

Customer Service Orientation, Emotional Labor Strategy, and Emotional Exhaustion

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to determine the relationship between customer service orientation with emotional labor strategy and emotional exhaustion among the sales employees. Customer service orientation is the predictor variable that influences emotional labor strategy and emotional exhaustion among the employees. The participants in this study were 88 sales employees in one of the automotive companies in Makassar, Indonesia. The regression analysis result showed a positive effect of customer service orientation on emotional labor and emotional exhaustion among the sales employees. The employees who have high service orientation tend to show deep acting strategy when serving their customers, enabling them to decrease emotional exhaustion.

Keywords: *Customer service orientation, deep acting, emotional exhaustion, emotional labor*

1. INTRODUCTION

The tough competition in the business market leads every company to offer their attention to service and marketing to satisfy the customers. Berry [1] stated that customer satisfaction could be achieved by creating a direct interpersonal relationship between the company and consumers.

Sales ability in the offering, promoting, and selling the product to the customer is the crucial process for an organization because it will represent the company's image. Wirtz [2] revealed that service will always require direct interaction between customer and service provider and involve individual skills, motivation, and emotion, especially for the service provider.

Hochschild [3] explained that emotional regulation during work is called emotional labor. Grandey [4] revealed that emotional labor is the employee's emotion regulation process to manage their expression and feeling to fulfill the company's demand. Emotional labor in an organization environment called professional behavior during the employee performs the work. Meanwhile, Diefendorf, Croyle, and Grosserand [5] stated that emotional labor is highly required to follow the organization's rule in performing the job without influencing a person's internal condition. Therefore, the emotional labor study's main focus is on how the employee achieves individual performances required by the organization.

While doing their job, sales employees will directly encounter their customers (face-to-face) to give satisfaction in service. During office hours, the employee can utilize two kinds of emotional labor strategy; deep acting and surface acting strategy [4]. The surface acting strategy is emotional regulation's form by pretending to perform a positive emotion. This process requires the employee's self-adaptation to follow the organization's procedures. Lawrence, Troth, Jordan, and Collins [6] stated that deep acting strategy constitutes one of the employee's strategies during work.

The tendency to performing deep acting or surface acting is caused by several factors, such as the employees' emotions at the moment, customers' attitude, work environment, and work demands. Working as a sales employee has to perform friendly to achieve the customer's satisfaction. Internal factors and organizational factors. Influence emotional labor on the individual, such as Internal factors, includes gender, emotional expression, emotional intelligence, self-monitoring, and customer service orientation. In contrast, organizational factors comprise peer and manager support [4] [7].

Based on the result of an initial survey from 63 participants, 61 of them declared that emotional regulation is required during the work, especially when facing the rude customers. The most frequently encountered problem for sales employees when meeting

with the customer is managing emotions towards the customer's complaint. Sometimes, it makes them express their anger to the customer. Sales employees must be friendly to their customers because it is one of the company's operational standards. This demand leads to the requirement of emotional labor in a job context. Therefore, employees who have a high level of customer service orientation show the deep acting strategy in their work. Allen, Pugh, Grandey, and Groth [7] explained that the employee with high customer service orientation tends to perform deep acting strategy when serving the customer.

Allen, Pugh, Grandey, and Groth [7] explained that customer service orientation is the employee's desire to express their positive emotions. It tends to become a work attitude without any intervention from other people. Customer service orientation is an employee's ability to place the customer's needs as a priority. The employee is ready to make time and energy to achieve the customer's satisfaction and demand. The employee with high customer service orientation will perform better motivation in working and increase self-confidence in fulfilling the organizational need.

Brown, Mowen, Donovan, and Licata [8] stated that customer service orientation consists of two dimensions: need and self-confidence. Need dimension refers to the employee's need to fulfill the request and desire from customers, like giving help to offer a satisfying service to the customer. Self-confidence dimension occurs when consumer serves their customer correctly and show their empathy during the interaction. These two dimensions sometimes cause a different tendency when applied by the service providers.

The study of Lee, Ok, Lee, and Lee [9] towards 250 aviation employees on service staff and call center position proved that customer service orientation correlated with deep acting and surface acting. Employees who served their customers with deep acting strategy had a high level of customer service orientation. In contrast, the employees who served with surface acting had low customer service orientation. Therefore, the hypothesis for this explanation is advanced:

Hypothesis 1a: There is a positive effect of customer service orientation on deep acting strategy among the sales employees.

Hypothesis 1b: There is a negative effect on customer service orientation on the sales employees' surface acting strategy.

Customer service orientation also correlates with emotional exhaustion. Wright and Cropanzano [10] stated that emotional exhaustion is when the employee is out of the energy in describing their emotion. Iplik, Topsakal, and Iplik [11] stated that emotional exhaustion was emotionally tired because of the job demands and inability to be repaired. This statement was proved by the study from Yoo, Kim, and Lee [12] about customer

service orientation and emotional exhaustion among 243 frontline officers in a restaurant in Korea. This study claimed that customer service orientation was the critical factor supporting the employees' ability to decrease emotional exhaustion from the customer's verbal aggression. Spector [13] revealed that emotional exhaustion is one of the burnout dimensions characterized by depersonalization and low self-confidence. Wright and Cropanzano [10] stated that emotional exhaustion is caused by excessive fatigue in job demands. Emotional exhaustion is the effect of physical pressure, affection, and cognitive from specific job demands [14]. Emotional exhaustion consists of physical and psychological exhaustion [10]. In physical exhaustion, the employee tends to feel stomachache, headache, or other physical illness. In contrast, psychological exhaustion is characterized by low motivation, low concentration, unstable emotion, and work motivation decline.

Several factors influence the employee's emotional exhaustion, such as unsupportive work environment and work demand, low support, and low customer service for the employee itself [15] [16]. These factors can emerge simultaneously at the same time and lead to the increment of emotional exhaustion on the employee. Chang & Chiu [17] stated that emotional exhaustion would cause the work productivity decline and lead to the work stress if not handled soon.

An employee with high customer service orientation does not experience excessive emotion during the interaction with a customer, which is called emotional exhaustion. Yoo, Kim, dan Lee [12] conducted the research involved customer service orientation and emotional exhaustion towards more frontline employees in a restaurant in Korea. This study illustrated that the employee with low customer service orientation experienced more negative effects of emotional exhaustion than the employee with high customer service orientation. Another research conducted by Hur, Moon, and Han [18] towards sales employees in South Korea showed that customer service orientation negatively correlated with emotional exhaustion. Employees with high customer service orientation will positively affect their loyalty and motivation because they experience less emotional exhaustion.

2. METHODS

The method in this study used the self-report to collect the participant's responses. The Customer Service Orientation scale was adapted from Brown, Mowen, Donovan, and Licata [8], Emotional Labor scale from Diefendorff, Croyle, and Gosserand [5], and the Emotional Exhaustion scale from the theory of Wright and Cropanzano [10]. A total sampling technique was applied in this study that involved all the populations as the sample.

This study's participants were 88 sales employees in one of the Automotive companies in Makassar, consisting of 61 males (69.31%). Participants' age ranged from 20-52 years old. The tenure of each participant varied, start from one year until more than ten years.

2.1. Customer Service Orientation Scale

Brown, Mowen, Donavan develop the customer service orientation scale, and Licata [8] consists of two dimensions, need and pleasure. This is an 11-item self-report scale. The response ranged from strongly agree to disagree on a 5-point Likert strongly. The result of the item correlation coefficient ranged from 0.322-0.786 and the reliability $\alpha = 0.887$.

2.2. Emotional Labor Strategy Scale

The emotional labor scale is a 9-item self-report scale developed by Diefendorff et al. [5]. The response ranged from never to always on a 5-point Likert. This scale is consisted of deep acting and surface acting. The result of the item correlation coefficient ranged from 0.373-0.715. The scale has been shown to have good internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.809$).

2.3. Emotional Exhaustion Scale

The emotional exhaustion scale 22 item refers to the theory from Wright and Cropanzano [10]. This scale was characterized by physical fatigue and mental or psychological fatigue. The response ranged from never to always on a 5-point Likert. The results were shown to have good internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.887$). The result of the item correlation coefficient ranged from 0.319-0.865.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Result

3.1.1. Customer Service Orientation

Data analysis found that $M_{\text{customer orientation}} = 47.78$ and $SD = 4.27$. Twenty-two respondents were in the high level of customer service orientation (25%). While there were 58 respondents were in the medium level of customer service orientation (65.9%). There were eight respondents in the low level of customer service orientation (9.09%).

3.1.2. Emotional Labor

In the emotional labor strategy variable, it is known that there were two strategies that participants used in this study: surface acting strategy and deep acting strategy. The participants who performed the deep acting strategy were 96.59%, and the surface acting strategy was 3.40%.

3.1.3. Emotional Exhaustion

The analysis of the emotional exhaustion variable showed that $E_{\text{emotional exhaustion}} = 41.59$ and $SD = 6.08$. There were 21 respondents with a high level of emotional exhaustion (23.86%). There were 56 respondents in the medium level of emotional exhaustion. In comparison, there were 11 respondents in the low level of emotional exhaustion (12.50%).

Regression analysis used in this study proved that customer service orientation significantly influence on deep acting strategy ($R^2 = 0.197$, $F = 21.043$, $p < 0.05$). The influence of customer service orientation variable on the deep acting strategy by 19.7%. This result revealed that hypothesis 1a was accepted. In contrast, customer service orientation variable did not influence significantly on the surface acting strategy ($R^2 = 0.016$, $F = 1.369$, $p > 0.05$). Therefore, hypothesis 1b was declined.

3.2. Discussion

Customer service orientation consists of four predictors: self-belief, personality, intellectual ability, and situational factor [19]. These factors can influence the employee in their interaction with customers. Therefore, the employee needs to minimize the factors that can reduce customer service orientation and maximize the factors that can increase customer service orientation. This interaction for the customer and service provider can emerge the benefits for both parties. For customers, a good relationship can boost customer satisfaction, commitment, and retention. At the same time, for the service provider, it can lead to organizational citizenship behavior, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, emotional exhaustion, and emotional labor.

This case is emphasized by the study conducted by Allen et al. [7] among the contact and controlling customers. The study results showed that employees who serve with high customer service orientation tend to perform deep acting. In contrast, the employee who serves with low customer service orientation tends to perform the surface acting with customers.

There was a significant effect of customer service orientation on deep acting strategy among sales employees in Makassar. The higher the customer service orientation level, the more employees tend to show deep acting strategy. In contrast, the lower the customer service orientation, the fewer employees tend to perform deep acting strategy. In contrast, a correlation in customer service orientation and surface acting strategy did not show a significant effect.

The use of a deep acting strategy will offer benefits for a sales employee. Ramachandran et al. [20] revealed that deep acting strategy is one of the required strategies in work conditions, such as facing mad customers, it is

required to pay attention and show empathy for the situation. However, the use of surface acting strategy is not allowed when facing a mad customer. Surface acting strategy only gives a simple smile, affecting the worse impact for the customer. The sales employee who can maintain their emotion during work will be easier to adjust their emotion-based on work conditions.

Pierce and Gardner [21] stated that employees with more excellent customer service orientation have a good capability in experience job demands, especially for serving the customers. The employee tends to perform the right attitude and behavior during the interaction with customers. The employees with a low tendency towards customer service orientation will have low cognitive quality and emotion regulation in fulfilling the job demands because of their low motivation. Brotheridge and Grandey [22] revealed that emotional expression, awareness, and the congruence relate positively with deep acting strategy because of the similar characteristic with customer service orientation. The employees with higher customer service orientation tend to perform deep acting strategies rather than surface acting strategies. Grandey [4] added that customer service orientation leads the employees to practice deep acting strategy and help the employees offer better service for the customers.

The regression analysis result of customer service orientation on emotional exhaustion revealed a significant result. Customer service orientation demonstrated a negative effect on emotional exhaustion. The employees with greater customer service orientation judge themselves have less tendency in fatigue during work time. This result is appropriate with the study from Hur, Moon, and Han [18] that there was a negative correlation between customer service orientation and emotional exhaustion among South Korea sales employees.

The data has found that sales employees experienced medium emotional exhaustion. Based on the interview result, the employees' emotional exhaustion was normal, and it occurred merely when the employees received the complaints and unpleasant customers. Those conditions can be accepted as a consequence of the job. The income and facility from the organization allow the employees being appreciated during their work. Therefore, all factors that can affect employees' perception of their work must be adequately overcome.

Based on the initial survey from 63 sales participants, 68,3% of them admitted they complain they always encounter. For instance, the customer's complaints such as cancellation of the purchased vehicle, the long waiting list, the long process of documents' accomplishment, and the misunderstanding about the payment method between the company and the customer about the down payment and cashback.

From those complaints, there were 77,8% of the employees felt tired when meeting with the customer. The emotional fatigue that the employee feels, such as being emotionally tired, anxiety, low interest in the presence, headache, crying, and angry after receiving a customer's complain. Those symptoms are several indicators of emotional exhaustion. Babakus, Cravens, Johnston dan Moncrief [23] stated that one of the emotional exhaustion causes is anxiety when beginning to work.

Kim, Paek, Choi, and Lee [24] explained that customer service orientation constitutes the personal resources in the work process, especially when facing social stressors related to consumer, the employees with greater customer service orientation are easier to understand the condition and enjoy the problem-solving process. This capability enables the employees to overcome social stress and decrease emotional exhaustion effects. Otherwise, the employees with lower customer service orientation have low self-confidence towards social stressor regards to the consumers. Therefore those employees are unable to cope with this problem and lead to emotional exhaustion.

4. CONCLUSION

The key principle of deep acting strategy revealed that emotional change is appropriate with the organization's rule display. Therefore, during the job, the employee should avoid emotional dissonance and show sincere emotion to the customer. The customer service orientation and emotional labor study showed a significant correlation of customer service orientation on the deep acting strategy. In contrast, for the surface acting strategy, it was not found. Furthermore, research on customer service orientation and emotional exhaustion resulted in a negative correlation towards emotional exhaustion. The bigger the customer service orientation that the employee has, the less emotional exhaustion they feel.

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