotional labour of the hotel's employees in Penang, Malaysia. They found that surface acting was the primary factor of various kinds of workplace violence. On the other hand, this current research aimed to investigate the influences of emotional labour strategies, such as standard scripts, dress code and acting on emotion management of fast food employees. Accordingly, the specific study objectives were; a) to determine the relationship of employing the standard scripts towards emotion management of fast food employees; b) to identify the relationship of dress codes towards emotion regulation of fast food employee; and c) to distinguish the relationship of acting towards emotion adjustment of fast food employee and last but not least is d) to investigate the effect of social-demographic roles towards emotion supervision of fast food employee.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Emotional Labour

Emotional labour can be denoted as individuals who control their emotion expression through display rules in order to develop the excellent impressions to public (Hochschild, 1983). Abd Patah,

Zain, Abdullah, and Radzi (2009) recognized that employees are the valuable properties of an establishment. They contain higher interaction with the patrons since they performed duties in the front of the office. Hence, managements always play the important roles to control their thoughts, feelings and emotions through a series of display rules in order to elevate the reputation of an organisation, service quality, customer purchase intentions, satisfactions and retentions (Barsky & Nash, 2002; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985; Tan, Foo, & Kwek, 2004). Emotional labour practice led both pros and cons. Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) stressed that emotional labour might boost up self-efficiency and enabled an individual to be more effective in the process of performing duty. Besides, it trimmed down unnecessary personal conflicts during service interactions. In detail, it enhanced task effectiveness and performances of employees by moderating their interpersonal problems. Thus, it allowed a smooth communication flow to take place and further fulfil customer expectations (Gross & Stone, 1964). Besides, demonstrating right attitudes and behaviours enhanced customer satisfaction and loyalty of an establishment as well (Bolton, 2005; Zeithaml et al., 2006).

Standard Scripts

One of the alternatives to monitor employees who have higher interactions with customers is by introducing a general guideline like scripts. Scripts have been widely applied in service industry (Hubbert, Sehorn, & Brown, 1995; Schank & Abelson 1997; Volden & Johnston, 1999). Script referred to a generalized episode that was effective for producing a stereotypical situation (Schank & Abelson, 1997). Scripts consist of numerous sub schemata which portrayed the scripts events and each of the script events encompasses an important relationship between the actions, objects and events (Rumelhart, 1980). Therefore, it can be viewed as the sequence of actions which an individual should perform for ensuring the certain event to take place (Abelson, 1981; Pryor & Merluzzi, 1985). Nottenburg and Shoben (1980) explained that scripts of restaurants anywhere in the world are almost identical, yet the primary distinction was the technique to manage the scripts. For example, major script norms of employees in fast food restaurant

were greeting guests at the entrance and counter, taking orders, offering and suggesting menu, accepting payment, preparing food and expressing thank to customers (Hsu & Chiang, 2010). Accordingly, it was one of the communication tools to regulate and manipulate the customer experiences and expectations (Leidner, 1993) enhanced the reliability and uniformity of information (Thompson, 2010), allowed employees to deliver more consistent and reliable services (Kelly, Skinner, & Donnelly, 1992; Leidner, 1993; Schau & Gilly, 1998) and produce the professional service interactions and service operations in short period (Schau et al., 2007) Consequently, it worked as references to reduce service failures and complaints.

Dress Codes

Dress code of an organization can be exemplified as uniform wear by employees when they are performing duties. Associational uniforms are not only encompass the dress like shirts, blouses, skirts and pants but also included artefact, such as name card, ornaments and smock linen over garment (Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993). Frequently, dress code integrates the process of transferring the enormous vary of indescribable meanings through nonverbal cues (Damhorst, 1990). Thus, it is an effective instrument to convey an individual's characteristics, personality, emotions, and behaviours to others (Stone, 1962). In view of that, Solomon (1987) acknowledged that the investments of institutions in the aspect of worker's attires are approximately achieving billions of dollars every year. Dress code is the most noticeable feature of an establishment (Ludicke, 1990). It portrayed the image of the establishment and also improved the organization overall presentation (Nelson & Bowen, 2000). They further elaborated that code of dress played the significant role in process of constructing brand identity of an establishment. It was a powerful tool to convey the organization concepts and values to customers. Similarly, suitable uniform enables the employees to be more sociable and easier to carry out their duty (Laptisky & Smith, 1981; Lennon & Miller, 1984). Nelson and Bowen (2000) explained that the foremost rationale was because uniform has stimulated the feeling of professionalism, triggered their self-confidence level and

directed them to perform in the appropriate manners in order to meet the customer expectations.

Acting

Act can be defined as an action of role playing to pretend the expression of certain behaviour (Hyperdictionary, 2009). In other words, acting can be illustrated as a sacrifice of truthfully convey their true self (Stormer & Devine, 2008). Principally, Hochschild (1983) recognized that employees perform emotional labour practice through two techniques including surface acting and deep acting. Surface acting is emphasised on the external behaviours which including the imitating the ideal emotions through verbal and nonverbal cues while the inner feelings remain constant. In detail, surface acting requires staffs carefully to present the emotions that not actually being felt. It incorporates the process of faking and exaggerating the external attitudes and behaviours without modifying inner feelings. Therefore, there are contradictions between their reveal behaviour and felt emotions. This scenario has taken place because of the actions of management to restrain the display emotions of employees by the rules. Furthermore, deep acting is stressed on the inner feelings when employees strive hard to regulate their actual emotions and behaviours (Hochschild, 1983). Deep acting integrates the suppression of inner feelings and also careful consideration of their felt emotions (Beal et al, 2006; Motaghi-Pisheh & Harianto, 2011). Ideally, Hochschild (1983) argued that deep acting hold lower propensity to direct the detrimental upshots basically since it could not constrain actual emotion expression. Accordingly, deep acting evoked lower level of self-estrangement, emotional exhaustion and dissonance compare to surface acting. Different viewed by Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) where expression of spontaneous and genuine emotions can be one of the organization display rules. They have discovered that employees able to express their authentic feelings and behaviours without acting. Authenticity is a key element to enhance customer satisfactions and reputation (Lynch, 2010).

Socio-demographics

Past researchers had allocated the thought about relationship between emotional labour and demographic profiles. For example, emotional labour can be synchronized linked to gender because emotional tasks were stereotypical (Heller, 1980; Hochschild, 1983). Hochschild (1983) has pointed out that females have possessed lower social status, authority and asset than males for the past decades. Besides, several researchers like Johnson and Spector (2007) as well as Scott and Barnes (2011) realized that females were trying hard to mask their genuine feelings and thoughts through surface acting compare than males. In terms of age, research by Dahling and Perez (2010) had investigated the association between age and emotional labour strategies. They accentuated that increasing of age was parallel with the practise of deep acting, yet unparalleled with the practice of surface acting. In other words, as aged was rising, employees have more supervision on their feeling and thoughts. For marital status, Hartel et al. (2005) critiqued that employees who involved in the marriage had applied emotional labour skill more regularly. Hence, they have been forced to deal with greater challenges of emotional exhaustion. Apart from that, Chang and Chiu (2009) claimed that single staffs were more probable to practise deep acting than married staffs. Hence, singles leaded less unwanted emotional adverse effects. Besides, for education level, research by Chang and Chiu (2009) revealed that highly educated service labours tended to exercise emotional labour frequently because they contain higher inspirations to complete their duties in more predominant manner. Their higher job accomplishment enthusiasms caused them to confront with serious side effects (Cordes & Doutherty, 1993). Moreover, research of Anderson, Provis and Chappel (2002) declared that managers were tended to enact emotional labour practices on a regular basis. Accordingly symptoms like pessimism, burnout and emotional exhaustion were more apparently on managers. In terms of work experiences, the study by Chang and Chiu (2009) claimed that employees with longer service years will experience deeper emotional labour level and indirectly yielded the higher emotional drawbacks like lack of self-esteem and desperation.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative approach and the sampling method used was convenience sampling. Prior to the data collection process, permission was obtained from the managers on duty of fast food restaurants and respondents were given a full explanation about the research before they start answering the survey. A total of 200 questionnaires were distributed to employees who were currently working in selected fast food outlets which located in the shopping mall in Klang Valley area in the year of 2011. However, 170 usable responses were accepted for further analysis and it was accounted as 85 per cent of response rate. The development of the survey questionnaire was modified based on the study done by Seymour (2000). The questionnaire comprises of four sections with three of the sections (Section A, B, and C) were in five-point Likert scales. Respondents were asked to describe their agreement based on the scales ranging from the scale of '1' representing 'strongly disagree' to the scale of '5' representing 'strongly agree'. Section A of the questionnaire concerned with the usage of standard scripts, while section B comprises of fifteen questions which focuses on identifying the relationship of dress codes toward employee's emotion. In section C, questions were stressed on acting or authenticity's aspect, while Section D was designed to collect information about the respondent's demographic profiles.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data analyses applied in this study was based on the research objectives established. Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) was used to disclose the research problem arose. More than half of the respondents in this research were male (56.5 per cent) while the rest were female (43.5 per cent). Majority of the respondents were between 21 years old to 29 years old (64.7 per cent). The information of respondents demographic profiles are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic profiles of respondents

Characteristics	Frequency n	Percent %
Gender		
Male	96	56.5
Female	74	43.5
Age		
Less than 20	48	28.2
20-29	110	64.7
30-39	8	4.7
40-49	2	1.2
50 and above	2	1.2
Race		
Malay	147	86.5
Chinese	7	4.1
Indian	12	7.1
Other	4	2.4
Marital status		
Single	153	90.0
Married	17	10.0
Highest education level		
Primary school	13	7.6
Secondary school	95	55.9
Certificate/ Diploma	43	25.3
Degree	19	11.2
Master's/ PhD	0	0
Work position		
Crew	131	77.1
Shift manager	15	8.8
Assistant manager	14	8.2
Restaurant manager	5	2.9
Other	5	2.9
Work experiences in fast food industry		
Less than 6 months	54	31.8
6-12 months	50	29.4
1-2 years	33	19.4
More than 2 years	33	19.4

Descriptive analysis was used to measure the agreement level of respondents toward standard scripts, dress code and acting. Mean score and standard deviation are shown in Table 2. From the result, respondents were agreed that standard scripts have helped them to get a better understanding about the customers' behaviour and improved their social skills. Schau, Dellande and Gilly (2007) as well as Seymour (2000) agreed that standard scripts improved the interpersonal techniques of employees and further assisted them to be aware of customer requirements in order to convey the high quality services. Alternatively, the natural mean score (3.48) for the statement of 'decrease my ability to communicate with the

customers' shows that scripts is not a barrier to encourage the smooth interaction between customers and employees as it was able to predict the occurrences of certain activities and direct the service period as well (Bateson, 2002; Leidner, 1993). Besides, standard scripts also benefited them by kept away the undesirable emotional consequences. This occurrence of this scenario was due to highly routinized, repetitive and standardized of the fast food tasks (Leidner, 1993).

Table 2: Mean Score and Standard Deviation of Respondents

	Dimension Items	Mean	Standard Deviation
Standard scripts	Provide me better understanding about the customers' behaviors	4.09	0.752
	Improve my social skills	4.09	0.827
	Decrease my ability to communicate with the customers	3.48	1.116
Dress codes	Enable me to be more sociable	4.10	0.71
	Construct a sense of self concept	3.78	0.853
Acting	Develop the mutual understanding between customers and me	3.99	0.73
	Assist me to satisfy the customer requirements	3.99	0.75
	Enable me to provide personalized services	3.99	0.726
	Cause me lose my own personality	3.59	1.030

Note: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree

Moreover, fast food employees also agreed that dress code enables them to be more sociable and subsequently lead more strengths than weakness. The result of this study is consistent with the perceptions of Laptisky and Smith (1981) as well as Lennon and Miller (1984) that employees are able to build up more friendliness and pleasurable companionship with customers through proper dress codes. In addition, dress codes have accelerated the moral of employees and further improved their service techniques (Nelson & Bowen, 2000). Consequently, dress codes boosted up their working productivity with minimal uninvited physically or psychologically emotional upshots.

Finally, the results also revealed that acting assisted fast food employees to satisfy the customer requirements as Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) believed the acting aided the employees

sympathetically alert with the feelings, opinions or demands of the guests.

However, there are different thoughts for different demographic background, for example, gender, marital status, age, education level, work position, and work experiences. Firstly, independent t-test validated that there are statistically difference between gender and acting ($p < .05$) yet effects of standard scripts and dress codes were not interrupted by gender. Results suggested that females were expected to practise emotional labour more periodically. The results were consistent with assumptions of Johnson and Spector (2007) as well as Scott and Barnes (2011) that females were tended to conceal their actual emotions through acting. For influence of marital status, it was appeared significant differences with dress codes only. Single employees recognized that dress code created a character for them ($p = .009$) and further motivated them to shield their own viewpoints, preferences and attitudes ($p = .044$). In terms of age, it was discovered that older adults from 30 to 39 years old believed standard scripts were more applicable to control their weakness and enable them to supply friendly and patient service and the dress code was a valuable tool to sharpen their identity, created the sense of proud and professional and enhanced their professionalism. Moreover, it was found that acting assisted the older adults in satisfying the customer requirements effectively. Meanwhile, the degree holder's employees claimed that standard scripts enabled them to provide consistent service quality, boosted up their self-confidence level and further enhanced their professionalism and credibility in front of the customer. This may maximize strengths and minimize weaknesses of the practices. Results were incompatible with presumption of Chang and Chiu (2009) that emotional labour directed more unwanted drawbacks to highly educated employees. Besides, emotional labour was act as an effective instrument to boost up job performances of managers. Findings were corresponding to the concept of Sloan (2008) that work position is negatively correlated with emotional facade. In term of working experiences, employees who have lower service years hold deeper emotional labour level and hence, they were more susceptible to take up higher degree of emotional problems.

Therefore, collected statistics of this study contain vast discrepancies with study of Chang and Chiu (2009).

CONCLUSIONS

The concept of ‘emotional labour’ has not received very much attention yet in the Malaysian fast food industry. Hence, from a managerial perspective, this study sheds light by providing information on ‘emotional labour’ and managing employee’s emotions. Firstly, higher agreement levels on practical functions of emotional labour strategies indicated that standard scripts, dress codes and acting should be practised to enhance the service quality and customer satisfactions. Secondly, effective recruitment system is the essential procedure to select right job candidates who suite with the professions. Ang et al. (2010) recommended that one of the dominant techniques is to request the job applicants to undergo a personality test or emotional intelligence test during the interview process. Higher ranking of emotional intelligence indicates that they are performing deep acting (McShane & Von Glinow, 2010). Thus, they have higher capability to cope with their inner feelings and display behaviours.

On the other hand, higher grading on personality test will signify that they have strong affirmative characteristics and effectively (Chu, 2002). Kim (2008) drawn that managements should hire individuals who possess higher extraversion, but lack in neuroticism because they have adopted deep acting and able offer more sincere and faithfulness services. In short, management can evaluate the actual behaviours and attitudes along with the ability to manage their emotions via personality and emotional intelligence tests.

Apart from that, leaders should be educated to direct their employees’ emotions, empower their subordinates, manage customer complaints and offer responses to customers via proper modes (Chu, 2002). In fast food industry context, managers should always understand and recognize emotional dedication of employees through proper compensation or reward. For instance,

Ang et al. (2010) declared that salary and wages of employees should be always based on their painstaking efforts. Likewise, incentives and promotional opportunities should be proposed for employees who have outstanding performances. As this study is believed to be the first such study in the Malaysian fast food context, the findings, it is hoped will help the managers at the head offices to plan crucial strategies in managing their employees and ultimately help the employee not only to improve their job performance but also deliver quality service to customers. The results from this study potentially may be used to help fast food employees to better manage their emotions when deals with customers.

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