

MEASURING CONSUMER EMOTIONS IN SERVICE ENCOUNTERS: AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Consider the range of emotions that make up the experience of life, emotions such as love, anger, excitement and joy. Yet by all accounts there is only one emotion that we experience as consumers, satisfaction. Customer satisfaction is the second most measured index in Australian business after net profit (James, 1997), and of course no one would argue that trying to achieve customer satisfaction is what we are all about. Customer satisfaction is one of those terms that is so ubiquitous however, that we rarely stop to consider what the word actually means, especially when we can 'measure' it so easily with commonly used Likert type rating scales.

Recently however there have been a number of criticisms of satisfaction rating measures. Peterson & Wilson (1992) address the inherent skewness of satisfaction rating distributions; Iacobucci, Grayson & Ostrom (1994) question the received wisdom of exceeding customer expectations; Jones & Sasser, (1995) in an article in the Harvard Business Review discuss why "satisfied" customers defect; and Stewart, (1997) argues that "a satisfied customer isn't enough".

This paper presents the results from an ongoing empirical study by the author into consumer emotions. By focusing on the service encounter specifically, it argues for the need to move beyond the satisfaction construct as a measure of the consumer experience.

SATISFACTION AND EMOTION

"I wanted to give them a piece of my mind. I wanted to throw the clothes back at them and shout, walk out, phone the general manager...and let them know what terrible service they offered" (Quotation from a respondent #1)

"Her reaction to me made me feel this way. I was the customer and she made me feel like it was all my fault and she was doing me a favour. I did not feel I was being served. I suppose I should not admit it, but I felt like squashing one of the cakes in her face!" (Quotation from a respondent #2)

As the above quotations from the research illustrate, our interactions with services and service personnel can make for very descriptive and highly involving stories (Gabbot & Hogg, 1996) and include vivid emotional imagery (Lang, 1993; Zaltman, 1997). Not only do we experience such episodes both good and bad ourselves and tell others, but we frequently listen to the retelling of similar events from friends, family or colleagues. If nothing else they make for good dinner party conversations, however the evidence is that we may more readily seek and rely on such personal sources of information when purchasing services, the oft mentioned "word of mouth" influence (Zeithaml, 1981).

These memories of service encounters, may not simply be "cold" cognitions of service attributes, but can be laden with affective content.

This is especially highlighted when we consider the growing hospitality, tourism, leisure and entertainment industries (Edwardson, 1997). These are about experiential consumption, and experiences are emotional. We don't ski to be satisfied, we want exhilaration. We feel serenity in the peacefulness and beauty of a wilderness area. We feel doses of terror and amazement from the latest blockbuster movie, or can be moved to tears by an opera.

Even the retailing industry now realises it is in the experiential business, and is trying to put excitement and multi-sensory experience into the act of purchasing (Burbury, 1997; Macken, 1997). Consider for instance Nike Town in New York where the store

is as much theme park as it is retail outlet (Blair, 1997). Similar developments in Australia can be evidenced at complexes such as Myer Sport, Myer Electric and Crown Casino; retail as entertainment.

The development of a future relationship between the firm and the customer can in fact be determined by this emotional content (Barnes, 1997). On those occasional times when things don't go right we don't just feel dissatisfied. We feel angry, disappointed, frustrated and cheated.

Recently Neidenthal and Halberstadt (in press) have demonstrated that people categorize stimuli and events according to their emotional response, beyond perceptual and functional groupings. This implies that different services may be categorised in a customer's memory by the emotional responses they have experienced in their interactions with the firm. An emotional event is also more likely to result in mental rumination, social sharing (Rime, 1995) and emotional disclosure (Pennebaker, 1995), further reinforcing the effect of "word of mouth" (Zeithaml, 1981). Due to the interpersonal characteristics of services, emotions in service situations may be highly social in origin and nature, directly linking to the self-concept and feelings of self-worth and self-esteem (Leary, in press; Showers in press). This may mean such emotional memories may be more accessible to priming and recall due to their central nodal connections to the self-concept in a person's associative memory networks (Bower, 1981; 1991).

How exactly though has affect or emotion been defined in the consumer and service context?

Building on the seminal thinking of Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) there has been a growing interest and exploration over the years of the emotions experienced in consumption situations (Richins, 1997). The conceptual model of emotions that has been used in these studies and more especially in services has focused mainly on dimensions of pleasure and arousal or positive and negative affect (Price, 1995; Liljander & Strandvik, 1997). Due to this framework the investigation of individual emotions (other than satisfaction) has been lacking. Recent research interest however is beginning to address this by investigating the appraisals that give rise to specific

emotions such as satisfaction, delight and anger (Oliver, Rust and Varki, 1997; Nyer,1997).

The body of evidence to date suggests strongly that measures of affect contribute significantly to important dependent variables in consumer behaviour such as judgements of overall satisfaction (Oliver, 1997) and relationship closeness (Barnes, 1997). Indeed satisfaction itself may be a unique emotional response independent of its operationalisation as a global transaction specific construct. Furthermore there are a number of studies that are indicating that satisfaction as an overall judgement is a poor predictor of loyalty and customer retention (Hennig-Thurau & Klee, 1997). There is an important need then both theoretically and practically to move beyond the satisfaction construct in the search for consumer responses that have significant influences on managerially relevant outcomes.

It seems to me that satisfaction is a word that has been framed by a rather conservative viewpoint in business and academia. It is neither too “hot” nor too “cold” and is hence generally acceptable. But has anyone bothered to ask customers how they actually feel? Marketing academics can’t agree whether satisfaction is an emotion or a judgement or an evaluation, or indeed how we should best measure it (Oliver, 1997).

One of the more accepted theories suggests that satisfaction, as a transaction specific response, and service quality as a global judgement, are best conceptualised as the gap between a consumer’s expectations and the performance of the provider (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1988). This conformation/disconfirmation paradigm and the gap model are useful conceptualisations, but what is consumer anger then? A very big gap? What about excitement?

This lack of fundamental or applied research to capture the reality of everyday life seems rather amazing when we reflect on our own experiences. Consider the intensity of frustration we feel waiting in a queue; the anger because of a rude service assistant; the excitement in purchasing a new car; gratefulness when someone goes out of their way to help; the promise never to return to a place again after what they did; or telling our friends how terrific and special the service was.

There are however a number of reasons why this research has not been attempted before. First is the reigning paradigm that has hitherto prevailed to explain consumer behaviour. This has been based on an information processing model of a rational consumer making rational decisions (Oliver, 1997). The mind as computer; I think therefore I am. This has led to the use of various statistical techniques being employed such as choice modelling, weighted attribute models and so forth. Emotions have been purposely left out of the equations because, well, how do you measure emotions?

Secondly for psychology in general, the renaissance of emotion, or affect, research is also relatively recent. What research had been done previously, was not particularly useful for applied purposes in marketing. Based in physiology, much effort was spent on discovering a small number of basic emotions that had pan-cultural facial expressions such as happiness, anger, fear, surprise and other measurable physiological effects (Ekman, 1992).

Yet a final reason for the limitation in our understanding of emotions is the intuitive 'naive' idea most people have of their own emotions as simply feelings that are experienced.

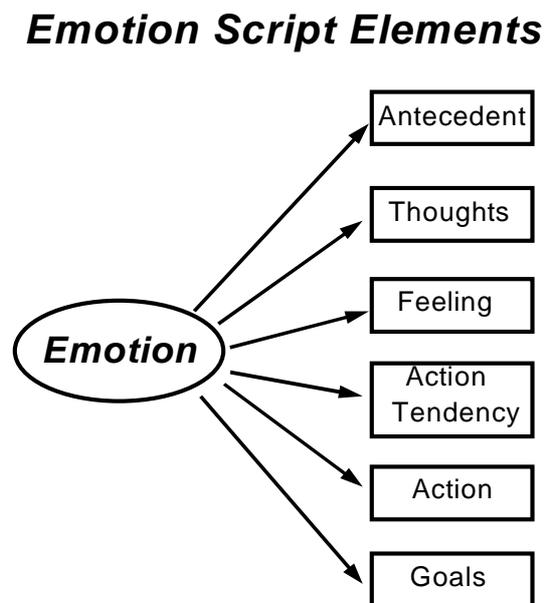
In the examples illustrated at the beginning, the respondents also stated that they felt frustrated, annoyed, angry, disgusted and upset. These emotion words may have unique antecedent and causal qualities that are not captured by overall satisfaction measures. It would therefore be interesting both theoretically and practically to understand the unique emotions consumers experience in services, beyond global dimensions.

NEW CONCEPTS OF EMOTION

In the past ten years there has been a revolution in emotion research that has opened up a whole new way of conceptualising and understanding emotions, yet very little of this work has filtered through to applied areas such as marketing. It is these new theories that I have been applying in the analysis of consumer emotions. These new theories go beyond simply a few basic emotions with facial expressions or an internal feeling. Rather emotions are viewed as functional, in other words, they serve to inform us and regulate our interactions with the environment.

The **functional** model of emotions conceives of each emotion as having a particular **antecedent** or cause, a specific thought or **appraisal**, a specific **feeling** and **expression**, a specific **action tendency**, a specific **action** and a specific **goal** (Roseman, Wiest and Swartz, 1994). In other words an emotion is all these things.

Figure 1



This is a paradigm shift in our understanding. One can think of an emotion as rather like a **script** that automatically plays out in response to a situation. For instance anger can be described as follows: a person is offended; the offence is perceived as intentional and harmful; the person considers themselves as innocent and thinks that an injustice has been done; the person glares and scowls at the offender; the person feels internal tension and agitation, as if heat and pressure were rapidly mounting inside; their heart starts pounding and their muscles tighten; the person desires retribution and the person may lose control and strike out, harming the offender (verbally or physically). This sequence of sub-events can happen almost simultaneously and not be under conscious control of the person. (For those that consider that satisfaction may be a cognitive judgement, this new theory considers the cognition and appraisal as part of the emotional response).

Using the script model we can categorise emotions in terms of **fuzzy set** theory rather than classically derived features for class inclusion. Fuzzy sets are not defined by a

conclusive set of necessary and sufficient features (such as might define the category of even numbers). Rather they are defined by a **prototype** - an abstract image or set of features representing the best most representative, most typical example of the category. Categorization decisions are made by comparing instances with this prototype (Rosch, 1978).

Each emotion word can be considered a label for a fuzzy set (comprising the script elements), defined as a class without sharp boundaries, in which there is a gradual but specifiable transition from membership to non-membership (Russell, 1980). Rather than limiting us to six or so, classically derived, basic emotions this new perspective allows us to explore a myriad of subtle and different emotional states. Indeed there are some 200 or more prototypical emotions, with each having a more or less defined script that establishes the fuzzy boundaries between them (Shaver et al, 1987).

The concept of emotion being defined by script elements, represents a framework for research into services that is consistent with, and is an extension of a number of previous approaches. These include the development of and the use of the critical incident technique in identifying the factors underlying satisfying and unsatisfying service experiences (Bitner, Booms & Tetreault, 1990) and service script analysis (Shoemaker, 1996) to investigate the precursors of consumer expectations .

Furthermore it may be that the stories people tell based on their service experiences may be structured in a consistent and predictable manner according to the specific emotions they recall (Bucci, 1995). Emotional knowledge structures, have been found in the content analysis of the stories people tell about communal and close relationships (Fitness & Fletcher, 1993), but these have not been studied for exchange relationships and specifically service encounters.

Different emotions may arise not only from different antecedant causes but may be associated with unique patterns of appraisal, action tendencies, emotivational goals and actions. This is consistent with both the emotional appraisal (e.g. Roseman, Spindel and Jose, 1990; Scherer, 1997; Smith and Ellsworth, 1985) and the emotion prototype or emotion script approach (e.g. Fehr and Russell, 1984; Lang, 1993; Shaver, Schwartz,

Kirson, and O'Connor, 1987) to the study of emotions, and thus provides a solid theoretical framework for analysis.

Emotion appraisal patterns and knowledge structures developed through past experience interact sub-consciously with real-time experience in a dynamic process of emotional elicitation (Smith and Kirby, in press). Thus an understanding of the content of these emotion patterns and structures can give detailed clues as to the focal antecedents, cognitions and behavioural tendencies and outcomes for specific service situations. Such emotional knowledge structures may comprise the structural content and dynamic processes behind the expectations that customers have for any service interaction. Whilst confirmation and disconfirmation of expectations is well established as a model in the services literature (Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman, 1993; Oliver, 1997), there is no consensus as to what expectations are or what they do (Johnson and Mathews, 1997). Conceptualising expectations as emotional knowledge structures may provide this consensus.

Both on an individual level and aggregated across consumers, these knowledge structures may be considered an operationalisation of the emotional equity that a service organisation has in the marketplace. This is a term that has been used in the marketing and organisational literature (Covey, 1994; Lovelock, Patterson and Walker, 1998), but has not been formally defined theoretically or empirically. Given the research to date that demonstrates the importance of emotion in influencing consumer behaviour, emotional equity may be an important new construct that should be developed and investigated. The present research program attempts for the first time to achieve this goal.

In studying consumer emotion in services both situational influences and individual differences need to be considered. Services are not a homogeneous domain differing only according to industry classification but are heterogeneous according to certain fundamental characteristics across industry (Lovelock, 1983), These characteristics may moderate the differing emotional knowledge structures that people form.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Some preliminary key findings from the research program into consumer emotions will now be presented. The research has focused initially on building, for the first time, a taxonomy of emotions experienced in services and understanding how this may differ according to different services. The next stage will be to unfold the scripts that comprise these emotions in different settings.

Let's look at some of these initial results and ponder some implications for practical use.

METHODOLOGY

Based on the prototype model of emotions, a structured quantitative and qualitative self-completion questionnaire, the *Service Experience Survey* was developed, which guided respondents through the emotional knowledge structure of their experience. When asked to recall a specific service experience people can access a detailed and rich emotional memory of the event. Some events are more emotion laden than others, but the more intense the experience, the more likely it is to be remembered, and these memories can be long lasting. If someone has a really good or bad experience they are going to remember it for a long time (Le Doux, 1996).

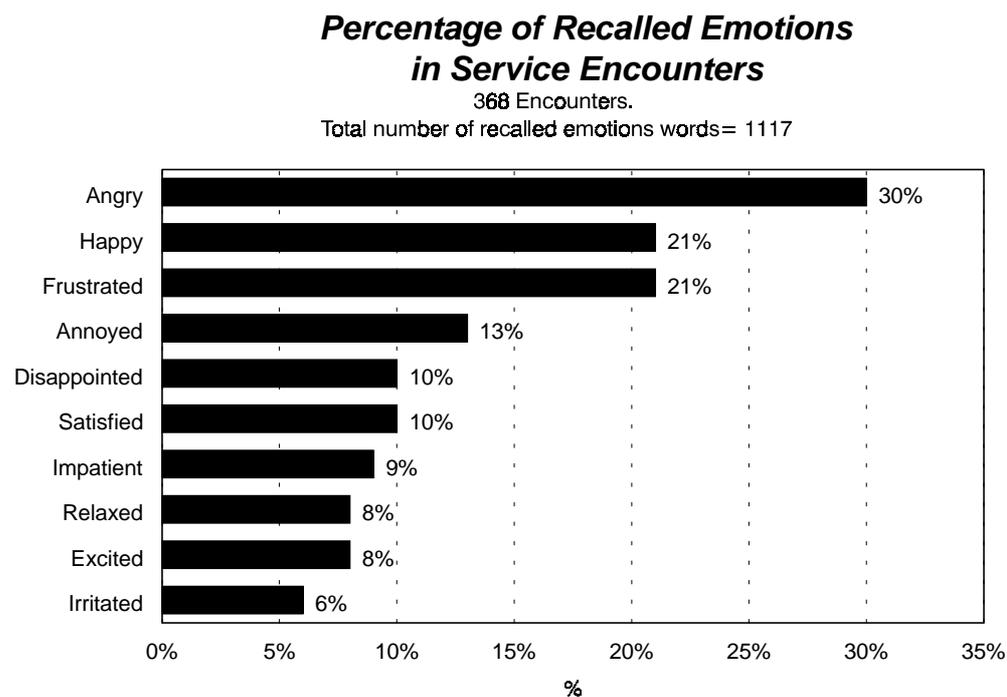
Respondents (n=226) were recruited from executive workshops (n=53), general staff (n=26), post-graduate (n=89) and under-graduate students (n=58) at the University of NSW. Approximately 42% of the sample recalled more than one service episode (max = 3), resulting in 368 recorded service encounters. The mean age was 28.5 years ranging from 19 years through to 62 years. Females comprised 56% of the respondents and 29% were males (15% did not disclose their gender). As the study was exploratory in its aim, people were free to remember either positive or negative experiences. As expected, more negative encounters (57%) were recalled than positive encounters (29%) or experiences that were classified as both positive and negative (14%). There were no gender differences for the recall of positive or negative experiences, or the number of emotions words recalled (mean = 3.0; range = 1 - 6 words).

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Overall, forty different services were included in the recalled encounters, with the most frequent being; Restaurants (16%); Miscellaneous Retail (11.5%); Clothing Retail (9%); Banks (6%). Other services included in the results were airlines, taxis, government and public authorities, hairdressers, hotels and supermarkets.

Is satisfaction the primary emotional experience that people have? Analysis of the 368 service encounter episodes recalled by respondents, resulted in over 220 different emotion words being used. A top ten list based on the percentage of respondents mentioning the emotion reveals that these prototypical emotions are...

Figure 2



To illustrate the range of experience, some of the other emotion words that were mentioned, were;

“embarrassed, insulted, powerless, resentful, shocked, adventurous, amused, respected, extravagant, amazed” .

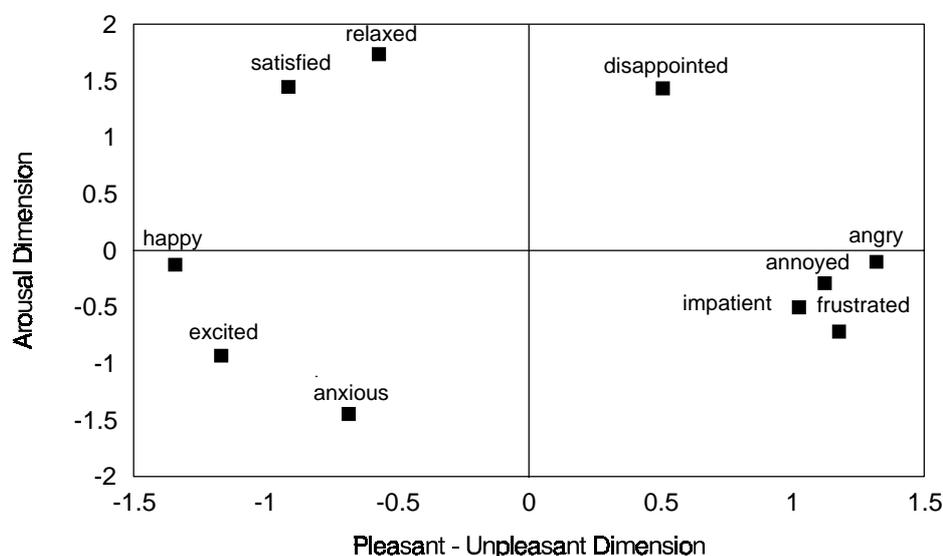
Satisfaction appears to be a unique emotional response, ranked sixth in the list, however the word “happiness” is used as the exemplar of a positive experience. Further analysis reveals that satisfaction is best described as a pleasant low-arousal condition (see Figure 3), as opposed to happiness which is more activated and seems to result from a perception of the personalised nature of the service interaction. Of respondents who stated they were happy, 33% rated the encounter as a 7 for (7) personal v impersonal (1). Only 20% of people who said they were satisfied gave the same rating.

It may indeed be far more useful to measure and understand customer happiness and customer anger as the primary exemplars of consumer experience rather than satisfaction. Satisfaction is a theoretical construct used by researchers and business, yet it has a unique structure and meaning for customers themselves.

Another interesting finding is that the word “delight” which has been used by several authors in describing the ‘next level up’ from satisfaction (e.g. Ulrich, 1989), is in fact a word rarely used by respondents to describe positive service experiences. Only 4.0% of respondents used the word delight in reporting positive encounters. Interestingly a feeling of dissatisfaction was mentioned by only 1.4% of respondents. This clearly is not a word people use, yet it appears as the anchor on most satisfaction scales.

Figure 3

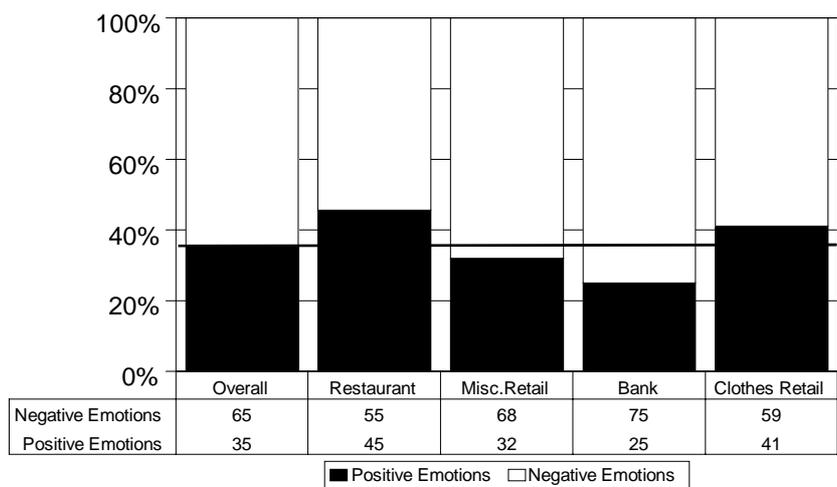
Multi-Dimensional Scaling - Derived Stimulus Configuration Emotion Word Associations



The emotional knowledge structures for different services appear to be characterised by different underlying frequencies of positive and negative emotions. I have termed these frequencies; **emotion valence ratios**. Figure 4 shows the **EVR**'s for four services, Restaurants, Misc. Retail, Banks and Clothes Retailing.

Figure 4

Emotion Valence Ratios
Comparison of Four Services to the Overall Ratio



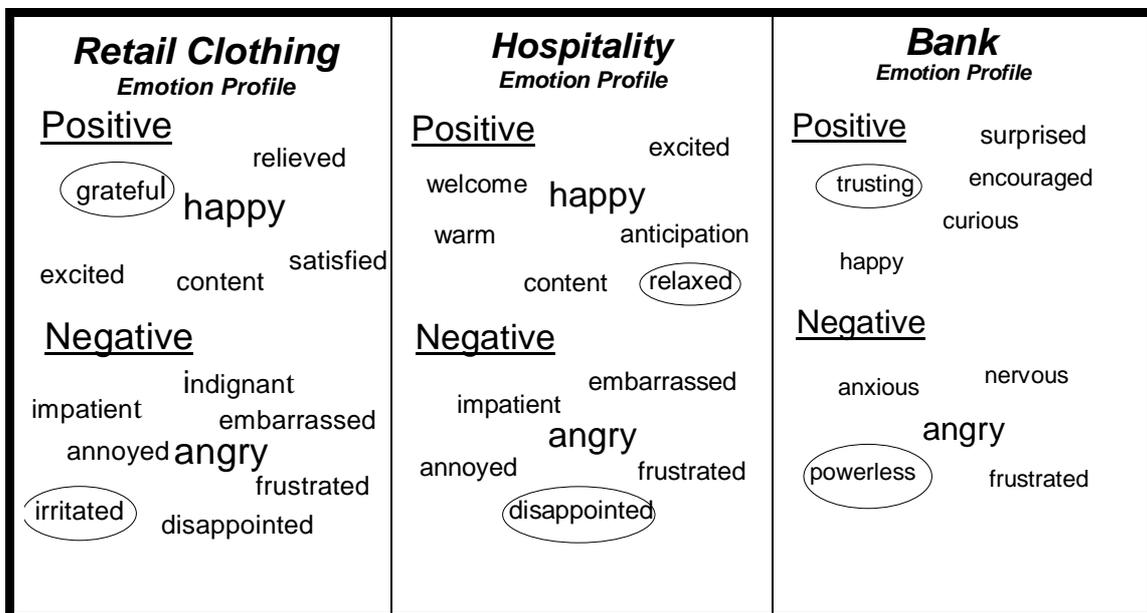
Asking respondents to freely recall an encounter will result in more negative than positive results due to saliency effects (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). However it is interesting to compare the different EVR's to the Overall result. We can see that Clothes Retailing and Restaurants, which it could be argued, are experiential consumption situations, have higher positive emotions than the average (41% and 45% v's 35%). Retailing in general and Banks have lower ratios of positive emotions than the average (32% and 25% v's 35%). It could be the case that there are specific emotional knowledge structures that determine the memories for different services. Some are remembered on the whole for the negative encounters (e.g. banks) whilst others, because we go for the experience (e.g. restaurants) have more remembered positive emotions. As is illustrated a bank's emotional valence ratio is quite low.

Rather than measuring satisfaction, which may mean very different things across services, it would be better to understand the specific emotions that comprise the emotion valence ratios. I have termed these, the **emotion profiles** of different services. As can be seen in Figure 5, whilst happiness and anger are the main

emotions underlying the positive and negative experiences, there are unique clusters of emotions that arise.

Certain emotions seem to signify something about the unique experience of each service, and these circled words are termed the **emotional markers** for the positive and negative aspects of each service. These were as follows: relaxed and disappointed for restaurants; grateful and irritated for clothes retailing; and trusting and powerless for banks.

Figure 5



Once these emotions have been defined, then the scripts that comprise these emotions can be examined in detail, using a similar method to the critical incident technique (Bitner et al, 1990). For each of these emotions the research has generated 368 detailed scripts that are in the process of being analysed in the next stage of research. Two shorter examples below illustrate the associated scripts that accompany the emotions.

Example 1.

The respondent had reported making a telephone call regarding a bill.

The specific emotion words used were...

Anger
Frustration
Resentment

The person rated the encounter as 2 on a 7 point satisfaction scale. 1= very unsatisfying.

This is what the person was thinking and feeling:

“My bill was incorrect. The person on the other end denied the errors.”

“I wanted to give the company a really hard time.”

“I felt tense and aggressive.”

“I wanted to yell at the customer service person, beat the operator into submission, slam down the phone.”

“What I did was actually raise my voice, threaten legal proceedings and other similar action.”

“I would not return as a customer. The outcome was lots of agro for little achievement”.

Example 2

The person was getting their registration papers from the insurance company. They telephoned to find out the time of opening so that they would not waste the hour of lunch, but arrived to find the computers were down for another 20 minutes.

The specific emotion words used were...

Rushed
Tense
Annoyed
Out of Control

The person rated the encounter as a 4 on a 7 point satisfaction scale (7 = very satisfied).

This is what the person was thinking and feeling:

“Their computers were down, I was doing it in lunch time. I had to quickly reschedule my lunch activities. I had to find car parks 3 times instead of 2.

“What a waste of time, they can’t be blamed. I wish they had told me when I called. I felt sorry for the liaison officer. Why today?? OK...how much time have I got, can I fit in the post office visit first and come back.

“I felt stressed, tense, tight, annoyed, calming myself down, getting organised - making my mind make a decision so my body could act. Hot and sweaty (hot day).

“The insurance company had a liaison officer explain as you walked through the door. He was apologetic and helpful. Non-confrontationalist. The person at the counter when I finally got there was helpful and apologetic about the time the computer was taking to operate.”

“I told the ladies I worked with. Off loading problems often helps dispel the pent up feeling.”

By analysing the scripts for each emotion one can understand the specific and underlying antecedents, appraisals, feelings, action tendencies, actions and goals of these emotions. To know the emotion is then to know the entire script that defines it, and these scripts may differ across services. Furthermore the evidence suggests that emotional memory and response is linked physiologically to behaviour through the limbic brain system (Le Doux, 1996), with specific emotions having their own unique pattern of action tendency and action.

To conclude these exploratory results, a final finding from the research is presented. An analysis was made of the percentage of positive and negative emotions associated with each level of a ‘standard’ seven-point satisfaction scale.

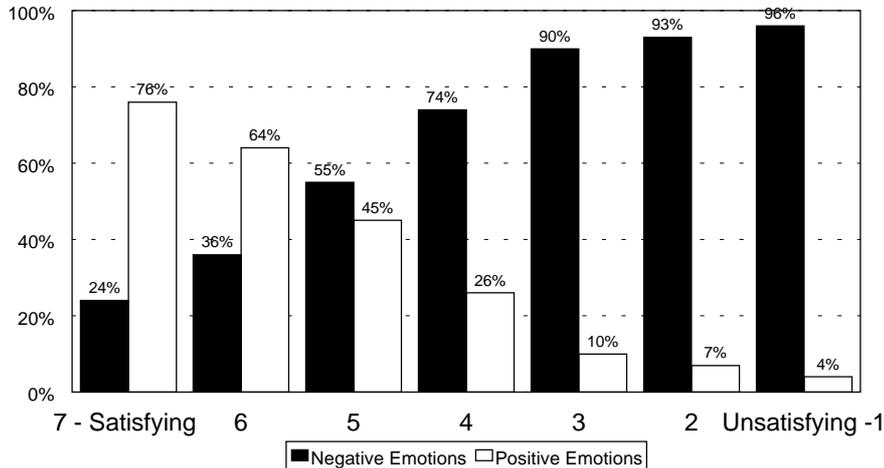
As mentioned earlier questions have been raised as to the skewness of satisfaction scale distributions (Peterson & Wilson, 1992) and the lack of loyalty from customers who rate less than the highest rating (Jones & Sasser, 1995).

It would therefore be interesting to explore the ordinal and interval properties of the satisfaction scale using emotional responses (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

**Percentage of Positive and Negative Emotions
for Different Levels of a Satisfaction Scale**

Encounters = 325



It can be seen that the psychological ‘mid-point’ of the scale seems to be between 5 and 6, and even at levels 6 and 7, 36% and 24% of the emotions experienced are negative. This confirms Jones & Sasser’s (1995) finding and cautions the common practice of dividing these types of scales at the ordinal mid-point (3.5) into satisfied and dissatisfied.

CONCLUSION AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

This paper reported preliminary results as part of an on-going program of research into consumer emotions in services. It presented the theoretical rationale for a new analytical approach and the development of new techniques to explore the consumer experience. A number of exploratory findings have been presented that arise from the application of these techniques and further research will extend these findings including the detailed analysis of the scripts.

One important implication is that service staff should be trained in understanding and dealing with emotional responses. Emotional episodes can flow from bad to good or

bad to worse depending on the service person. An example of a bad to worse **emotion flow** from the research is...

impatient

angry

neglected

cheated

upset

... resulting in a customer vowing never to return. This is in comparison to an example of a encounter that started poorly but ended positively...

nervous

impatient

encouraged

happy

Developing the emotional intelligence (Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Goleman, 1995) of the staff is a new and critical area that is indicated by the research. In a new book on **Services Marketing**, I state that, “ the concept of emotional intelligence will be useful in selecting and training service staff. Staff who are emotionally intelligent or who have developed emotional competency are able to recognise and understand their own and the customer’s emotional state and effectively use this understanding to manage the customer’s desired outcome to a service encounter “ (Lovelock, Edwardson & Patterson, 1998). Furthermore the research has shown that it is often the service delivery systems that are implicated, in which the customer actually empathises with the staff (see example 2 above). The emotion scripts can give very detailed information as to the critical control points in the system of relevance to the customer, and where relevant changes need to be made.

The program of research continues but already the findings are providing a new insight into the previously neglected yet critical area of consumer emotions in

services. This paper argues that customer satisfaction measurement and research as commonly applied, needs to now move to the next stage and consider the specific and unique consumer emotions and emotional knowledge structures that comprise the variety and richness of the consumer experience.

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