

“Smile and Dial”

The impact of emotional labor on athletics ticket sales employees

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Despite the demand for sales talent in professional and intercollegiate athletics, entry-level sport sales positions continue to experience a high rate of turnover (Popp et al., 2017). While previous literature has discussed employee retention, job satisfaction, and job turnover among sport industry professionals (Pierce et al., 2014; Popp et al., 2022; Popp et al., 2019), emotional labor is one aspect of the service interaction that has not been considered. Therefore, the concept of emotional labor and the role emotion regulation strategies play in various organizational behavior outcomes of ticket sales employees was examined. Athletics ticket sales representatives from different levels of sport were interviewed and open coding was utilized to analyze the results. Similar to other customer-service contexts, the findings indicate athletics ticket sales representatives engage in emotional labor by monitoring their emotions to achieve organizational goals. Specifically, the following themes were discovered and discussed: 1) emotional expectations of the job, 2) explicit altering of emotions, 3) presence of contrasting emotions, 4) emotional exhaustion, and 5) unique emotions required in selling sport.

KEY WORDS: Emotional labor; Sport employees; Emotion regulation strategies; Ticket sales; Employee retention.

Over the past 15 years, inside sales teams and the demand for sales talent have grown in professional and intercollegiate athletics (Popp et al., 2017) creating a plethora of entry-level job opportunities in this domain. During this time, entry-level job positions within inside sales increased from 32.3% (Pierce et al., 2012) to 53% (Clapp, 2016). Notwithstanding the growth of this segment of the athletics industry, individuals in these entry-level sport

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sales positions experience a high rate of turnover. King (2010) estimated five out of six people who start in an entry-level position within athletics ticket sales will leave for a different employment opportunity, and one in every four left within the first year (Pierce et al., 2022). This turnover rate is significantly higher compared to the 27% annual turnover rate for other industry sales positions (“How to predict turnover”, 2017). Despite these statistics, little is known about how psychological and emotional factors may contribute to the retention or departure of athletics employees in these frontline ticket sales positions which continue to serve as the entry point for sport management graduates into the workforce.

Further, while previous literature has studied employee retention, job satisfaction, and job turnover among sport industry professionals (Pierce et al., 2014; Popp et al., 2022; Popp et al., 2019), few studies have examined these concepts through the lens of service relationships. Emotional labor is one aspect of the service interaction that has not been considered or explored in terms of retention and turnover among athletics ticket sales employees. Emotional labor denotes the regulation of one’s own feelings for displaying emotions deemed desirable by an organization (Grandey, 2000). This concept is vital to the service industry, including athletics ticket sales, because the manner in which frontline employees exhibit emotional labor can alter a customer’s perception about the organization (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Mishra, 2014). Additionally, frontline employees operating in contexts where service relationships are used to facilitate exchange are more likely to be motivated by a sense of obligation to their customers than to the organization (Lavelle et al., 2007). In service-relationship contexts (i.e., athletics ticket sales), frontline employees perform helpful behaviors directed toward customers because the customer’s satisfaction has an impact on the frontline employee’s job satisfaction (Zablah et al., 2016). This outside-in effect occurs when social bonds are formed between frontline employees and customers due to the extent and intensity of day-to-day interactions (Zablah et al., 2016). As a result, regulating and displaying positive emotions can strengthen the customer-employee relationship through authentic conversations and genuine interactions.

According to Grandey (2000), customer-focused employees engage in emotion regulation strategies to “manage” specific feelings that may be required by the organization. Scholars have primarily focused on understanding three key emotion regulation strategies: surface acting, deep acting, and genuine expression (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Brotheridge & Lee, 2003; Grandey, 2000; Hülshager & Schewe, 2011). Surface acting occurs when individuals suppress felt emotions and display required emotions, whereas deep

acting involves changing internal feelings to align with the required organizational emotions (Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983). Genuine expression has been viewed as the most-effective form of emotional labor, as it occurs automatically (Diefendorff et al., 2005; Humphrey, 2012). Although emotion regulation strategies help frontline employees deliver added outcomes to an organization, they have been linked to potential psychological strains such as emotional exhaustion (Goldberg & Grandey, 2007; Totterdell & Holman, 2003) and job dissatisfaction (Grandey, 2000). These consequences of emotional labor have been shown to originate from expressing a “false” emotion and/or excessive emotional demands (Park et al., 2015).

As many entry-level positions across the athletics industry require customer-employee interactions, emotional labor is likely to occur, and employees from various sectors may engage in emotion regulation strategies to maintain the expectations of the organization. However, athletics ticket sales positions are unique as employees face higher levels of rejection than other segments of the industry such as marketing, community relations, social media management, event management, etc. (Pierce, 2021; Popp et al., 2022). In addition, athletics ticket sales positions are known to pay relatively lower salaries for entry-level representatives compared to other industries or sectors (Apple, 2020; Mathner & Martin, 2012), and their pay is often dependent on performance through commission during set periods of time. The combination of low pay, long hours, defined selling seasons, high rejection, and the dependence on receiving commission from sales, situate athletics ticket sales representatives in a distinct position where they actively engage in emotional labor and emotion regulation strategies.

While research has focused on the various emotion regulation strategies utilized among employee-customer interactions, little to no work has been conducted to examine whether these strategies are used in the sport management setting, particularly in consideration of the athletics ticket sales sector. Considering this unexplored area of emotional labor and sport sales research, the present study explores the concept of emotional labor and emotion regulation strategies in the athletics ticket sales setting. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to discover the impact emotional labor and the role emotion regulation strategies play in various organizational behavior outcomes of athletics ticket sales employees in the sport context. Additionally, the researchers evaluate negative outcomes of emotional labor and search for a connection that may explain the reasons why individuals choose to avoid or leave the athletics ticket sales profession altogether.

Literature Review

The existing literature detailed below draws from the theoretical framework surrounding the emotional labor theory and athletics ticket sales literature. The first section describes emotional labor theory and details the three most common emotion regulation strategies: deep acting, surface acting, and genuine expression. This section also explains the negative consequences associated with emotional labor. The second section provides an overview of athletics ticket sales literature and describes the importance of employee retention in this industry sector.

EMOTIONAL LABOR THEORY

The current study utilized a theory developed by Hochschild (1983) known as emotional labor. Emotional labor has been described as regulating one's emotions to comply with occupational or organizational norms (Hochschild, 1983). Many times, this regulation of emotion requires employees to display feelings that are discrepant with their internal feelings (Glomb & Tews, 2004). Employees are expected to exhibit positive emotions that are not necessarily felt while interacting with customers. The tactics involved with emotional labor help employees manage their own emotions as well as control the emotions they portray to potential and/or current customers.

Emotion regulation strategies. Past literature has linked emotional labor to the existence of explicit and implicit organizational display rules (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987) that directly state which emotions are expected by employees and which emotions should be suppressed. These display rules are standards for appropriate emotional display on the job (Hülshager & Schewe, 2011) and have been shown to positively influence customer interactions. Empirical evidence from the hospitality industry has shown display rules are implemented by an organization to regulate an employee's behavior (Chu, 2002). These rules are classified as societal, occupational, and organizational norms that are created to explain which emotions should be expressed and which should be disguised (Ekman, 1973). Common display rules exhibited in employee handbooks include positivity, enthusiasm, personable, and an upbeat attitude (Pierce et al., 2012). An example statement of display rules from an employee handbook is as follows: "Put energy and enthusiasm into every guest interaction", and "Show an upbeat attitude" (Chu, 2002, p. 18). In combination with policies and employee handbooks, organizations use cultural elements such as symbols, myths, and stories to teach, demonstrate,

and reinforce the expectations. Display rules are expected by an organization during all interpersonal transactions, and employees perform emotional labor through emotion regulation strategies. These strategies have been studied in various industries involving frontline service workers who are in direct contact with the consumer (Anderson et al., 2002). They positively impact the cycle of self-reinforcing exchanges between customers and frontline employees (Zablah et al., 2016). Furthermore, customer-service employees utilize emotion regulation strategies because positive employee behavior has been shown to be the most critical aspect of service quality (Bailey et al., 2001; Bitner et al., 1990).

The first emotion regulation strategy, surface acting, involves employees displaying emotions that are not actually felt through changing their outward appearances (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Hochschild, 1983). Service industry employees have been shown to exhibit this mechanism by putting on a smile or changing their body language for a customer even if they are having a bad day. When individuals utilize surface acting, they do not attempt to feel the emotions they are displaying to others. Instead, they are faking appropriate affective displays in order to fulfill their job duties (Scott & Barnes, 2011).

The second category, deep acting, occurs when the feelings of employees do not fit the situation, and in turn, they use their training to express appropriate emotions (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Hochschild, 1983). Employees utilizing this strategy ultimately try to change their internal feelings to match the expected organizational display (Grandey, 2000). For example, an individual who engages in deep acting may try to put themselves in a positive friendly mood by recalling happy memories or experiences. Instead of “faking” an emotion, the employee attempts to change their outlook on the situation and summon up the emotion they are expected to portray (Humphrey, 2012). Unlike surface acting, scholars have discovered deep acting to be positively linked to sense of accomplishment for employees (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Kim et al., 2019). Further, researchers have argued that deep acting requires less cognitive and emotional resources than surface acting (Totterdell & Holman, 2003) as one’s sense of authenticity is not compromised.

The third category, genuine expression, was not initially considered to be an emotion regulation strategy. However, Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) proposed the classification of genuine expression to account for those employees who were able to experience and display appropriate expected emotions spontaneously. These natural emotions directly comply with organizational display rules and situational requirements. Unlike surface and deep

acting, genuine expression occurs automatically and has been viewed as an effective form of emotional labor (Diefendorff et al., 2005; Humphrey, 2012).

Consequences. Even though the emotion regulation strategies discussed above aid in the employee-customer interaction, several negative consequences of performing emotional labor through the lens of surface acting have been discovered. First, employees may experience emotional dissonance, which occurs when there is a discrepancy between the felt emotion and displayed emotion (Hochschild, 1983). This discrepancy is due to the inauthentic emotions that employees are required to display on a daily basis when interacting with customers. According to Hochschild (1983), this inauthenticity “poses a challenge to a person’s sense of self” (p. 136). A meta-analysis on the costs and benefits of emotional labor indicated hidden feelings harm employee well-being because suppressed emotions indicate a lack of control (Hülshager & Schewe, 2011).

Another negative outcome that has been associated with emotional labor is performance. Empirical studies have shown emotion regulation strategies, specifically surface acting, can impair performance by priming expectations that are difficult to meet (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). The constant emotional control involved with the primed expectations can ultimately lead to negative performances by employees. Goodwin and colleagues (2011) discovered a negative relationship between surface acting and performance. Their findings indicated, “employees engaging in surface acting may lead to inconsistent or insincere interpersonal displays of the organization’s required emotions” (p. 544). An additional study found that the more employees reported “faking” their emotions, the more they found themselves distancing from customers and not performing to the best of their abilities (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002).

Other negatively cited outcomes of emotional labor in service-oriented employees included employee burnout (Hochschild, 1983), job dissatisfaction (Morris & Feldman, 1996), and employee turnover (Goodwin et al., 2011). Scholars have found customer-service employees, who experienced a discrepancy in their emotions, were more likely to express intentions to leave their workplace (Abraham, 1999; Hülshager & Schewe, 2011). Goodwin and colleagues (2011) discovered similar findings where the more employees engaged in surface acting, the more likely they would quit their job or be terminated. In general, these employee turnover results are critical to not only the organization but the employee as well. These consequences of emotional labor will be vital in identifying the reasons for low retention numbers among athletics ticket sales positions.

Athletics Ticket Sales

Operating as frontline employees, athletics ticket sales representatives establish and foster relationships between customers and the sport organization. These critical relationships take time to develop, as they emphasize personalization to keep the customer satisfied (Jolson, 1997). Compared to other segments of the sports industry, turnover among athletics ticket sales representatives has a more direct and immediate impact on customer relationships. Therefore, the retention of employees in the athletics ticket sales context has been a focus for sport organizations.

Exploring the retention of athletics ticketing employees is crucial for the success of athletics organizations, as ticket sales are one of the largest revenue generators for sport organizations and have been for nearly a decade (Fulks, 2017; Mathewson, 2019). With the increased importance of capitalizing on ticket sales revenue, sport organizations have placed an additional focus on cultivating relationships and selling game experiences. However, despite the necessity for athletics ticket sales representatives, many sport organizations see high levels of turnover amongst sales staff (Pierce & Irwin, 2016; Pierce et al., 2022; Popp et al., 2019).

Numerous studies have examined athletics ticket sales employee turnover and factors such as low compensation, long hours, workplace culture, and leadership style were all cited (Bouchet et al., 2011; Popp et al., 2019; Popp et al., 2022). The relationship between sales training on both job satisfaction and turnover intent was examined by Popp and colleagues (2019), and they discovered the amount of on-going training (beyond the initial new hire training) significantly contributed to representatives' job satisfaction levels. Additional evidence suggests athletics ticket sales representatives, who actively participate and engage in professional development activities, are more likely to continue working in sales (Pierce et al., 2013). Furthermore, a recent study by Popp and colleagues (2022) discovered demographic differences of sales representatives who left their position. Female athletics ticket sales employees were found to experience more harassment from customers compared to their male counterparts. With ticket sales being a crucial factor for revenue generation, it is important for sport organizations to understand the reasons individuals choose to leave the profession and prioritize employee retention strategies to save time, money, and resources.

Methods

To investigate the presence of emotional labor among athletics ticket sales employees, the current research employed a qualitative research de-

sign. Specifically, an interpretive approach was utilized which allowed the researchers to infer the complex meanings, views, and beliefs of the participants (Creswell, 2017). Through semi-structured interviews, participants provided rich, in-depth responses which furthered the researchers' understanding of emotional labor within the athletics ticket sales context. To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, the researchers adhered to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) methods of establishing trustworthiness.

PROCEDURES

The current sample consisted of 16 total athletics ticket sales employees at the professional, collegiate, and minor league levels. Of the 16 participants, 11 were currently working in the ticket sales profession, with one individual actively searching for a new position, and five had left the position and secured other employment. The ticket sales representatives were located in the Midwest and South regions of the United States. Their positions required them to identify new customers and sell season, mini-plan, individual game, and group tickets for their organization. These individuals were also tasked with actively engaging with past ticket buyers to sell renewals or upgrades for upcoming games.

The participants were selected because of the customer interactions they have/had experienced while working in athletics ticket sales. The researchers initially utilized convenience sampling for their semi-structured interviews (Özdemir et al., 2011). After the first round of interviews were completed, snowball sampling was employed to discover other participants who were working or had worked in the athletics ticket sales profession and were willing to speak about their experiences. An in-person or telephone interview was scheduled with each participant, and the interviews lasted between 15-45 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded, and the researchers utilized an interview guide containing open-ended questions for flexibility during the data collection process (Gratton & Jones, 2010). Data was collected until saturation occurred where the researchers realized further responses would not produce any new or meaningful information (Gratton & Jones, 2010).

DATA ANALYSIS

The researchers transcribed the participants' responses using a deductive approach, which was based on established theory guiding the analysis (Gratton & Jones, 2010). Open coding was also employed, which entailed

“the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 61). The responses were coded independently based on the a priori themes used to develop the interview guide. After initial themes were discovered, the researchers identified new emergent themes that were not present or differed from past literature.

In order to ensure the trustworthiness of the study, the researchers adhered to Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) four trustworthiness concepts: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Specifically, the researchers included an extensive description of the context and utilized purposive sampling and triangulation techniques. The following section contains summarized results by the researchers as well as verbatim participant responses. The participants were listed as “Ticket Sales Representative 1,” “Ticket Sales Representative 2,” and so on for confidentiality purposes.

Results

The results of the open coding process fell into one of four theme categories described throughout the literature: (1) emotional expectations of the job, (2) explicit altering of emotions, (3) presence of contrasting emotions, and (4) emotional exhaustion. Additionally, 5) an emergent theme related to the unique emotions required in selling sport appeared during the transcription analysis. The results are organized below according to each overarching theme and representative quotes are presented in verbatim form.

EMOTIONAL EXPECTATIONS FOR THE JOB

The most salient theme derived from the interview transcriptions was the emotional requirements detailed by the athletics ticket sales representatives. Participant responses were consistent to questions regarding the emotions needed for their current (or former) job position. All current and former ticket sales representatives mentioned positive emotions and positive attitudes were the number one requirement when interacting with customers. Ticket Sales Representative 1 conveyed the required emotions and skills with the following quote:

The number one requirement for my current position is a positive attitude. We are expected to sound upbeat and enthusiastic when selling tickets to the customers. We aim to make the customer excited for the upcoming games, and a lot of the times that has to be done through the tone of our voice and positive descriptive words.

Ticket Sales Representative 10 disclosed the following regarding the expected emotions, “When we speak to our customers, we have to act like we genuinely care about the tickets we are selling, even if we do not care at all.” Ticket Sales Representative 5 elaborated on the required emotions and detailed how sport impacts their position through the following representative quote:

Being involved with sports always elevates people’s emotions. If we have a bad loss, or if we are on a five-game losing streak, we have to still be positive when interacting with our customers. If we, as ticket sales representatives, aren’t excited and happy about the product we are selling, then the customers will notice. The positivity and up-beat attitude stems from us, and we then try to extend that to our customers.

As expressed above, positive emotions and attitudes are expected daily and, in many cases, are explicitly stated by the organization. Ticket Sales Representative 11 elaborated on that concept and discussed how her organization introduced a tagline relating to their required emotions:

“Smile and dial” was one of the rules we had in our office. It was actually one of the quotes that was hanging over the door, so we could see it before we came in every single morning. It was stressed daily that it was noticeable to the customers if we had negative or neutral emotions, so we constantly strived to show our smile through our conversations. My managers were sticklers about that and harped on it a lot.

Ultimately, this overarching theme illustrates the common emotions that are required of a ticket sales representative at the professional, collegiate, and minor league levels of sport. The nature of the expected emotions suggests a strong influence from the organization. Such an influence indicates employees may feel a pressure to display these expected emotions and conform to the policies of their employer.

EXPLICIT ALTERING OF EMOTIONS

After discussing the emotions that were required for their current job positions, all current and former athletics ticket sales representatives mentioned how they deliberately altered their emotions and sales approach to fit the situation. Participants conveyed that their emotions and script changed depending on the specific athletics event they were selling for, the type of client they were interacting with, and the platform where the conversation was being held (i.e., in-person, via email communication, via phone communication). Ticket Sales Representative 3 provided the following representative quote in relation to specific sporting events:

Honestly, depending on the sport, especially if the on-field product is bad, it is hard to put on a happy face. The last thing I want to do is get on the phone and call somebody

after our football team lost on national television 56-0. Believe me, it is not fun, but you have to psych yourself up and change your attitude when interacting with customers.

Another aspect discussed among respondents was the altering of emotions depending on the type of customer they were interacting with. Ticket Sales Representative 5 expressed the following in support of the previous statement:

I believe one of my keys to success in my sales career was teaching myself to think like the customer. Kind of getting the feel for where their emotions were, where their nonverbal communication was, and how they were reacting to what I was selling to them. I would then make adjustments to my presentation based on their reaction.

This interviewee's response depicts the notion that athletics ticket sales representatives alter their sales approach and emotions frequently when interacting with various clients. Ticket Sales Representative 4 had a similar response in the following representative quote:

I would say we are constantly changing our selling points to fit our customer's needs. For example, it is a different conversation if you are talking with a former student-athlete compared to the head of a large business company. The script also changes if you are talking to an older person compared to someone who is young and bringing the family out for the first time. It is also a different approach if you are selling to an individual game buyer who wants a cheap seat compared to season ticket holders who fight for seat locations. Every client needs a different approach, and the conversation should constantly be changing.

Finally, participants discussed how their emotions and sales approach changed depending on the platform they use to communicate with the client. All current and former athletics ticket sales representatives mentioned they primarily speak with individuals via phone communication, but their goal is to secure a face-to-face meeting. Ticket Sales Representative 9 stated "With conversations over the phone and email, we are the ones having to paint that picture with only words. It is very difficult at times." One key aspect discussed regarding face-to-face communication was the relationship building that exists. Ticket Sales Representative 1 stated the following, "When we can meet the customers face-to-face, you have that personal interaction that can really build the relationship. The customer can put a face with the name instead of "some guy/gal who calls me." Finally, Ticket Sales Representative 9 expressed the following regarding face-to-face interactions:

When you meet with customers in person, it is easier to pick up on their nonverbal cues. These nonverbal cues help you match the emotion and body language of the customer you are speaking with. If they are quiet and reserved, then I try to be the same way. I always try to match their tempo and personality as well. I feel like the customer is more

likely to purchase from you if they can see you are similar to them rather than the opposite. The connection is key in sales, and face-to-face conversations help bridge the inevitable distance.

PRESENCE OF CONTRASTING EMOTIONS

Throughout the semi-structured interviews, it was made clear to the researchers that both current and former athletics ticket sales representatives frequently experienced contrasting emotions in their job position. This was demonstrated through responses regarding how participants were expected to display the required positive emotions, even if their true feelings varied. As conveyed by Ticket Sales Representative 4, “Whether it is family issues, financial issues, relationship issues, etc., you must be positive toward the customer. You must put on a happy face and display positive emotions, even when you’re dealing with personal stuff behind the scenes.” Ticket Sales Representative 14 discussed the contrasting emotions felt on game day in the following representative quote:

A lot of the times I experience contrasting emotions on game days when I’m dealing with an irate customer. Anytime something goes wrong, I am the one tasked to calm the person down. Even though I might want to come out of my shell and speak honestly about the situation, I have to remember I work in customer-service. I have to gauge myself in those experiences and make sure my customer service hat is always on. I must stay positive and remember that the “customer is always right.”

As alluded to above, athletics ticket sales representatives often experience uncivil behavior which exceeds the standard rejection response, and they are expected to maintain their composure and follow company procedures. Ticket Sales Representative 3 mentioned how he spent most of his days on the phone with customers who berated him. He described how the rejection did not necessarily hurt, but rather the unnecessary personal attacks made by the customers. Ticket Sales Representative 6 provided a story detailing the emotions he experienced on a cold call which got personal:

In 1999, I was first getting started making calls to people on behalf of [the organization]. I had just made an outbound call to gauge some interest in a company to see if they had any experience at our games or had an interest in buying tickets. The receptionist who answered the phone call, stopped me mid pitch and asked me if I had ever thought about going to college and making something of myself, as opposed to being a telemarketer who consistently bothers other people. This was something of a shock to me, considering I had just graduated with my bachelor’s degree. The point is, that at any point in this industry, someone might fire off on you and be rude. However, you must take a step back, bite your tongue, swallow your pride, and remain positive because that is your job.

This story illustrates the contrasting emotions that can be experienced daily for athletics ticket sales representatives. Although the customer was rude and personally attacking the seller, the sales representative was expected to put aside his anger and focus on positive emotions and attitudes to abide by the company policies.

Other representatives mentioned instances where customers used illicit language or made derogatory comments during the interaction. Ticket Sales Representative 7 stated, “at times it felt like I was a punching bag. For some reason they expressed all their anger out toward me. Some of the stuff they said was extremely hurtful.” When asked to provide an example of what was said, she stated, “I would rather not repeat some of the comments.” These types of exchanges involved verbal abuse, yet representatives were still expected to “smile through the phone,” maintain a positive attitude, and abide by the organization’s status quo.

EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION

Stemming from the emotional expectations of the job, explicit altering of emotions, and presence of contrasting emotions, athletics ticket sales representatives commonly experienced exhaustion. Specifically, 12 of the 16 participants mentioned some form of mental and/or emotional exhaustion during the interviews, including one participant who was actively searching for a job outside of ticket sales and all five who left the profession and secured other employment. This exhaustion was portrayed in numerous ways such as: struggling to engage in regulation strategies, feelings of isolation, and processing uncivil exchanges.

Ticket Sales Representative 12 illustrated emotional exhaustion through the following representative quote:

It’s exhausting to be quite honest with you. That whole biting my tongue thing. You know, when I don’t necessarily agree with something, and I have to ‘put on a happy face’ and act in direct contrast of how I actually feel. It’s harder than you would think.

An additional statement by Ticket Sales Representative 10, highlighted the emotional struggles that occur while engaging in regulation strategies, “It is very draining, and that constant rejection is very hard. Then you add that it doesn’t make very much money.” The previous quote provides an insight into reasons why individuals may leave their current entry-level ticketing position. In fact, when asked about the satisfaction with her current position, Ticket Sales Representative 11 mentioned her search for a new job in the marketing field. She asserted:

I don't love it [ticket sales]. I do not love the work that I do. I am at the point where I am not passionate about it anymore. It is a lot of negatives. It is a lot of no. It is a lot of "don't call me again." And truthfully, it can wear on you pretty quick if you don't have the right type of personality. For me, marketing is where I want to be. I'm ready to move on.

The athletics ticket sales representatives also expressed how isolating the position was which contributed to their emotional exhaustion. Ticket Sales Representative 16, who recently left the profession, described her former work environment as overly competitive and at times "toxic". She referenced how her manager created competition among sales representatives for the number of closed sales, which added unnecessary stress and anxiety. Individuals were pitted against each other to meet sales quotas, which created an isolating experience. She conveyed:

I was forced to "wear a happy face" while I experienced rejection for seven hours straight. I kind of expected that when I entered sales though. Everyone warns you of it. They talk to you about it in the training. But I wasn't expecting the rejection I felt from my colleagues. Even if they weren't assholes to my face (though sometimes they were), seeing them win the weekly competitions and sell more packages was discouraging. Each day I walked away feeling like a failure.

Ticket Sales Representative 11 also mentioned the isolation and described "feeling like I was on an island with no help in sight". There was not anyone she connected with at work where she could relax for a second and be genuine. Everyone seemed to have an agenda which stemmed from the constant pressure to make sales.

Further, little organizational support seemed to exist for ticket sales representatives who experienced verbal attacks from customers, which contributed to the emotional exhaustion. Participants described how their employers cared more about the sale than the uncivil customer. They were not given much time to process what was said, as there were quota expectations each day. Ticket Sales Representative 13 stated, "We were just expected to brush the comments off our shoulders and make our next call." Other participants described the process of reporting the uncivil interaction. Ticket Sales Representative 7 explained:

I was so appalled by what was said to me that I could barely keep my cool. I managed to get off the phone without losing it and went straight to my boss. He acted like it was not a big deal and showed me how to flag the guy in the system. That was it. Then I was expected to call the next person on my list.

Receiving these comments contributed to the emotional exhaustion of the athletics ticket sales employees, as many were personal and targeted. Furthermore, the lack of acknowledgement and support from colleagues and employers when these uncivil exchanges occurred furthered the feelings of isolation.

UNIQUE EMOTIONS REQUIRED IN SPORT

The final prevalent theme discovered through the open-coding process was an indication that athletics ticket sales differed from general sales regarding emotion. The ticket sales representatives expressed this theme through two avenues. The first avenue consisted of responses related to the difference between selling an experience compared to a physical product.

The thought was conveyed through the following quote from Ticket Sales Representative 4, "If I were selling a physical product, I would focus on the benefits [of the product]. However, with sports, I focus on the experience side of things and try to tap into the customer's emotions to get them excited for the game." Ticket Sales Representative 2 conveyed a similar response:

With sports, there is so much passion and emotion involved by the fans. I am consistently altering my emotions when selling tickets to the game because I have to try to connect with my customer's passion and provide them with a unique experience. I am always having to adapt to them, whereas with a physical product, the script would stay the same from week to week.

Another individual, Ticket Sales Representative 1, expressed a similar message regarding the difference between selling a physical product and an experience:

I think it is more difficult to sell a physical product because it is hard to connect to. Whereas when I'm selling an experience such as an event or a game, I am able to paint a picture of what possibilities exist for the [customer].

As discussed in the previous statements, all participants viewed a difference between the selling of an experience and the selling of a product. The responses indicated heightened emotions are involved with selling tickets to an athletics event. Although representatives can capitalize on this intense connection, some respondents, primarily those who had left the profession, viewed selling the experience as harder than selling the product. This concept was illustrated by Ticket Sales Representative 10:

I actually think selling a physical product is easier because the product stays the same. Every person knows exactly what they are paying for, and they know in advance if they are going to enjoy it or not. With sport, the experience is what we sell, and that differs from person to person. Then if you add in winning and losing, that just adds another messy dimension that complicates the selling process.

The second avenue participants expressed as being unique to the athletics industry was the concept of genuine identification or fandom. In almost all interviews, participants indicated they were fans of the team they sold

tickets for. "I would say I am a fan of the [Tigers]. I might not have been when I originally took the job, but the excitement and identity grow as you progress within the organization," stated Ticket Sales Representative 8. Another participant, Ticket Sales Representative 6, echoed that statement with the following quote:

I am not a minor league sports person in general. I am not a fan of minor leagues because I like seeing sports played at the highest level possible. However, I would say I am a fan of [my organization] because I appreciate everyone involved with the [athletics] program.

The same participant directly discussed how being a fan of the team impacts selling tickets to customers. The respondent stated, "I believe the fans and the season ticket base know if you are invested emotionally as a fan rather than just an employee. Quite frankly, if you are, it pays off in dividends." Ticket Sales Representative 12 had a similar response in relation to the benefits of being a fan when speaking with customers:

Even though I work for the rival school of where I got my undergraduate degree, I have become a fan of the sports teams within [my organization] because it provides a common ground for when I am speaking to my clients. Knowing the ins-and-outs of the players, coaches, records, etc., makes it easier to connect with an individual. Whereas, if I was not a fan and had no interest in the team, I would not have been able to form the immediate connection with people when trying to sell tickets.

These statements add support to the idea that ticket sales representatives in the athletics context benefit from identifying with their team and organization as not only an employee, but a fan, to form a stronger connection with their customers.

Discussion

Based on the semi-structured interviews, the first contribution centered around the prevalence of managed emotions among athletics ticket sales employees. The current findings indicate athletics ticket sales representatives engaged in emotional labor by monitoring their emotions in order to achieve organizational goals. While this process of regulating both internal and external expressions has been found to positively influence organizational outcomes (Humphrey, 2015), the presence of emotional labor, especially in the form of surface acting, has predominantly been seen as a negative influence on the individual employee (Totterdell & Holman, 2003). As athletics ticket sales representatives experience added pressures (e.g., low pay, long hours, defined selling seasons, high rejection, and dependence on commission),

compared to other customer-focused positions across the sport industry, the current findings illustrated that the daily performance of emotional labor was difficult to manage due to the expectations outlined by the organization.

Specifically, the results indicated that athletics ticket sales representatives were expected to always display positive emotions throughout the workday, regardless of their felt emotions. The pressure to conform has been shown to be difficult to manage for many employees (Goodwin et al., 2011), which was illustrated through the acknowledgment of frustration and annoyance among athletics ticket sales representatives. The current findings indicated that emotions were explicitly altered during customer-employee interactions due to the informal norms expected by the employer as well as written organizational policies. The conscious changing of feelings to abide by the organization's display rules has been shown to occur because of individual differences involving customers (Goldberg & Grandey, 2007) along with the frontline employee expectation to engender customer satisfaction (Saxe & Weitz, 1982; Zablah et al., 2012). As shown in the athletics ticket sales context, the representatives altered their behaviors and emotions based on the sport, type of customer, and platform of interaction to provide a positive customer experience and achieve sales quotas.

The second contribution discussed the presence of contrasting emotions. Through the interviews it was evident the athletics ticket sales representatives engaged in emotion regulation strategies to counteract the continuous discrepancy they felt between inner-feelings and outward expressions. The findings indicated the representatives engaged in surface acting (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993) by displaying the required emotions of the organization while suppressing their true feelings. Surface acting was most evident during the uncivil exchanges involving verbal abuse by the customer, as the comments elicited negative emotions in the athletics ticket sales representatives, which were counter to the pleasant demeanor they were expected to display. Although many customer comments included illicit language, diminishing statements, prejudicial assertions, and derogatory terms, the athletics ticket sales representatives described their felt obligation to convey a positive sentiment. This finding is supported by an empirical study conducted by Rupp and Spencer (2006) where customer-service representatives were exposed to interactionally fair or unfair customers. Results indicated that participants who had been exposed to "impolite, disrespectful, inarticulate, and informationally unclear" customers exerted higher levels of emotional labor than those exposed to customers who were fairer (p. 975).

Further, the athletics ticket sales representatives engaged in surface acting because of the fear of constant rejection involved with their position.

This concept, known as sales call anxiety, is defined as “the fear of being negatively evaluated and rejected by customers” (Verbeke & Bagozzi, 2000, p. 88). Because of this trepidation, customer-focused employees are more likely to engage in protective actions, such as surface acting, where they can easily regress to the organization’s previously defined emotions. While the “service with a smile” approach has been shown to yield positive results for the organization (Pugh, 2001), the constant emotional control involved with surface acting is detrimental to individuals and depletes cognitive and emotional resources needed to perform other essential duties (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993).

In fact, Hülshager and Schewe (2011) conducted a three-decade meta-analysis and discovered surface acting to be consistently problematic for employee well-being which includes “emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, psychological strain, psychosomatic complaints, and negative relationships with job satisfaction and organizational attachment” (p. 377). Based on their findings, athletics ticket sales representatives who constantly engage in surface acting are at risk for the negative outcomes. While almost all the ticket sales representatives in the current study acknowledged the difficulty of emotional control, negative impact on well-being was specifically expressed by all five of the ticket sales representatives who chose to leave the profession. These individuals specifically discussed the emotional exhaustion they felt due to a combination of factors including constant rejection, feelings of isolation, and uncivil behaviors. The athletics ticket sales representatives explained how toxic work environments, an overly competitive organizational culture, and a lack of connection to colleagues were contributing factors to their feelings of isolation. They felt the pressure to succeed, make sales, and hit quotas were prioritized over their well-being. Further, as three of the five individuals who left the profession identified as female, these results provide support that female-identifying athletics ticket sales employees are more likely to experience negative consequences when engaging in surface acting (Johnson & Spector, 2007) and may experience more harassment and/or uncivil customer exchanges than their male-identifying colleagues (Popp et al., 2022).

Finally, the last contribution of the current study indicated the athletics industry, specifically in terms of the athletics ticket sales context, may offer two unique avenues related to emotion when compared to other customer service positions. While the current findings have not been discussed in emotional labor literature, selling the “game experience” and the importance of team identification have been identified as characteristics unique to the sport industry and have been frequently explored in the sport management

discipline (Chanavat & Bodet, 2014; Kang et al., 2022; Samra & Wos, 2014; Wann, 2006). Because the outcome of the game and/or competition cannot be predicted or guaranteed (Chanavat & Bodet, 2014), additional focus must be placed on creating a memorable and unique experience to establish a strong emotional connection with the customer. In the current study, some athletics ticket sales representatives preferred selling the “game experience” over a physical product, as they were able to form more authentic relationships when identifying and addressing the individual needs of the customer. Supported by Zablah et al. (2016), creating a cycle of self-reinforcing exchanges can enhance the outcomes for both customers and frontline employees alike.

Alternatively, the athletics ticket sales representatives who left the profession deemed selling the “game experience” more difficult, as the individual needs of the customer differed dramatically, increasing the uncertainty involved with each service interaction. As every potential customer expects a unique experience tailored toward their needs, athletics ticket sales representatives regularly participated in unscripted interactions where surface acting was likely to occur. The uncertain and unscripted interactions have been shown to strongly contribute to job stress, emotional exhaustion, and disengagement among frontline service workers (Behrman & Perreault, 1984). Participants also described dealing with customers when issues arose including when the “game experience” did not meet their level of satisfaction. Recall the quote by Ticket Sales Representative 14 where she discussed the contrasting emotions felt on game day when dealing with an irate customer, or Ticket Sales Representative 3 when he expressed his frustration after a customer called to complain about the on-field product after a 56-0 loss. Although the sale was completed, athletics ticket sales representatives often engage in unscripted and challenging interactions after the event has concluded. As explained by some of the athletics ticket sales representatives, the phone number for the organization’s ticket office is heavily promoted and easily accessible compared to other offices and/or departments, which can lead to increased call volume from unsatisfied customers. Compared to other segments of the athletics industry, ticket sales representatives often manage negative and/or uncivil customer exchanges through surface acting more frequently due to the previously mentioned reasons. This prior statement corresponds with the idea that emotional expression, created by regulation strategies such as surface acting, is likely to differ by occupation (Goodwin et al., 2011).

The majority of athletics ticket sales representatives, both former and current, also described the importance of identifying with their team to form

deeper connections with their customers. The results suggested that team identification has a positive influence on workplace attitudes through the display of more authentic emotions. In support of Swanson & Kent (2015), the results indicated, “the psychological connection with the team does indeed have an impact on how committed, satisfied, motivated, and cognitively involved [the employees] are in relation to their workplace environment” (p. 472). By engaging in deep acting or genuine expression, employees have the ability to remove the implicit and explicit pressures placed by the organization (Grandey, 2000; Grandey, 2003). In turn, frontline employees, such as athletics ticket sales representatives, are motivated to perform helping behaviors which strengthen the social bond with the customer (Zablah et al., 2016). Further, the current findings add support to previous research which suggests employees who identify with the team find more meaningfulness in their jobs and display affective organizational commitment (Swanson & Kent, 2015). While they do not directly contribute to the on-field/on-court performance, athletics ticket sales representatives play a direct role in the atmosphere that takes place during the event. Through relationship building and self-reinforcing exchanges, customers not only provide immediate benefits to the team such as creating an atmosphere through a full stadium, but also, prolonged benefits through a customer’s lifetime value. Supported by Wann and colleagues (1999), individuals who are psychologically attached to their team, “will consider themselves as more “instrumental” (...), because their actions more directly contribute to their team’s performance” (as cited in Swanson & Kent, 2015, p. 466).

Practical Implications

The results of the current study have practical importance to the emerging line of research on emotional labor within the sport industry. Because this concept has minimally been studied in this context, the current study not only addresses a gap in the literature but furthers the understanding of service-related frontline employees within the athletics setting. The researchers’ current findings illustrated the presence of emotional labor, which indicates athletics ticket sales representatives are regulating their emotions to conform with workplace standards.

While this practice is common among frontline employees in service-related industries, the emotional toll these athletics ticket sales representatives experience may be excessive, which was illustrated by the individuals who left the profession. All five former ticket sales representatives, and the one

applying for positions outside of ticket sales, discussed the emotional exhaustion they experienced related to regulation strategies, feelings of isolation in the workplace, and the internal processing needed after uncivil exchanges with the customer. Further, demographic differences emerged, and female-identifying participants more often described instances of inappropriate customer-employee exchanges which contributed to their emotional exhaustion. The expectation of always displaying positive emotions was shown to be difficult due to the previously mentioned factors in combination with the low pay, long hours, defined selling-seasons, high rejection, and dependence on commission, all of which are common among the athletics ticket sales profession.

To help address the emotional exhaustion, employers can start by evaluating their leadership style, overall organizational sales culture, and workplace environment through self-reflection, focus group discussions, annual reviews, and exit surveys. This evaluation can help identify situations where negative emotion regulation strategies are commonly utilized, so situation-specific programming can be developed to aid employees. To address feelings of isolation, employers could encourage partnerships between co-workers or provide lunch-and-learn opportunities for people to connect, as work teams have been demonstrated to serve as both a source of support and a target of commitment for employees (Bishop & Stewart, 2000). Employers could also offer incentives related to effort rather than the number of closed sales. As purported by Popp and colleagues (2022), “rewarding things like calls made, appointments set, or emails written” may lead to better retention of employees (p. 281). Additionally, employers should consider the impact an overly competitive environment may have on individuals who frequently are engaged with surface-level acting. If an organization offers incentives, they should be structured to provide employees with a reward and no potential loss to avoid additional stress and emotional exhaustion. To encourage collaboration and knowledge-sharing, team incentives could also be created instead of individual competitions.

Employers should also evaluate the policies for when employees experience uncivil exchanges and provide the necessary time to process what was said. While quotas may need to be met, the impact verbal attacks have on the cognitive, psychological, and emotional health of employees should be recognized and treated respectfully. Further, employers should understand female-identifying athletics ticket sales representatives are more likely to experience uncivil exchanges with customers, as “the unique nature of the fan-as-consumer service relationship, coupled with the non-traditional hours of sport sales settings, may exacerbate such behaviors” (Popp et al., 2022, pp.

279-280). The organization must have consistent strategies in place so ticket sales representatives are equipped to properly handle the negative exchange and feel supported after the exchange occurs. As perceived supervisor support can reduce negative emotions (Xiao et al., 2022), it is important employers promptly assist and provide task/material support. When creating a policy, it is important these uncivil exchanges do not get buried in the system, but rather discussed and cataloged for future use. Examples include: create policies to deter dysfunctional and uncivil customer behavior from the onset, develop a clear reporting structure for when the exchange occurs, provide a detailed recollection of the uncivil exchanges, flag the customer account, and offer time off to process the exchange and meet with a trained professional. Most importantly, employers should not expect ticket sales representatives to continue “smiling and dialing” immediately after an uncivil exchange occurs.

Finally, practitioners should capitalize on the finding that athletics ticket sales representatives consider themselves fans of the team of which they are employed. This fandom not only allows athletics ticket sales representatives to interact with potential customers and participate in self-reinforcing exchanges, but the psychological connection provides them with a heightened sense of identity. Although conflicting anecdotes exist regarding whether fandom is a benefit or detriment for athletics employees, the results of the current study provide support to Swanson and Kent’s (2015) notion that identifying with the team leads to more positive workplace attitudes, and a higher level of psychological connection is associated with positive employee outcomes. Further, the current study provides support that team identification in the entry-level employee context may be beneficial from an emotional labor standpoint. As team identification allows athletics ticket sales representatives to express authentic emotions, genuine body language, and natural mannerisms when communicating with customers, the negative outcomes of emotional labor are limited (or nonexistent). Because of this finding, practitioners and managers should place importance on the team sport environment and search for opportunities to organically increase an employee’s psychological connection to the team.

In sum, as the demand for sales talent in professional and intercollegiate athletics continues to increase, practitioners must acknowledge the impact emotional labor and emotion regulation strategies have on athletics ticket sales representatives. Although emotional labor occurs in various service-relationship roles, the athletics ticket sales context places frontline employees in a distinct position where they actively engage in emotion regulation strategies. Due to the negative outcomes (e.g., emotional exhaustion, job satisfaction, burnout, job turnover, etc.) associated with surface acting, it

is important for practitioners to acknowledge the prevalence of emotional labor in this setting, identify instances where emotion regulation is likely to occur, and develop organizational strategies to improve the work experience of athletics ticket sales representatives.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite the relevant findings discovered from the current study, it is not without limitations. First, as the researchers' utilized a qualitative approach, the results are not easily generalizable to a broader population. These findings should be strongly considered since this concept has only briefly been studied in the sport context and has never been applied to athletics ticket sales. Additionally, the current study examined the viewpoints of ticket sales representatives located in the Midwest and South regions. Finally, the exploratory nature of the study allowed for the discovery of the unique emotions required in sport. Because this theme was not expected, there is a need for further examination.

Based on the semi-structured interviews, several future research avenues were evident. While there is a dearth of literature on emotional labor, the concept has yet to be applied to the sport management context. Despite providing evidence that emotional labor is present among athletics ticket sales representatives, the concept should be further examined in this context from a quantitative point of view. By introducing valid and reliable measures, the potential exists to discover the prevalence of each emotion regulation strategy among athletics ticket sales representatives.

Additionally, it would be meaningful to examine the differences between athletics ticket sales representatives in terms of hierarchical employment. The current study interviewed ticket sales representatives from a variety of positions to discover if emotional labor was present in the general setting. While the broad range of participants provided a baseline for the findings, future studies could examine how various roles may experience emotional labor differently. For example, do ticket sales managers experience similar emotional labor struggles as entry-level employees? Additional research could also aim at garnering a better understanding of the emotion regulation strategies utilized at the various sport levels: professional, collegiate, and minor leagues.

Finally, it would be beneficial to examine the unique avenues of emotions that were displayed in the athletics context. Future studies should build upon the current findings (i.e., discrepancies between representatives who stayed and those who left) and further examine the impact selling a "game

experience” has on employees in terms of emotion regulation strategies. Additional research should also be conducted on the topics of team identification, fandom, emotional labor, emotion regulation strategies, and athletics ticket sales representatives. As conflicting anecdotes exist regarding whether fandom is a benefit or detriment for athletics employees, the exploration of this area of sport could be meaningful and add additional insight into the topic.

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