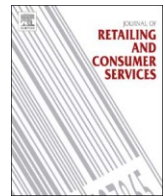




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Employee display of burnout in the service encounter and its impact on customer satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

This study examines if employee display of burnout symptoms in service encounters has an impact on customer satisfaction. An experimental approach was used in which the employee's display of burnout (absent vs. present) and the service performance level (low vs. high) were the manipulated factors. The results show that employee display of burnout had a negative impact on customer satisfaction, that this effect was mediated by customers' appraisals of the employee's emotional state, and that the effect was stronger under the condition of low service performance.

1. Introduction

Work comprising face-to-face encounters with customers is challenging, because it involves balancing a complex set of demands from co-workers, managers, and customers. At the same time, many employees who deal with customers are poorly paid, undertrained, and sometimes abused by customers (Chen and Kao, 2012; Zemke and Anderson, 1990). It is not surprising, then, that customer contact employees run the risk of job burnout (Cho et al., 2013; Cordes and Dougherty, 1993; Lings et al., 2014; Singh et al., 1994; Singh, 2000; Yagil, 2006; Yavas et al., 2013).

The toxic consequences of burnout, a negatively charged state of exhaustion and emotional depletion (Grandey et al., 2012), are well-documented at the individual employee level. They include (a) mental and physical health problems such as depression, anxiety, distress, decreased self-esteem, fatigue, and insomnia (Chen and Kao, 2012; Cordes and Dougherty, 1993; Kristensen et al., 2005; Maslach et al., 2001; Schaufeli et al., 2008); (b) deterioration of social and family relationships (Cordes and Dougherty, 1993; Maslach et al., 2001); and (c) dysfunctional outcomes in the individual's relation to the employer, such as lower organizational commitment, more absenteeism, reduced job satisfaction, intentions to leave, and attenuated job performance (Babakus et al., 1999; Chen and Kao, 2012; Cho et al., 2013; Cordes and Dougherty, 1993; Deery et al., 2002; Han et al., 2016; Karl and Peluchette, 2006; Kristensen et al., 2005; Low et al., 2001; Maslach et al., 2001; Schaufeli et al., 2008; Singh, 2000; Singh et al., 1994; Taris, 2006).

Given such consequences, it is unlikely that employees with high

levels of burnout would be able to produce a positive experience for the customers with whom they interact. Some existing studies suggest that this is indeed the case, thus implying that employee burnout has implications not only from a human relations perspective but also from a marketing perspective in which the customer's reactions are in focus. For example, Singh (2000) found a negative association between service employee burnout and performance quality, a dependent variable that included some customer-related aspects. Yagil (2012), who examined dyads of first-line service employees and customers, identified a negative association between service employee burnout and customer satisfaction. Similar results have also been obtained for health care employees and patients (Argentero et al., 2008; Garman et al., 2002). It should be noted, however, that these studies were based on (a) employees' self-ratings of burnout, (b) assessments of the burnout-customer evaluation association in aggregated terms (i.e., the aggregated history of employee-customer interactions), and (c) questionnaire data without a clear time asymmetry between cause and effect variables.

In the present study, we apply a different perspective to the link between employee burnout and customer reactions. First, given that burnout is a variable that can take on values ranging from low to high, we assume that contemporary customers are more likely to encounter employees with relatively mild levels of burnout rather than employees with burnout at such critical levels that they would require treatment and even hospitalization. Second, we assume that burnout symptoms at the relatively mild level are likely to "leak" in service encounters (i.e., clues about the employee's state are transmitted to the customer through employee behaviors), and that such leaks influence customers'

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information processing activities so that overall evaluations are affected. Focus here is on customer satisfaction as the main dependent variable, because it has become a key construct for many firms, and it has been shown to positively affect many firm performance-related variables (Luo and Homburg, 2007; Vargo et al., 2007). Third, the present study is an attempt to focus on the potential for an impact of the employee's display of burnout symptoms per se on customer satisfaction, and we examine this in an experimental setting allowing for (1) a time asymmetry between display of burnout symptoms and customer satisfaction and (2) control of other factors.

The specific purpose of this study, then, is to examine – in a service encounter context – if employee display of burnout symptoms has an impact on customer satisfaction. Given that humans in general are sensitive to other humans' emotional states (and given that this sensitivity is a causally potent factor with respect to overall evaluations), we expect a negative association between employee display of burnout symptoms and customer satisfaction. We also expect that the association is mediated by customers' appraisals of the employee's emotional state, and that it is moderated by the level of service provided by the employee. Our moderation hypothesis is based on a view of the customer as relatively egoistic; we assume that employee burnout symptoms are likely to have a reduced negative impact on customer satisfaction when service performance is at a high as opposed to a low level. The reason is that a high performance level would make it more likely that the customer gets what was expected, and this would overshadow concerns about the employee's negatively charged state and attenuate its causal potency. In methodological terms, we employed a between-subjects experimental design comprising a retail setting (a shoe store) in which employee display of burnout (absent vs. present) and the service level (low vs. high) were the manipulated factors. Customer satisfaction was the dependent variable.

An assessment along these lines of the employee burnout-customer satisfaction link contributes to previous researchers' effort to build theories regarding employee behaviors and characteristics with an impact on customer satisfaction (e.g., Bitner et al., 1990; Delcourt et al., 2013; Hartline and Jones, 1996; Keh et al., 2013; Smith et al., 1999; Söderlund and Colliander, 2015; Winsted, 2000), because the influence of employee display of burnout symptoms on customer satisfaction has hitherto not been examined. Moreover, many researchers acknowledge that service encounters are emotion-inducing and that emotion-related variables mediate the customer's evaluations of an offer (e.g., Collishaw et al., 2008; Doucet, 2004; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006; Mattila and Enz, 2002; Price et al., 1995a; Sherman et al., 1997; Söderlund and Rosengren, 2008; Yoo et al., 1998; Wirtz and Bateson, 1999). So far, however, researchers have not examined such mediating aspects in the context of employee display of burnout symptoms. The present study should therefore be seen as an attempt to contribute not only to research on employee burnout and customer satisfaction, but also to a general stream of research acknowledging that emotional variables mediate customers' reactions to an offer. In addition, research on burnout has resulted in copious models of antecedents of employee burnout (e.g., Babakus et al., 1999; Cordes and Dougherty, 1993; Heuven and Bakker, 2003; Hsieh and Hsieh, 2003; Leiter and Maslach, 2001; Low et al., 2001; Maslach et al., 2001; Schaufeli et al., 2008; Yagil, 2006). Incidentally, customer-related variables, such as customers' negative behaviors, appear as antecedents to burnout in some models (e.g., Ben-Zur and Yagil, 2005; Deery et al., 2002; Yagil et al., 2008). Yet what we address in this study is customer-related *consequences* of employee burnout, which is a less well-researched area.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Overview of the framework

The context for our assessment of employee display of burnout symptoms and its impact on customer satisfaction is the service

encounter; that is to say, the dyadic interaction between a service employee and a customer (Bitner et al., 1990; Surprenant and Solomon, 1987). Given that this interaction is the service from the customer's point of view, the interaction is an essential determination of customer satisfaction (Bitner et al., 1990). Consequently, copious studies have generated a long list of specific service employee behaviors in the service encounter with an impact on customer satisfaction (e.g., Bitner et al., 1990; Smith et al., 1999; Winsted, 2000). Attempts to specify the conditions for this link (i.e., when it is weak and strong) have been made in previous research and, in tune with Price et al. (1995b), we assume that the link will be stronger given that the interaction has a relative long duration, has affective content, and involves relatively close proximity between the employee and the customer. In our attempt to add satisfaction-inducing behaviors of the employee to the list produced by previous authors, and given a service encounter with non-negligible levels of duration, affect, and proximity, we assume that employee burnout symptoms are likely to leak in service encounters with customers, and that customers are motivated to use such symptoms as clues for appraisals of the employee's overall emotional state. We also assume that this appraisal affects customers' overall evaluations (such as customer satisfaction) by means of emotional contagion and affect infusion, in such a way that that employee display of burnout symptoms has a negative impact on customer satisfaction. Yet we assume that this negative impact is moderated by the level of performance by the employee; we expect a stronger negative effect when the employee is performing at a low as opposed to a high level.

2.2. Burnout and its facets

Burnout, which has been described as “a modern disease” (Golembiewski et al., 1998), “a particular type of job stress” (Cordes and Dougherty, 1993), “a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job” (Maslach et al., 2001), and “a state of mental weariness” (Schaufeli et al., 2008), is typically conceived of as a psychological syndrome comprising three facets.

The first facet is *emotional exhaustion*: feelings of being over-extended, depleted of energy, and drained of sensation. Fatigue, often co-existing with frustration and tension, is a key word for this facet. In addition, “a flat battery” is sometimes used as a metaphor. The second facet is *depersonalization*, defined in terms of a tendency to de-individualize and dehumanize others – particularly clients, who are treated as objects rather than people. This facet also comprises a negative, callous, or excessively detached response to various aspects of the job. The third facet is *reduced personal accomplishment*, which is characterized by attributions of inefficacy, reduced motivation, and low self-esteem (Argentero et al., 2008; Babakus et al., 1999; Cordes and Dougherty, 1993; Hsieh and Hsieh, 2003; Lee and Ashforth, 1990; Maslach et al., 2001; Singh et al., 1994). It should be noted that some researchers question if the third facet is a part of the burnout construct; it has been suggested that emotional exhaustion and depersonalization represent the most prominent burnout dimensions (Cox et al., 2005; Kristensen et al., 2005; Schaufeli et al., 2008), and that emotional exhaustion is really the core of burnout (Cho et al., 2013; Cox et al., 2005; Demerouti et al., 2001; Garman et al., 2002; Grandey et al., 2012; Lings et al., 2014; Maslach et al., 2001). Indeed, in some recent research, emotional exhaustion is seen as the cause of depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment (Lings et al., 2014).

Moreover, burnout is generally conceptualized (and operationalized) in continuous terms, ranging from “low” to “high” for each facet, and thus not as a dichotomy. At the same time, however, models have been developed allowing for the classification of a specific individual into one of several categories reflecting different levels of overall burnout. The phase model of burnout, for example, contains eight phases (Golembiewski et al., 1998). As already noticed, in this paper we focus on the effects of a relatively mild level of employee burnout.

2.3. Burnout symptoms as emotional display behavior

Previous research suggests that burnout is communication-inducing, in the sense that individuals suffering from burnout may share their symptoms with colleagues (Bakker et al., 2007). It is conceivable that customers may hear such conversations and even that employees subject to burnout explicitly talk about how they feel with customers with whom they interact. In this study, however, we are interested in what we think is the more common case: the employee's transmission of clues – in terms of facial expressions, body language, tone of voice, and utterances – containing indirect information about the employee's emotional state. Such clues are referred to as emotional display behaviors (Sutton and Rafaeli, 1988). In general, despite the fact that there are many ways for an individual to regulate what emotions he or she displays in a social situation (Côté, 2005), we assume that burnout, a negatively-charged state of mind, is relatively difficult to hide. It is thus assumed here that clues about burnout symptoms are likely to leak from the employee in his or her customer contacts.

2.4. Employee display of burnout symptoms and the customer's appraisal

An important part of human interaction comprises the identification of other individuals' emotional states. The main reason is that to facilitate social interaction, people are motivated to understand each other's emotions (Ickes, 1993); people are hardwired to pick up emotional signals from others and to rely on them to guide their own behavior (Côté, 2005). Here, we view the individual's assessment of another person's emotional state as an appraisal (cf. Arnold and Landry, 1999; Lazarus, 1982; Nyer, 1997): an immediate, well-nigh automatic response that serves to make the relationship between the individual and the environment manageable. A receiver of signals from a sender can make such appraisals in terms of many specific emotional states (e.g., "the sender is irritated", "the sender is angry", and "the sender is joyful"), yet we expect that a general unhappy-happy dimension is particularly likely to be used for appraisals (Russell, 2003). We also expect that the sender's state in terms of this dimension is difficult to regulate in terms of faking a state of mind which is not actually felt (Côté, 2005). Indeed, Elfenbein and Ambady (2002) have shown that receivers' accuracy in identifying the sender's emotional state in the happiness dimension is greater than for other states, such as anger, fear, and surprise.

In the case of employee display of burnout symptoms, then, we expect that burnout symptoms are leaking in a service encounter and that these leaks serve as clues for the customer's appraisal of the employee's emotional state. More specifically, we assume that the employee's display of burnout symptoms is negatively associated with the customer's appraisal of the employee as happy.

2.5. The customer's appraisal and customer satisfaction

Given a negative association between the employee's display of burnout symptoms and the customer's appraisal of the employee's emotional state (on an unhappy-happy continuum), we expect that employee display of burnout results in customer perceptions that the employee is relatively unhappy. Then, by the mechanisms of emotional contagion and affect infusion, we expect a negative impact on customer satisfaction. This is the basis for the first hypothesis to be presented below.

First, it is assumed that the customer's appraisal has a valence-congruent impact on the customer's own emotions. This is consonant with the notion of emotional contagion; emotions are contagious in social situations, in the sense that one person is easily "catching" the emotion displayed by another person with whom s/he interacts (Hatfield et al., 1992; Hess et al., 1998, 1990; Neumann and Strack, 2000; Pugh, 2001). Previous empirical research in a service context

provides support for this, in the sense that the customer's appraisal of the employee's emotional state has been shown to be positively associated with the customer's own positive emotions and negatively associated with the customer's own negative emotions (Söderlund and Rosengren, 2004, 2007, 2008). The perceived relatively unhappy state of the burnout displaying employee is thus assumed to increase the customer's own negative emotions.

Next, it is assumed that the resulting customer emotions inform evaluations in a valence-congruent way. This impact of emotions on evaluations has been referred to as affect infusion (Forgas, 1995; Forgas and George, 2001; Pham, 2004). In our display of burnout case, we expect that the increased level of negative customer emotions would have a negative impact on both the customer's evaluation of the employee and the customer's overall evaluations of the firm in which the employee works (i.e., customer satisfaction). This type of emotional impact on customer satisfaction has been shown in several empirical studies (Doucet, 2004; Mano and Oliver, 1993; Mattila and Enz, 2002; Oliver, 1993; Wirtz and Bateson, 1999).

In sum, then, we expect that the employee's display of burnout symptoms in a service encounter results in the customer's appraisal that the employee is relatively unhappy, that this increases the customer's own negative emotions, and that these emotions have a negative impact on the customer's overall satisfaction. We thus hypothesize the following:

H1: Employee display of burnout symptoms in a service encounter is negatively associated with customer satisfaction.

2.6. The level of service performance as a moderating factor

Service performance can be viewed as comprising two different dimensions: (1) the technical dimension ("what you get") in terms of what the service comprises in terms of outcomes for the customer, and (2) the functional dimension ("how you get it"), which is concerned with how the process itself functions (Grönroos, 1998, 2001). The technical dimension refers to the core of the service, while the functional dimension refers to the interpersonal, relational part of the service process (Doucet, 2004; Iacobucci and Ostrom, 1996). Examples of good service performance in the technical dimension is providing the customer with rich information before a decision, offering several alternatives, and adapting the offer to the customer's needs; examples of good service performance in the functional dimension is friendliness, courtesy, and display of positive emotions.

With this view of service performance, employee display of burnout symptoms can be seen as an expression of relatively poor performance in terms of the functional dimension. This view appears to be consistent with the view in firms demanding employees to conceal negative emotional states (often referred to as "emotional labor"), because their view is that good service requires display of positive emotions (Hochschild, 1983). However, given that functional and technical service represent different dimensions, the performance levels in the two dimensions can reach both the same and different levels. In other words, employee display of burnout (poor performance in the functional dimension) may occur together with both poor and good performance in the technical dimension. Therefore, the technical dimension can be seen as a context factor in which functional performance takes place. In the present study, we examine if service performance in the technical dimension (poor vs. good) moderates the impact of display of burnout symptoms on customer satisfaction.

We assume that customers in general expect that the service level in an encounter would be good rather than poor (cf. Vargo et al., 2007). In other words, good service is more congruent with customers' expectations than poor service. Moreover, given that a high level of congruency reduces the customer's need to process information (Goodstein, 1993; Lee and Schumann, 2004), we expect that performance at a high technical level reduces the motivation for attending to clues related to

the employee – such as the employee's emotional state. The case of low technical performance, however, is assumed to be different. This case, thus representing a higher level of incongruity, is assumed to cause disturbances in the cognitive system, and thereby it calls for more information processing to resolve the incongruity (Lee and Schumann, 2004; Törn, 2009). This relatively more extensive processing of information, we expect, would make the customer more attentive to clues related to the employee's emotional state and also make it more likely that the customer uses such clues in forming an overall evaluation of the service experience. Doucet (2004) provides indirect empirical support for this assumption; she found that service provider hostility had a stronger impact on customer perceived quality when service performance was low rather than high. Similarly, Landy and Sigall (1974) found that if a worker's output is perceived to be acceptable, the worker's personal characteristics are less likely to influence evaluations of that work than when the quality of the work is relatively poor.

The assumed net result with regard to the negative employee display of burnout-customer satisfaction association (i.e., Hypothesis 1), then, is that the level of technical performance moderates the association. More specifically, under the condition of low technical performance, we expect that employee display of burnout symptoms has a stronger impact on customer satisfaction in relation to the condition of a high level of technical performance. We thus hypothesize the following:

H2. : The level of the employee's technical service performance moderates the impact of the employee's display of burnout symptoms on customer satisfaction.

3. Research method

3.1. Research design

A 2×2 between-subjects experimental design was used to assess the hypotheses. The two factors were the employee level of burnout display (absent vs. present) and technical service performance level (low vs. high). The experimental stimuli consisted of role-play scenarios; the participants were asked to assume the role of a customer who interacted with an employee in a service encounter. The scenarios were included in a questionnaire packet, which contained measures of the constructs in the hypotheses. One main advantage of an experiment is that treatments are allocated to participants before effects are measured, thus establishing a time asymmetry between cause and effect variables. We explicitly mention this here, because there is no discussion of this crucial aspect in the few existing (and non-experimental) studies of the association between employee burnout and customers' overall evaluations (Argentero et al., 2008; Dormann and Kaiser, 2002; Garman et al., 2002; Leiter et al., 1998; Singh, 2000; Yagil, 2006).

3.2. Stimuli

We used a role-play scenario approach of the type that appears frequently in research on service encounters (e.g., Bitner, 1990; Karande et al., 2007; Söderlund and Rosengren, 2008). Such scenarios allow for a systematic manipulation of variables and contexts that cannot be easily manipulated in a field setting. In our case, we decided that the scenario should deal with a visit to a shoe store in which a customer interacts with a female store employee. This setting was assumed to comprise a service encounter with non-negligible levels of duration, affect, and proximity between an employee and a customer, and thus to represent a setting in which employee behavior is likely to have an impact on customer satisfaction (cf. Price et al., 1995b). We developed one basic narrative about this interaction, and then we created four variations to manipulate the two factors. The appendix

contains the four scenario versions.

For the *display of burnout symptoms* manipulation, we focused on the emotional exhaustion aspect and the depersonalization aspect, because it has been questioned if reduced personal accomplishment is a part of the burnout construct (Cox et al., 2005; Demerouti et al., 2001; Kristensen et al., 2005; Schaufeli et al., 2008). The selection of the same two aspects is at hand in burnout studies by Heuven and Bakker (2003), Montgomery et al. (2006), Singh (2000) and Yagil (2006). It can also be noted that Leiter et al. (1998) found that the reduced personal accomplishment facet was unrelated to patient satisfaction. With this in mind, we made the following four changes (displayed in bold in the appendix) to the absence of display of burnout symptoms version of the scenario text to create a version in which such display was present: (1) “She looks energetic” was replaced by “She looks tired”; (2) “I’ll talk to you later, please, I am helping this customer here. I’ll come back to you in a minute, I promise!”, says the sales person happily to her colleague” was replaced by “No, not now, I am trying to take care of some feet here”, says the sales person irritably to her colleague”; (3) “I am sorry”, she says patiently” was replaced with “I am sorry”, she says impatiently”; and (4) “The sales person looks at you and waits for your decision” was replaced by “The sales person looks away from you and waits for your decision”. We assumed that (1) and (3) would be expressions of the emotional exhaustion facet of burnout, and that (2) and (4) would be expressions of the depersonalization facet.

Turning to the *service performance level* manipulation, and as stated in our conceptual framework, our focus is the service level in terms of the technical dimension (Doucet, 2004; Grönroos, 1998, 2001; Iacobucci and Ostrom, 1996). For the manipulation of a relatively low level of performance in this sense, we used a scenario version with limited assistance from the sales person in terms of (1) no particular help when the customer was in the process of choosing between shoes and (2) no particular help when one pair of shoes was not in stock. For the manipulation of a relatively high level of service performance, we added more assistance from the sales person (displayed in italics in the appendix).

We assessed the manipulations with a separate sample ($n = 40$), because we wanted to avoid problems associated with employing manipulation check items within the frame of the main experiment (cf. Kidd, 1976; Perdue and Summers, 1986). The participants for this assessment, which we recruited from a class of undergraduates, were randomly allocated to one of the four scenario versions. Then, the participants were asked to respond to three statements assumed to tap into the employee's level of burnout (“The sales person's batteries appear to be flat”, “The sales person is a cold person”, and “The sales person is frustrated”). These items were scored on a scale ranging from 1 (do not agree at all) to 10 (agree completely), and the average of these items was our variable to check the display of burnout symptoms manipulation. The participants were also asked to respond to three statements regarding the service performance level (“The sales person provided me with good information for my choice”, “The sales person allowed me to make several choices”, and “The sales person offered me control of the purchase situation”), scored on a scale ranging from 1 (do not agree at all) to 10 (agree completely). The average of these items represented our check of the technical performance manipulation. An ANOVA revealed that the perceptions of employee burnout reached a higher level in the display of burnout symptoms scenario groups ($M = 7.08$) than in the groups for which there was no display of burnout symptoms ($M = 2.63$). This difference was significant ($F = 49.49, p < .01$). Moreover, the perceived service level reached a higher level ($M = 8.09$) in the groups who received the high service performance scenarios compared to the groups receiving the low service performance scenarios ($M = 5.45$). This difference was significant, too ($F = 44.23, p < .01$). The manipulations, then, behaved as intended, and therefore the same four scenario versions were used for the main experiment.

3.3. Participants for the main experiment and procedure

We recruited the participants ($n = 196$) from courses in business administration for undergraduates and decision makers in firms and allocated them randomly to one of the four scenario versions. The sample was thus a convenience sample, based on the argument that such samples are legitimate for theory-testing purposes (Calder et al., 1982). Eighty-seven participants were men, 109 were women. A chi-square test revealed that there was no significant difference in the proportion of men versus women in the four treatment groups ($\chi^2 = 4.28, p = .23$). Each participant read one of the scenarios printed on paper, and was then asked to answer all the subsequent questions (in a paper-based questionnaire included in the same packet as the scenario). The questions were identical for all scenarios.

3.4. Measures

To measure *customer satisfaction*, we used the three satisfaction items employed in several national satisfaction barometers and in many studies published in academic journals (cf. Fornell, 1992; Johnson et al., 2001; Rego et al., 2013), and we adapted them to a shoe store context. These are the three items: “How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with this shoe store?” (1 = very dissatisfied, 10 = very satisfied), “To what extent does this shoe store meet your expectations?” (1 = not at all, 10 = totally), and “Imagine a shoe store that is perfect in every respect. How near or far from this ideal do you find this shoe store?” (1 = very far from, 10 = can not get any closer). Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .91, and we used the average response to the three items as a satisfaction measure.

To allow for an examination of the assumed mediating role of emotion-related variables, we asked the participants about their *appraisal of the employee's emotional state*. We used a two-item measure comprising the adjective pairs “unhappy-happy” and “she is in a bad mood-she's in a good mood”, which were scored on a 1–10 scale. The zero-order correlation between these two variables was .86 ($p < .01$), and we used the unweighted average of the responses as our analysis variable.

In addition, we used a single-item measure to capture the participants' perceptions of the scenario realism, scored on a scale ranging from 1 (very unrealistic) to 10 (very realistic). A similar approach was used by George et al. (1988) and Karande et al. (2007). In our case, the overall sample mean for the perceived realism variable ($M = 7.21$) was significantly higher ($t = 10.85, p < .01$) than the scale midpoint (i.e., 5.5), thus suggesting that the scenarios were not perceived as unrealistic by the participants. Finally, we also assessed hypothesis guessing by asking the participants to summarize what they believed was the purpose of the study. This question was followed by an open-ended response format. No participant, however, was able to guess the hypotheses in the present experiment.

4. Analysis and results

4.1. Testing the hypotheses

The customer satisfaction means for the four treatment groups are presented in Table 1. To test the hypotheses, we employed a two-way ANOVA with employee display of burnout symptoms (absent vs.

Table 1
Customer satisfaction means.

		Employee display of burnout symptoms	
		Absent	Present
Service performance level	High	8.07	7.32
	Low	6.54	4.70

present) and service level (low vs. high) as the factors. Customer satisfaction served as the dependent variable. Although some authors argue that a fixed level of significance is questionable (Preece, 1990), we use the classical 5% level suggested by Fisher (1926).

The main effect of employee display of burnout symptoms was significant ($F = 35.23, p < .01$). Table 1 shows that customer satisfaction – in both performance conditions – was reduced when the employee displayed burnout symptoms. H1 was thus supported. The main effect of the service performance level was significant ($F = 77.72, p < .01$); as can be expected, customer satisfaction was higher under the conditions of high as opposed to low service performance. The interaction was also significant ($F = 4.74, p < .05$). Given display of employee burnout symptoms, Table 1 shows that the reduction in customer satisfaction was larger under the condition of low service performance as opposed to high service performance, thus providing support for H2.

4.2. Mediation assessment

Our conceptual reasoning implies that the association between employee display of burnout symptoms and customer satisfaction is mediated by the customer's appraisal of the employee's emotional state. To examine this, we used the Preacher and Hayes bootstrap approach for mediation analysis (cf. Preacher et al., 2007; Zhao et al., 2010). The independent variable was employee display of burnout symptoms (scored as 1 if absent and 2 if present), the appraisal variable was the mediation variable, and customer satisfaction was the dependent variable. The zero-order correlations between the variables were as follows: $r = -.77$ ($p < .01$) for the display-appraisal association, $r = .59$ ($p < .01$) for the appraisal-satisfaction association, and $r = -.33$ ($p < .01$) for the display-satisfaction association. A mediation assessment with Hayes' Model 4 macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013) indicated a significant indirect effect from the bootstrap analysis of -2.56 (5000 bootstrap samples, 95% CI limits -3.41 and -1.80), thus suggesting that the (negative) effect of employee display of burnout symptoms on customer satisfaction was mediated by the appraisal variable.

More precision, however, is obtained if the moderation hypothesis (i.e., H2) is explicitly taken into account in this type of mediation analysis. It should be noted that our conceptual assumption was that the appraisal variable would lose some of its causal potency in relation to customer satisfaction given high as opposed to low technical service performance. In other words, we are assuming that indirect effects can be conditional in terms of moderated mediation (Preacher et al., 2007). In the present case, we assessed this with Hayes' Model 14 macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013). A similar assessment appears in Auh et al. (2016). In our case, we examined if the service performance level (scored as 1 if low and 2 if high) would moderate the final link in the employee display of burnout symptoms-the customer's appraisal of the employee's emotional state-customer satisfaction chain. This analysis showed that the indirect effect of employee display of burnout symptoms was significant and negative under both service performance conditions (low service performance: -2.37 , 95% CI limits -3.18 and -1.66 ; high service performance: -1.70 , 95% CI limits -2.49 and -1.06), yet the mediation effect, .68, was significantly stronger (95% CI limits .06 and 1.29) under the condition of low service performance. Translated into zero-order correlations for the appraisal-satisfaction link, this link was stronger when service performance was low ($r = .65, p < .01$) as opposed to high ($r = .51, p < .01$).

5. Discussion

5.1. Main assumptions and findings

In a service encounter, and from the customer's point of view, we assumed that the customer is motivated to (a) be perceptive with respect to leakage of clues about the employee's emotional state (Côté, 2005; Ickes, 1993), and (b) that such clues can have a valence-

congruent impact on overall evaluations in terms of emotional contagion (Hatfield et al., 1992; Hess et al., 1998) and affect infusion (Forgas, 1995). Our results indicate that these assumptions seem reasonable in a burnout context; we found that the link between the employee's display of burnout symptoms and customer satisfaction was mediated by the customer's appraisal of the employee's emotional state. That is to say, display of burnout symptoms produced a view of the employee as relatively unhappy, and perceived unhappiness had an impact on customer satisfaction. The net result was that customer satisfaction was reduced given employee display of burnout symptoms (Hypothesis 1).

Moreover, we also assumed that the (technical) service level produced by the employee would moderate the impact on the employee's display of burnout symptoms and customer satisfaction; it was assumed that customers would be less sensitive to the employee's emotional state given a relatively high level of technical service. More specifically, our congruency theory-based assumption (cf. Lee and Schumann, 2004) was that a high level of service performance is more congruent with consumers' expectations. Therefore, this condition would foster more fluent information processing – implying a reduced motivation for customers to use clues about the employee's emotional state in arriving at satisfaction assessments. This assumption thus also seems reasonable, because our results indicate that the service level indeed moderated the impact of employee display of burnout symptoms on customer satisfaction; satisfaction was reduced under the conditions of both low and high service performance – yet the (negative) impact was stronger when performance was relatively low (Hypothesis 2).

5.2. Contributions to existing literature

The results should be seen in relation to the limited number of attempts in previous research to examine consequences of employees' burnout for customer-related overall evaluation variables. A handful of studies, however, do exist and they indicate that the association is negative (Argentero et al., 2008; Garman et al., 2002; Leiter et al., 1998; Singh, 2000; Yagil, 2006). Our results are thus consonant with such studies.

In contrast to existing studies, however, we applied what we believe is the first experimental assessment of the employee burnout-customer satisfaction link. As already mentioned, by definition, experiments are capable of establishing a time asymmetry between cause and effect variables – and we argue that the time order issue is muddled in studies such as Argentero et al. (2008), Garman et al. (2002), Singh (2000), and Yagil (2006). Moreover, in relation to existing studies of the link between employee burnout and customers' overall evaluations, our results offer a more detailed picture of the link in the sense that we examined both mediating and moderating variables.

First, we have provided evidence of mediation by emotion-related mechanisms. Our findings therefore also offer further support of a general notion of emotional mediation identified in studies of the impact of employee behavior on customers' overall evaluations (e.g., Barger and Grandey, 2006; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006; Söderlund and Rosengren, 2008). Yet our approach extends the mediation argument to comprise a burnout setting.

Second, with regards to the moderating impact of the service level, our main explanation for the relatively stronger impact of display of employee burnout symptoms under the condition of low service performance was based on congruency-based assumptions. Our findings supported this assumption, and the findings are in accord with previous research on incongruency and its impact on information processing in marketing settings (Goodstein, 1993; Lee and Schumann, 2004; Törn, 2009) and in service encounters (Doucet, 2004). It can be noted that some critical observers believe that individuals in the contemporary consumption-oriented society have become increasingly egoistic. Our moderation-related findings may offer some support for

this critical view, in the sense that they indicate that customers seem to be relatively less sensitive to problems in the employee's life as long as they get the output they have come to expect.

In addition, and to the best of our knowledge, previous studies have not assessed employee burnout in terms of customer perceptions of employee burnout display (i.e., most existing studies rely on employees' self-assessments of burnout). Thereby, we argue, the present study highlights the *social* aspects of burnout. In any event, the perception focus in the present study should be seen as a contribution to previous research in which customer perceptions of various employee behaviors and characteristics are seen as intimately linked to customers' overall evaluations of service firms (e.g., Bitner et al., 1990; Hartline and Jones, 1996; Smith et al., 1999; Winsted, 2000).

5.3. Implications for managers

Burnout has become a wide-spread phenomenon. In the U.S., for example, it has been reported that some 40% of all employees feel overworked, pressured, and squeezed to the point of anxiety, depression and disease. And 60% of workers' visits to doctors stem from stress-related problems (Chapman, 2005). Given that burnout is common also in service professions (Cho et al., 2013; Singh et al., 1994; Yagil, 2006), managers should acknowledge that a substantial number of all face-to-face encounters with customers may involve employees with at least some level of burnout. Indeed, employee burnout calls for particular attention in the present low growth situation in many economies, which often comprises large scale layoffs and increasing feelings of job insecurity as well as additional demands on those who are still employed (Yavas et al., 2013). And as noted in the introduction, the consequences of employee burnout, particularly at high levels of burnout, are likely to be incompatible with the ability of employees to create high levels of customer satisfaction and other desired customer reactions. The results of the present study, however, indicate that even the display of relatively mild forms of burnout symptoms is likely to have a negative impact on customer satisfaction.

At the same time, employers' demand for emotional labor, such as displaying an emotion that is not actually felt, and the suppression of negative emotions, has become more prevalent in the workplace (Bryman, 2004; Morris and Feldman, 1997). Presumably, if such demands are taken seriously by employees, they may make attempts to hide burnout symptoms. Demanding emotional labor, however, is unlikely to make burnout go away. In contrast, emotional labor has been shown to exacerbate burnout, particularly the emotional exhaustion facet (Côté, 2005; Grandey et al., 2012; Karl and Peluchette, 2006; Montgomery et al., 2006; Näring et al., 2006). Emotional labor has also been shown to have a negative effect on customer satisfaction (Yagil, 2012).

Therefore, other and more fundamental activities would be needed for managers to deal with employee burnout. Here, we agree with Leiter and Maslach (2001) when they claim that burnout can be seen as the results of dysfunctional organizations; it says more about the workplace than it does about the employees. The main activities to come to terms with burnout should therefore be sought in terms of work-related factors identified as antecedents of burnout. One influential model to deal with such antecedents is the job demands-resources model (Demerouti et al., 2001), in which (1) job demands are assumed to positively impact burnout and (2) job resources are assumed to have a negative impact on burnout. Successful attempts to reduce the potential for employee burnout may therefore be viewed as the joint minimization of job demands (e.g., physical workload, time pressure, and role conflict) and maximizing job resources (e.g., feedback, control, participation, and supervisor support). Subsequent empirical studies inspired by this model indeed show that several specific job resources-related factors are negatively associated with employee burnout, such as feedback from supervisors facilitating employee growth and learning (Auh et al., 2015), job autonomy (Grandey et al., 2005), opportunities

for career development (Chen and Kao, 2012), peer support (Avanzi et al., 2015; Chen and Kao, 2012), and supervisory support (Han et al., 2016). Such factors, then, provide a point of departure for managers with a serious ambition to reduce employee burnout.

5.4. Limitations and suggestions for further research

Some limitations regarding the present study should be observed. With respect to employee display of burnout symptoms, we manipulated this variable in dichotomous terms (i.e., the symptoms were absent or present). Employee burnout, however, is a continuous variable, and the same may be assumed for also employee *display* of burnout. More precision in further examinations of the impact of this variable would thus be obtained if they allow for a wider range of values. Moreover, our manipulation of the presence of burnout symptoms comprised employee behavior leaking signals about emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, because the third aspect, reduced personal accomplishment, has been considered less relevant by some burnout researchers (Cox et al., 2005; Kristensen et al., 2008; Schaufeli et al., 2008). Yet the jury is still out concerning the relevant dimensions of burnout, and researchers engaged in measuring burnout and/or display of burnout symptoms in marketing settings should monitor the on-going debate regarding the burnout construct. In addition, we used an approach in which emotional exhaustion and depersonalization were combined, thus making it impossible to examine if specific burnout facets contribute with different strength to consumer reactions. Given that specific burnout facets are assumed to have distinct antecedents and consequences (Kristensen et al., 2005), however, more precision would be obtained in an examination in which they are manipulated as separate factors.

As for mediating mechanisms, our analysis suggests that the customer's assessment of the employee's emotional state mediated the impact of display of burnout symptoms on customer satisfaction. One main conceptual reason, we argued, is that this mediating variable would have an impact on the customer's own emotions. Yet to obtain further empirical precision regarding this mechanism researchers should include measures of customers' emotions in the analysis.

Turning to the moderating aspects, our analysis shows that the level of service performance served as a moderator; the impact of employee display of burnout symptoms on customer satisfaction was attenuated under the condition of high service performance. As already noted, the conceptual argument was based on congruency mechanisms. This argument, however, would benefit from including explicit measures of congruence and information fluency and using them in the analysis. The congruency aspect also calls for specific attention: in a society in which burnout rates are at high levels, and are on the rise, customers may come to expect that employees with whom they interact typically are under pressure. Maybe the *absence* of employee burnout is the really incongruent case in this sinister situation? This is definitely a topic deserving further research.

In addition, other moderating factors than the service level deserve attention in further studies. It should be noted that our specific empirical setting comprised employee-customer interactions in a shoe store, so it remains to be explored if other settings would produce the same results. We argued that a shoe store setting is characterized by non-negligible levels of duration, affect, and proximity between an employee and a customer (and thus it represents a setting in which employee behavior is likely to have an impact on customer satisfaction; cf. Price et al., 1995b). Yet duration, affect, and proximity are factors subject to variation in the vast pool of service encounters taking place between employees and customers, and they represent moderating factors that could be examined for further precision in assessments of the strength of the employee display of burnout-customer satisfaction link. Another such factor is the perceived similarity between the customer and the employee, because similarity between interacting parties is likely to boost the impact of one person's emotional state on

another person (Bakker et al., 2007). The strength of the employee-customer relationship also calls for attention. In the present study, in which the employee and the customer were implicitly depicted as strangers vis-à-vis each other, their relationship should be considered as weak. Yet in situations in which their relationship is stronger one may expect more customer sensitivity to (and a stronger impact of) employee display of burnout symptoms.

Finally, our setting involved a dyadic interaction between one employee and one customer and, more specifically, we focused on the employee as the sender of burnout signals and the customer as a receiver. Yet the employee can be a receiver of emotional display behavior from the customer. Previous research has shown that the customer's emotions can affect the employee's emotional reactions through emotional contagion (Dallimore et al., 2007), so a complete model of what is happening in emotional terms in a service encounter dyad needs to consider both parties. Moreover, some authors have suggested that burnout may be contagious in a social setting, in the sense that one person's burnout enhances another person's burnout. This is referred to as crossover in burnout literature (Härtel and Page, 2009; Yavas et al., 2013). Westman et al. (2001), for example, found indications of burnout crossover between spouses, while Bakker et al. (2009) identified crossover of burnout between colleagues. Such crossover effects have gloomy implications if they occur also in employee-customer interactions, at least in Western economies in which many of customers are service employees, too: if employee burnout in one firm would carry over to customers in their roles as employees in other firms, in which they interact with additional customers, the result is a vicious circle of escalating burnout.

Appendix. The four versions of the scenario text*

Imagine this: You feel the need for a new pair of shoes, and you go to a shoe store.

When you enter the store, a sales person notices you and comes forward. "Hi", she says, "can I help you?" You say that she may perhaps help later; first you want to take a look at the shoes in the store. So you examine what the store has to offer. You find two pairs of shoes, pair X and pair Y, that you may consider buying.

You go to the sales person and say that you would like to try both pairs. "OK", she says, "what is your size?" You tell her your size, and she comes back with both pairs for you to try. "Here they are," she says. **She looks tired.** *And she adds: "You see, in this store we have two types of floor: there is a carpet in one section and a stone floor in the other section. I suggest that you try the shoes on both types of floors to get a real feeling for them."*

Next, you try the X and Y shoes – *on both types of floor*. Both pairs feel pretty good. And both of them look good, too. Moreover, the price is basically the same, but the X pair is slightly more expensive. So this is not an easy decision. You explain to the sales person that both X and Y appear good, and you ask her for a recommendation.

"I do not see much difference between them, really, so if I were you I would actually take these," she says and she points to the X pair. You say that you are not completely happy with the color of the X pair – they are brown, but you would like to see them also in black. So you ask if they come in black. "Yes, they do", says the sales person, "I'll get a black pair of X in your size so you can try them, too." When she turns to go to get the black pair, a colleague approaches her. "Excuse me", says the colleague, "may I ask you something about the boots we have on sale?" **"No, not now, I am trying to take care of some feet here", says the sales person irritably to her colleague.**

But when she comes back, she has no shoes. "I am sorry," she says **impatiently**, "the X in black are out of stock in our store. But we have a sister store in another part of the town. [You may go there to see if they have them. It's only 5 km from here.] *Shall I call them to see if they have them in black and in your size?*" *You say that you do not really want to go to another part of the town to get the shoes.* "OK,"

says the sales person. “What about this: if they have them, I can ask them to send them over. The other store is about 5 km from here, so they will be here in some 10 min”. **The sales person looks away from you and waits for your decision.**

You say that this is OK. After a little while the sales person comes back to you and says that she has made the phone call, that the other store did indeed have the black shoes, and that they are now on their way. And after some 8 min they arrive, so you can try them on. They feel as good as the brown pair.

*For the manipulation of employee display of burnout (absent vs. present) the **bold** parts were used for the two presence of burnout conditions. For the two absence of burnout conditions, these parts were replaced with “She looks energetic”, “I’ll talk to you later, please, I am helping this customer here. I’ll come back to you in a minute, I promise”, “patiently” and “The sales person looks at you and waits for your decision”.

For the manipulation of the service level (low vs. high), the parts in *italics* were added for the two high service level conditions, and the part [You may go there to see if they have them. It’s only 5 km from here.] was deleted.

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