

Antecedents and Consequences of Emotional Dissonance among Call Center Agents

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Abstract

Emotional dissonance is a strong feeling of uneasiness commonly experience by call center agents when dealing with unfriendly customers. It is known to be detrimental to the workers' emotional wellbeing, which, in turn, lead to the formation of attitudes and behaviors inimical to the employing center's success. Aimed at identifying the determinants and the consequences of emotional dissonance, a structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis was performed using the data gathered from 689 randomly selected respondents working in eight call centers in the Philippines. The findings revealed that customer unfriendliness and strategic deception contribute to emotional dissonance, which, in turn, predicts job satisfaction negatively and turnover intent positively. From the valuable insights gained from the findings, the paper suggests that to limit the negative consequences of emotional dissonance (e.g., lower job satisfaction and greater turnover intent), the employment of strategic deception in the workplace has to be discouraged or, in some cases, its requirement has to be ceased. In addition, professional trainings or interventions aimed at helping agents develop coping strategies in dealing with unfriendly customers are also recommended to limit the impact of unfriendly customer behaviors on emotional dissonance.

Keywords: Emotional Dissonance; Strategic Deception, Customer Unfriendliness, Job satisfaction, Turnover Intent

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Introduction

In service-oriented businesses, workers are expected to perform emotional labor. It refers to the process by which workers are expected to manage their feelings in accordance with organizationally defined guidelines when dealing with customers. (Morris et al, 1996) This means that employees in a service-oriented organization are required to express only positive displays of emotions in their interaction with customers. (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Gosserand and Diefendorff, 2005) To come up with the most appropriate observable emotion, employees have to undergo various cognitive processes that regulate the deliberation of positive emotions (Gosserand and Diefendorff, 2005) that sometimes include faking or suppressing negative feelings (Wegge et al, 2010), which, in turn, facilitate the formation of the emotional discomfort called emotional dissonance. (Dormann and Zapf, 2004)

Previous literature highlighted the roles of emotional dissonance in the formation of negative emotional states and burnout. (Demerouti et al, 2001)

Unfortunately, its seriousness has not been given much importance in the Philippine call centers. (Visconti, 2012) Hence, this study aims to contribute by examining the direct antecedents and consequences of emotional dissonance in the context of call centers in the Philippines. The results of the examination are expected to provide valuable insights that can help human resource managers in designing programs that will benefit call center workers and the call center industry as a whole.

The subsequent sections discuss the following topics. First, the paper will examine the current state of the call center industry in the Philippines. Following this is the literature review of emotional dissonance and its conceptualized antecedents and outcomes. The methodology of the study will then be presented, and it will be followed by the discussion of the results and limitations. Finally, the paper will be concluded and recommendations will be provided.

Background of Call Centers in the Philippines

Over the past decade, many business processes outsourcing (BPO) operations have surfaced and gained momentum in the Philippines. The cost-saving and less stringent operation requirements, in addition to a large pool of computer-literate college or university educated young Filipinos with American English communication skills, make the Philippines very attractive for BPO outsourcing. The largely American-catering industry is booming that it is expected to generate \$40 billion in revenues, 7.6 million jobs, and cover 15 percent of the total global outsourcing market by the end of 2022. (Chanco, 2017)

The most popular of the BPOs to gain employment are call centers, and their popularity is partly attributed to the fact that the workforce are lured by wages higher than the legislated minimum wage and other financial incentives. (Hechanova, 2013) However, call centers have also been known to have a variety of grave challenges, two of which are related to employee

turnover and wellbeing. (Montecillo, 2012) Turnover rates in call centers have been recorded to reach 70 percent, mostly from voluntary resignation. With regards to well-being, smoking, drinking, excessive eating and lack of exercise habits are reported to be prevalent among call center workers. One report went even further by saying that call center workers are more likely to engage in high risk behaviors such as unprotected sex with multiple partners and alcohol use during sex. (Melgar et al, 2009) In the same report, call center workers were also described as psychologically and physiologically stressed.

Literature Review

1. Concepts, Empirical Studies, and Hypotheses

Emotional dissonance is a state of discomfort, unease, tension, or psychological strain due to discrepancies between felt and expressed emotions. The tension brought by emotional dissonance is associated with emotional exhaustion – a core component of burnout and closely resembles



traditional stress reactions such as fatigue, job-related depression, psychosomatic complaints, and anxiety.

In general, many of the antecedents of emotional dissonance are related to performing job tasks under emotional labor conditions. The general findings are that negative emotions develop when workers encounter customer-related stressors (e.g., disproportionate customer expectations, customer verbal aggression, disliked customers, and ambiguous customer expectations) . It follows that the discrepancy between what the workers really feel as a natural response to the customer's unfriendly behavior and the organizationally predefined emotions lead to emotional dissonance. Hence, hypothesis 1 is:

H1: Customer unfriendliness positively affects emotional dissonance.

Strategic deception can be described as a kind of work strategy in which employees are asked to assume different identities, and perform other explicit deception such as the script of outright lying when customers ask personal questions such as names, nationalities, and locations. Such strategy

is common in call centers across Asia, in India and the Philippines in particular, that cater English speaking customers based in their home countries (e.g. Australia and USA). Strategic deception is originally proposed in the current study to also affect emotional dissonance as it is thought to cause emotional discomfort when the workers perform strategic deception while engaged in surface acting. Therefore, the second hypothesis of the current study is:

H2: Strategic deception is positively affects emotional dissonance.

Job satisfaction refers to the degree to which people like their jobs resulting from positive valuation of the job. In the current study, job satisfaction is hypothesized to be negatively influenced by emotional dissonance following the concept that workers experiencing discomforts due to the discrepancy of what they feel and what they actually do as required by the organization develop low levels of job satisfaction. In addition, as job satisfaction is known to be one of the most important predictors of turnover

intent, it is also hypothesized to mediate the positive relationship between emotional dissonance and turnover intent. The hypotheses in this segment are:

H3a: Job satisfaction is affected negatively by emotional dissonance.

H3b: Job satisfaction affects turnover intent negatively.

H3c: Job satisfaction mediates the positive relationship between emotional dissonance and turnover intent.

Tett & Meyer (1993) defined turnover intention as “a conscious and deliberate willfulness to leave the organization” (p. 262). Several empirical studies also suggested that turnover intent is the most direct or the most important predictor of voluntary turnover [e.g., 20, 21], which is costly and associated with many negative implications at work. In the current study, turnover intent is hypothesized to

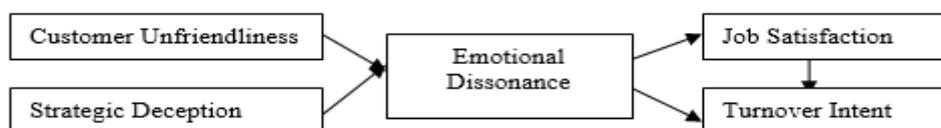
be one of negative outcomes of emotional dissonance following the conceptualization that workers who have experienced negative emotions associated with dissonance will develop higher levels of turnover intent. Specifically, the hypothesis is:

H4: Turnover intent is positively affected by emotional dissonance.

2. Conceptual Framework

As seen in Figure 1, the conceptualized relationships are a multi-stage structural model. It starts with customer-unfriendliness and strategic deception as positive antecedents of emotional dissonance, which in turn leads to reduced job satisfaction and increased turnover intent. Job satisfaction also serves as a mediator of the positive effect of emotional dissonance on turnover intent.

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework of the Hypothesized Relationships





Methodology

1. Sample and Data Collection

Using simple random sampling, 1,000 survey questionnaires were randomly distributed to call center agents working in eight call centers in Cagayan de Oro City, Davao City, and Cebu City, Philippines. The contents of the self-administered questionnaire were mostly items adapted from previous studies to measure strategic deception, customer unfriendliness, emotional dissonance, job satisfaction, turnover intent, and other related constructs. Prior to their distribution, the questionnaires had been scrutinized to ensure the ethical appropriateness of its contents, and then obtained approval from the committee members of the *Institutional Review Board of Institute for Population and Social Research (IPSR-IRB), Mahidol University*.

From the 1,000 distributed questionnaires, 715 were collected; however, only 689 were deemed usable due to extreme cases of missing data. The response rate was just under 70% – the rate that is considered very good [22]. Of the respondents, 44.7% were

men and 55.3% were women. Most of the respondents were aged from 25 to 29 (43.4%), and a considerable number were aged below 25 (35.3%). The remaining respondents were aged 30 to 34 (13.5%), 35 to 39 (4.6%), 40 to 44 (2.6%), 45 to 49 (.3%), and 50 or over (.3%). Most were new workers, with 64.3% and 29.5% reporting that their job tenures were two years or below and 3 to 5 years, respectively.

2. Measures

In the questionnaire, four of the five Likert-type measures (i.e., scales for customer unfriendliness, emotional dissonance, job satisfaction, and turnover intent) were adapted from established reliable scales, with all their reliability coefficients fulfilling the recommended value of .70. *Customer unfriendliness* was measured through 3-item scale adapted from Walsh (2011). The three items have a construct reliability of .78. *Emotional Dissonance* was measured using the 4-item Frankfurt Emotional Work Scale-E (FEWS-E). In the current study, the construct reliability of the scale is .83. *Job satisfaction* was measured using 3-item Likert-type scale

adapted from job satisfaction questionnaire formulated by Brayfield and Rothe (1951). The items in the scale have a construct reliability of .84. To measure *turnover intent*, 5-item scale used by Wayne, Shore, and Liden (1997) were adapted. The construct reliability of the scale is .92.

Responses to the items for the constructs job satisfaction and turnover intent were recorded on a 7-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree); while responses to the items for customer unfriendliness and emotional dissonance were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (often).

The scale for strategic deception was originally developed based on the findings of some qualitative studies [e.g., 18, 19]. Eight items pooled from research findings of Patwardan et al. (2009) and Milawati (2011), and pre-tested among 74 respondents were analysed using exploratory factor analysis (EFA) technique. The resulting 4-item scale was then used in the current study. It has a reliability alpha of .81.

3. Data Analysis

Data analysis were divided into two phases: 1) testing the measurement theory through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and 2) testing the structural theory. The phases are composed of six stages that cover all the structural equation modelling (SEM) process.

In CFA, necessary steps were taken to come up with an acceptable model fit. For the model fit to be considered good, Chi-Square (χ^2) is preferably small and insignificant; the Standardized Root Mean Residual (SRMR) and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) should be at most .08; and the Comparative Fit Index should be at least .90 [27] RMSEA that is not over .10 can also be considered acceptable [28]. The fit indices in Table 1 shows figures that support the fit acceptability of the measurement model.

Through AMOS (version 22), the structural relationships were established using the constructs and their respective items validated in the CFA section. The resulting values in the fit indices indicated that the fit of the structural model worsened only very slightly with



respect to the values seen in the model fit indices of the measurement model, and all the values were still within acceptable levels. In addition, all of the hypothesized directions of the

relationships were supported. Hence, the structural model has fulfilled all validity concerns, implying its usability for hypotheses testing.

Table 1 Fit Indices comparison of the original measurement model, modified measurement models, and the structural model

Model	χ^2	df	Sig.	CFI	PCFI	SRMR	RMSEA
Measurement Model	648	142	.00	.93	.77	.07	.05
Structural Model	717	146	.00	.92	.76	.08	.08

Results

The hypotheses testing results provide significant evidence on the existence of multi-stage causal relationships among the variables in the proposed model. Following the conventional guideline of interpreting effect sizes of .02, .15, and .35 as small, medium, and large, respectively; it can be said that both customer unfriendliness ($\beta = .25, p < .001$) and strategic deception ($\beta = .27, p < .001$) have medium effects on emotional dissonance. Hence, H1 and H2 were supported. With regards to the outcomes, H3a and H4 were also

supported as emotional dissonance was found to negatively affect job satisfaction ($\beta = -.20, p < .001$) and positively affect turnover intent ($\beta = .32, p < .001$). In addition, H3b, which hypothesized the negative effect of job satisfaction on turnover intent, was also supported ($\beta = -.37, p < .001$).

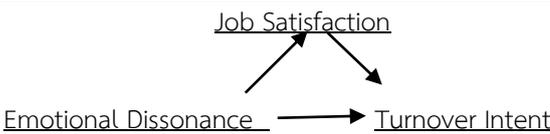
The mediation hypothesis (H3c) was tested using Bootstrapping technique in AMOS. The mediation test result showed that both the indirect effect (the product of multiplying the effect of emotional dissonance on job satisfaction by the effect of job satisfaction on turnover intent) and the total effect (the sum of

the direct effect and indirect effect) were both significant, suggesting the presence of partial mediation; hence, supporting H3c.

Overall, the findings imply that higher levels of emotional dissonance can be experience by call center agents in the Philippines when they are more exposed to customers' unfriendly behaviours and perform more strategic

deception to gain their customers' trust and cooperation. As consequence, job satisfaction reduces, while turnover intent increases. In addition, job satisfaction was also found to be both an antecedent of turnover intent and a mediator of the effect of emotional dissonance on turnover intent. Table 2 presents the results of the hypotheses testing.

Table 2 Hypotheses Testing Results

Hypothesized Relationship	β		
	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect
Customer Unfriendliness → Emotional Dissonance	.25***		
Strategic Deception → Emotional Dissonance	.27***		
Emotional Dissonance → Job Satisfaction	-.20***		
Job Satisfaction → Turnover Intent	-.37***		
	.32***	.07***	.39***

Note. **p* < .05. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001

Discussions

The results revealed that Filipino call center agents who encounter more unfriendly customers and constantly engage in strategic deception experience stronger emotional dissonance. Although the finding with regards to the effect of

unfriendly customer on emotional dissonance is a repetition of the findings of earlier studies conducted in the West (e.g., Europe, United States, and Canada) [14,17], the results pertaining to strategic deception-emotional dissonance causal



relationship is an original finding of the current study. Hence, the study provides the first empirical proof that, in addition to customer behaviours, emotional dissonance experienced by call center workers in the Philippines can also be caused by performing strategic deception.

With regards to the consequences, both job satisfaction and turnover intent were found to be affected by emotional dissonance, aligned with the earlier findings [7, 8]. More specifically, job satisfaction is negatively affected, while turnover intent is positively affected. In addition, job satisfaction is also confirmed to be mediator of the effect of the dissonance on turnover intent.

In previous studies, greater job satisfaction is associated with higher levels of work commitment, higher productivity, and other desirable consequences. In contrast, higher turnover intent is associated with many negative implications at work that includes absenteeism, low organizational commitment, and, even worse, actual turnover. Therefore, the findings that they are both affected by emotional

dissonance in a harmful manner, imply that the dissonance has a variety of negative effects not only to the workers, but also to the organization.

In the Philippines, turnover rate is unusually high, with some centers reaching up to 70 percent. As presumed contributors to the reported turnover, based on earlier findings that turnover intent and job satisfaction are major determinants of actual turnover, it can be inferred that both job satisfaction and turnover intent of call center employees in the Philippines are not in their desirable levels.

Conclusions, Implications, and Limitations

Studies on emotional dissonance in the past were mainly focused on the attitudes and behaviors of customers as the triggering antecedents. The finding in the current study that strategic deception also affects emotional dissonance is a theoretical contribution that may be further explored in the future to enhance our understanding about the variable. Furthermore, strategic deception may also be included in turnover intent and job satisfaction theoretical models in the future

as it may also help explain their variances and provide additional understanding.

The findings also have practical implications. The results confirm that emotional dissonance has a negative effect on job satisfaction and positive effect on turnover intent, aligned with the findings found in studies conducted in the United states and Europe [e.g., 20, 21] . As job satisfaction and turnover intent are known to be antecedents of actual turnover, it is, therefore, inferred that emotional dissonance has an important indirect role in the high turnover rates in Philippine call centers. Hence, human resources managers can use the findings as bases for designing organizational practices aimed at reducing the chance of actual turnover by lowering emotional dissonance to maintain job satisfaction and reduce intent to quit.

As implied from the findings, measures that can discourage workers from utilizing strategic deception and can reduce the impact of customer unfriendliness on the workers' emotions can be implemented to reduce emotional dissonance. Pertaining to strategic deception, which is mainly employed so that workers may appear more attractive to customers, call centers

who are more concerned about their employees' wellbeing over customer satisfaction could find other pulling variables that can also attract customers, such as improved service quality and knowledge ability of the product or service they represent. To do these, the employing centers have to focus on service improvement and knowledge-oriented educational programs or trainings. With regards to customer unfriendliness, which is unavoidable and beyond control, professional interventions or seminars that are aimed at helping workers develop coping strategies that can be helpful in limiting the impact of unfriendly customers to their emotional constructs can also be implemented.

Furthermore, as job satisfaction was confirmed to partially mediate the positive effect of emotional dissonance on turnover intent, increasing job satisfaction by focusing on improving the quality of some known job satisfaction antecedents such as supervisory behaviours and task variables may also help in mitigating the impact of emotional dissonance on turnover intent.

The paper also has several limitations. First, the study only utilized data from eight



call centers in three cities in the Philippines. Hence, it is recommended that a similar study in the future be conducted in Metro Manila, where the majority of call centers are located, and other places throughout the country so that the whole call center industry in the Philippines will be thoroughly represented. A nationwide research will also add more credence to the generalizability of the results. Second, the current study utilized cross-sectional

data; hence, its predictive values are somewhat flawed. Future studies may improve this study by utilizing longitudinal approach. And lastly, the inclusion of strategic deception in the model is original. It is, therefore, advised to exercise prudence in interpreting its predictive value on emotional dissonance. A further investigation or confirmatory study will strengthen its position as emotional dissonance antecedent.

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