

Buying and Selling Emotions: A Theoretical Analysis

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Abstract

This paper seeks to understand the relationship between the buying and selling of emotions in the retail and customer service industries of a capitalist economy. Symbolic interactionist theories were used to analyze the commodification and selling of emotions from the perspective of the producer and the employee. Psychoanalytic theories are employed to analyze consumer's unconscious desires for buying the newly commodified emotions. The unconscious cognitive processes and accompanying physiological manifestations occurring during the interaction between buyer and seller for the commodified emotion were subsequently looked at in detail. In the end, a conceptual theoretical framework was created which provides a means for interpreting internal, unconscious desire for type and level of a particular emotion based upon observable interactions.

Introduction

Members of capitalist societies use various forms of currency to obtain from others the commodities they require. Money is typically the currency exchanged between consumer and producer for goods and services. However, as Arlie Hochschild reveals in *The Managed Heart*, first published in 1983, individuals have come to commodify their emotions for use as currency as well. Much of the previous research regarding the commodification and management of emotions is focused around individuals in various sectors of employment who commodify and sell their emotions to an employer for a wage (Hochschild, 2003; Raz, 1997; Bolton, 2006; Seymour & Sandiford, 2005; Schweingruber & Berns, 2005; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987). An often overlooked aspect in the discourse on emotional commodification is the fact that there must ultimately be consumers who are willing to pay to obtain the artificially manufactured emotions; otherwise purchasing the right to structure a person's emotions will likely be deemed a poor capitalistic investment. I will contribute to previous research by employing symbolic

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interactionist and psychoanalytic perspectives in identifying a relationship between the unconscious emotional desires of consumers and the carefully manufactured emotions of producers. It is my contention that emotions are commodified and sold as a means for producers to reach capitalistic goals, while at the same time being purchased by consumers in an unconscious attempt to fill the void of “self.”

The unconscious emotional transactions that occur between consumers and producers is examined in two sections. Individuals who commodify and sell the control of their emotions to an employer are examined in the first section using Hochschild’s theory of emotion management. In the second section, dramaturgy provides a solid foundation for inspecting the physical interaction between a consumer and a producer due to the importance symbolic interactionism places on observable social interactions, while a psychoanalytic perspective allows for insight into the hidden emotional aspects of the interaction from the perspective of the consumer due to the perspective’s focus on internal and unobservable cognitive processes. Using psychoanalysis and dramaturgy, the emotions of consumers prior, during, and subsequent to an emotional transaction will be examined.

Selling Emotional Control

Hochschild (2003) exposes a profound new way of looking at emotion in the context of employment. No longer are employees trading only their labour for a wage, they are also now trading their emotions for a wage. The commodification and management of emotions can be found in most, if not all, sectors of work in contemporary society. I wish to focus the discussion specifically on the retail/customer service sectors. In the retail and customer service sectors, unlike most other areas of employment, the emotional performance staged by employees is pivotal to the success of the employer. If a salesperson greets a customer with an unpleasant demeanour, or if a waiter/waitress is rude to a customer, it is likely the customer will not purchase the product being sold. Therefore, if improper emotions are continually projected the employer will lose sales and clientele and may ultimately lose the entire business. In other sectors of employment, such as health care or industrial work, emotion management on behalf of employees is indeed paid for and expected, but it likely will not affect the profitability of the organization itself. A cantankerous nurse who is expected to project emotions of empathy, caring, and helpfulness will not cause the hospital to lose revenue or have to shut its doors, just

the same as a lazy dock worker who is expected to have pride in the job will not cause the shipping port to close. Despite the majority of workers being paid, to various degrees, to manage their emotions, only the emotion management of employees in retail and customer service work has ramifications for the employer's profitability and sustainability.

Hochschild (2003, p. 37-42) suggests an individual's management of their emotions can be done through either of two ways: surface acting or deep acting. Surface acting is the process by which an individual produces an emotion but it is not representative of their actual internal emotion. Surface acting is likely the more prominent of the two types of acting engaged in by retail and customer service employees since the emotions portrayed are contrived and an individual can separate themselves from the emotion. In essence, surface acting is analogous to wearing a mask of emotion. An employee can smile and be outwardly pleasant while working, but as soon as their work day is done they can easily discard the happy facade and allow their actual feelings to resurface. Wearing a mask of emotion also allows for emotions and feelings to be interchangeable and situational. A waitress might be jovial with one table of customers, and then a short time later stern and standoffish with another table. The function of quickly and easily transforming emotions is facilitated through an individual's engagement in surface acting.

Deep acting, on the other hand, occurs when an emotion is evoked through a recall of prior memories and experiences in which the required feeling is present. With deep acting the emotion that is elicited is derived from pre-existing emotions within the individual, and as such it will likely be viewed as a more sincere display of that emotion. Hochschild (2003) parallels her concept of deep acting to that of Constantin Stanislavski's Method acting by using the example of a man who is trying to suppress his love for his ex-wife. The man must remember instances where he felt disdain for his wife and create situations in his mind in which she exhibits the negative emotions. By continually remembering his wife in a negative fashion, the man will actively, rather than naturally, fall out of love with her (Hochschild, 2003, p. 40-41). It is likely that when employers mould their employee's work-related emotions they are attempting to, in the long run, train the employees to deep-act these emotions. Rather than putting on a happy or helpful emotional mask, the employees who use deep acting will actually bring forth from within the emotion their employer requires of them. A possible consequence of modifying an emotion through deep acting is that the feeling may not be easily discarded at the end of the work day.

Raz (1997) explores the practical implementation and utilization of Hochschild's aforementioned theories of emotion management by employees at Tokyo Disneyland. He initially iterates Disney's well-known service motto, "we create happiness," (Raz, 1997, p. 204) to contextualize the emotions which employees are expected and paid to represent. Tokyo Disneyland employees are trained and continuously reminded to uphold the atmosphere they have been hired to create. In the orientation quiz provided to new employees, the correct answer to the question "We Tokyo Disneyland Cast Members provide [blank] to all the guests" (Raz, 1997, p. 204) is "happiness." Beyond training, employees are routinely told to protect the magical and happy image that Tokyo Disneyland provides. One employee expresses that trainers have told him, "people have dreams about Disneyland, you cannot break their dream, it would break their heart." (Raz, 1991, p. 204) In another instance, an employee discusses how workers are told that using the park's public address system too often will destroy the atmosphere of dreams and magic (Raz, 1997, p. 205). As a profit-seeking corporation, Disney keeps tight control over the ongoing emotion management of its employees and, in turn, the entire emotional experience of its customers.

The training regimen of employees at Tokyo Disneyland may imply that surface acting is the method of emotion management employed in the creation of happiness since employees must be trained and reminded to continually construct the emotion of happiness for the consumer. However, Raz suggests the method for managing emotions practiced in Tokyo Disneyland can be more succinctly defined as symbolic typing. Symbolic types "are stable, permanent performative patterns of behaviour that through their inner consistency, self-referentiality and independence of social context, serve to create a reality of their own." (Raz, 1997, p. 213) When a symbolic type must be adhered to it does not matter whether individuals use surface or deep acting to construct and manage their emotion(s), it only matters that the symbolic type is successfully achieved and propagated. It is evident that Tokyo Disneyland, and Disney in general, do in fact create their own "magical" reality. No matter what country or culture a consumer visits a Disneyland in, the corporation attempts to maintain a consistency of atmosphere and experience for all its customers. Consistency is the most important aspect of symbolic typing as it relates to the management of employee's emotions.

Individuals employed by a corporation using symbolic typing have no leeway in regards to adding a touch of personality into the emotion being manufactured. Although the emotions of

the flight attendants studied by Hochschild are highly regulated, they no doubt have the authority to articulate them in various manners. For example, the flight attendants must put on a smile (Hochschild, 2003, p. 4), but they can elicit it in different ways (forcibly, by making jokes, through surface or deep acting, etc.). Whereas employees whose emotion management is guided by symbolic typing must portray the contrived emotion(s) exactly as they are designed in order to perpetuate the engineered capitalist environment, regardless of how they come to elicit the emotion (either through surface or deep acting). A Tokyo Disneyland employee is not allowed to unilaterally decide how to create an environment of happiness, the corporation already has in place a pre-defined and successfully proven template to create happiness and the employees are simply required to fill certain roles in sustaining the emotionally driven consumerism. The training at Tokyo Disneyland provides the framework of inner consistency and self-referentiality that cast members are expected to abide by in order to satisfactorily implement Disney's patterns of happiness and magic.

Emotion management techniques used by customer service and retail workers who are not compensated for maintaining a symbolic type also need to be addressed since they too are required to manage their emotions, albeit with typically less restriction and oversight. Seymour and Sandiford (2005) discuss how smaller scale employers have minimal training and few rules regarding emotion management while allowing employees to informally learn the organization's emotional rules. According to Seymour & Sandiford (2005), employees often already have experience in managing their emotions based on prior instances of socialization from various social institutions (p. 555). At the same time the researchers suggest that the management in smaller organizations have the role of protecting customers from the inevitable emotional mistakes of the employees (2005, p. 553). In contrast to the strictly imposed and ever-present symbolic typing of many large multi-national corporations, small scale businesses are more likely to allow their employees to learn emotional rules through observation and will only intervene if an employee projects emotions which are significantly inconsistent with those that are desired. In this situation individuals probably employ surface acting to conjure up specified emotions. They are aware, through observation and/or prior experience, of the emotions that need to be created and as such will find ways to exhibit them. It is likely the emotions will only be surface acted since the employees acknowledge the emotions are an aspect of their

employment and not of their conception of self, and they will presumably recognize they can stop the emotional performance once their shift has ended.

It is important to realize that although the majority of retail and customer service employers require some form of emotional management from their employees, the degree to which they instill and enforce it falls along a continuum. At one end of the continuum are the laid-back public houses examined by Seymour & Sandiford (2005) where employees gradually pick up the rules of emotion management while on the job and are kept on track by management only when errors in the display of emotions occur. On the other end of the continuum are corporations like Disney which are hyperconscious about their public image. These types of corporations are more likely to use the symbolic typing Raz (1997) identifies because they have a much wider audience of potential customers and must maintain consistent service around the world. All other retail and customer service employers fall somewhere along the continuum in regards to the degree of control they exert over the emotion management of employees. No matter what point an employer occupies along the continuum of emotion management, they compensate their staff with currency in return for the creation, display, and propagation of emotion.

Buying Emotions

Capitalist ideologies dictate that the newly created emotional commodities in the retail and customer service sectors must now be sold so the employer who has paid for their creation may attempt to make a profit. The employer, through remuneration of their employees for the management of their emotions, provides capital to create a commodity, and as such must sell that commodity to consumers in order to recoup not only the initial capital investment, but also make a profit. If managing employee emotions is not profitable (ie. consumers do not buy the emotion or the tangible commodities associated with the emotional commodity) the practice will likely cease since it is not in the capitalist employer's best financial interest to continue. Thankfully for employers, the market for emotional commodities in a capitalist society is vast and includes customers from most, if not all, social demographics. All consumers, regardless of their age, sex, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, or socioeconomic status have some degree of subconscious or unconscious desire to obtain emotional fulfillment. Psychoanalytic concepts assist in understanding why all individuals, and especially those in capitalist societies, are in the market

for emotions. Elliot (2007, p. 137) argues that to Jacques Lacan the self is marked by emptiness and that individuals try to cover the fragmentation and loss of self through narcissistic illusions of completeness. When a person reflects on their self, they may conjure up characteristics such as female, male, mother, father, doctor, musician, student, professor, employee, priest, and likely countless more. However, all these conceptions are false – they only serve to displace the emptiness that is the self by providing a comforting blanket of contentment that allows an individual to interact with and relate to others in day-to-day society.

All emotions point inwards to the empty core of the self. Emotions, either possessed or sought, can be thought of as a shroud which covers an individual's desire for some semblance of a self. An expression of happiness can be viewed as a form of self-denial in which the individual is refusing to accept the nothingness by pretending they do not even acknowledge its existence. The act of an emotional gloss-over allows an individual to focus their attention on maintaining narcissistic illusions. At the same time, an expression of sadness might also be considered as an individual's acknowledgement of the emptiness of self. Sadness can be used to illustrate a realization of the presence of a non-existent self through the internal turmoil caused in trying to come to an acceptance of that fact. The omnipresent emptiness of self can cause sadness due to individual recognition of the fact that attempting to cloak the emptiness with an emotion is futile and no matter what the emptiness is inevitably inescapable. Some people may argue that a person can be happy and content internally with their self and that they do not use emotions and feelings as a way to construct a false self. An argument such as the one described does not disprove the idea that individuals beguile themselves into believing there is indeed a self, it can actually be used to strengthen Lacan's delusion of self supposition. True inner contentment, although highly subjective and generally elusive for most, may be defined by some as having acknowledged, accepted, and transcended the idea of an empty self. Content people may describe themselves as unencumbered by internal turmoil and cognitive dissonance. However, contentment itself is also a feeling, and as such it is employed in the same fashion as other emotions in protecting the individual from their nothingness. Individuals therefore unconsciously seek to purchase emotions in an attempt to delude themselves regarding the existence of a self.

Theoretical Discussion

Having identified a potential internal desire for emotional fulfillment, the unconscious transaction between the consumer and the retail or customer service employee for the newly created emotional commodity can subsequently be examined using aspects of dramaturgy and psychoanalysis. From the point of view of the consumer, Rafaeli and Sutton (1987) describe an emotional transaction as consisting of a cycle of displaying an emotion, receiving feedback on it, and then readjusting the emotion, if necessary (p. 25). Each transaction allows consumers to unconsciously compare and contrast their emotion with the one that is being sold. When the consumer begins interacting with an employee, he or she initialize the cycle with whatever emotion they happen to be currently presenting. The degree to which the commodified emotion replaces the consumer's emotion may be personified by the perceived willingness of the consumer to obtain the material good. I intend to construct a conceptual framework of consumer's emotions prior to, during, and subsequent to emotional transactions in the discussion that follows.

In the initial phase of the conceptual framework of an emotional transaction, consumers present with an emotion. Any emotion conceivable may be presented – it is not important in the overall framework to identify what the specific emotion is. The modification of an emotion is primarily the reason why an individual presents with the emotion of their choice. Again drawing from Lacanian psychoanalysis, individuals are constantly seeking to rid themselves of the feeling of a loss of self, and as such they are always attempting to modify their emotions in a way that will bring them closer to the unattainable completeness of self. Individuals can enter an emotional transaction in one of three scenarios: Projecting the same emotion that is being sold, projecting the emotion they think they need to possess in order to obtain the emotion being sold, or projecting whatever emotion they happen to be feeling at the moment. In the first scenario, if the consumer presents with the same emotion being sold, they may be doing so in order to be more easily accepted into the manufactured emotional environment. Entering the transaction while already performing their dramaturgical role is evidence that the consumer has a strong desire to attain or strengthen the emotion being sold. For example, a consumer entering Disneyland with their suspension of disbelief already piqued and a happy attitude will almost instantly fit in to the role created by cast members. The individual may feign (surface act) an emotion or it may be genuine (deep acting), either way the consumer will be looking to modify it

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in some fashion. Under the second scenario, when consumers enter a transaction projecting the emotion they think they need to have in order to justify the purchase of the emotional commodity being sold to them, they are again employing dramaturgical principals. Rather than actively joining the performance with employees, customers will wait for the employees to initialize the engagement and bring the emotional commodity along with them. The circumstance mentioned is analogous to going to Disneyland while in a bad mood. While in a bad mood it is unlikely for an individual to seek out happiness (misery loves company), but they are likely to allow the employees to come up to them and try to create happiness around them. In the third and final possible scenario of the initial display of emotion, consumers possess a feeling not seemingly linked to the one being sold. This scenario is the most important because it allows the consumer to window shop an emotion through arms-length observation without any commitment to buy. Engaging in a transaction with a retail or customer service employee allows the consumer to make an unconscious emotional comparison to the emotional commodity being sold.

During the transaction, consumers may react with willingness, confrontation, or indifference to the feedback they receive about the emotional commodity. Once the emotions of the consumer and the employee have had a moment to interact, the resulting feedback is analyzed by the consumer's unconscious and a determination regarding the appropriate reaction to display is made. A degree of willingness to engage and remain in the interaction should be displayed if the emotion being sold is in fact the emotion being sought by the consumer. For example, if individuals desire to be happy they should be willing to be involved in an interaction where happiness is commodified. The willingness for the emotion may be displayed by the consumer as focused attention on the employee, questions regarding the material good or service being sold, or a request for assistance in determining the correct material product to buy. If an employee embodies an emotion the consumer is willing to purchase, the consumer is more likely to engage in activities in the environment longer, or will purchase a material good in the hopes of obtaining the attached emotional commodity as well.

Exhibiting a reaction with any degree of confrontation during a transaction provides evidence the emotion being sold is not the emotion the consumer is seeking. If a consumer becomes confrontational based upon receiving negative feedback about the emotion being sold, this will be the point that they exit the transaction. The exit can manifest itself as a "no thanks, I'm not interested," or an "I'm just browsing," or if the emotional transaction has been occurring

without any face-to-face contact the consumer may just physically leave the environment. Through confrontation an individual may also be attempting to influence a change in the emotion being sold. A good example of consumers attempting to modify an emotional commodity can be seen most days at McDonald's as customers who approach the till to order become confrontational with the employee after a short time. The consumer may desire happiness, for example, but if the employee does not exude enough of the emotion to satisfy the consumer the resultant confrontation will likely stem from the attempt to extract more happiness out of the employee. If the employee succumbs to the emotional demands of the customer, the confrontation is likely to cease. However, if the employee does not sufficiently alter their emotion management and the emotional commodity the confrontation is likely to continue throughout the remainder of the transaction. A confrontational reaction to an employee is irrespective of the actual service being provided and should be considered as an attempt to modify the emotional commodity.

A consumer may react to emotional feedback during the interaction with indifference if the commodity deviates substantially from the amount or type of emotion that is desired. If an individual desires a large amount of happiness, but the emotional commodity being offered only contains a small amount of happiness, the consumer might become disinterested and halt the transaction. The opposite should also hold true – if an individual seeks only a limited amount of happiness, but the employee is overbearing and trying to sell a large amount, the transaction could fall through. Indifference may also signify that the marketed emotion is not at all the one the consumer is searching for. The unconscious desires of an individual are specific in the emotions which are sought and if an employee is found to be peddling an unwanted emotion the likely reaction to it is indifference. A demonstration of indifference is a sign the unconscious mind wishes for the conscious body to relocate to a different emotional environment. Reactions caused by emotional feedback during a transaction provide insight into whether an emotion is acceptable for purchasing or not.

The feelings a consumer projects subsequent to an emotional transaction are evidence of the success of the transaction. A transaction may have graduated levels of success from an emotional standpoint. In the worst case the transaction was a failure, there was no emotional fulfillment, and the consumer is still unconsciously searching for the emotion they desire. If an individual seeks to obtain excitement, they may go to a mattress shop, but if the unconscious

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transaction that takes place in the mattress shop does not appease their emotional desire they will likely go elsewhere to obtain excitement. The best result would be the complete success of a transaction. A successful exchange of the emotional commodity should be characterized by the consumer no longer desiring the purchased emotion since it has sufficiently covered the area of emptiness within. An individual leaving a theatre after watching a kung-fu movie who does not want to see another action film for some time has likely successfully acquired a desired feeling of adventure. Transactions ending somewhere in the middle of the scale exhibit varying characteristics of success or failure depending on which end of the spectrum the result is leaning towards. More success should equate to less of a desire for the emotion initially sought while more failure should translate into a continuing drive to obtain the emotion. The level of emotion displayed by the consumer following an interaction is a physiological indication of the success or failure of the unconscious emotional transaction.

Conclusion

Consciously, the commercial transactions that take place between consumers and producers can be aptly explained using capitalism and Hochschild's emotion management. All employers in our capitalist culture, not just those in the retail and customer service sector, are driven by the desire to accumulate as much wealth as possible. The companies sell not only material goods and services, but feelings as well through the control of employee emotions. Both the material and emotional commodities must be sold in the marketplace so the companies who invest heavily in their creation can earn a profit. A company would not invest in manufacturing a good or service if they knew a market for the product did not exist, if they did it would likely be an act of corporate suicide. The same can be said for the manufacturing of emotions. Realizing a positive return on investment must be occurring or else the tactic would be deemed unprofitable and the company would no longer employ the process. The sale of emotions to consumers is facilitated directly through the emotion management of employees who are trained to follow emotional rules. The employees are the ones who ultimately produce, market, and sell the emotions to consumers. There is no accurate way of assessing the financial gains realized from the sale of emotions since the figure would have to be correlated to a measurable statistic such as the revenue earned from the sale of material goods and services.

However, a positive correlation is likely to be found between the amount of money spent on emotional training and the revenue generated subsequent to the training.

Unconsciously, narcissistic desires drive consumers towards purchasing the manufactured emotions. The fact that the self does not exist fuels the unconscious towards covering up the emptiness that is in its place with false labels and emotions. The nothingness of self seems to be fluid and dynamic since the labels and emotions used to shroud it must constantly be reorganized and modified. Most commercial advertising reminds consumers that they are lacking in some superficial way (too much fat, not enough muscle, not happy enough, etc.); however, the unconscious mind will interpret the conscious recognition of a superficial deficiency as a realization of the self being a delusion. Subsequently the unconscious stokes desires for in the sense of Beaudrillard's theory of the hyperreal – in which everything is bathed in excess, images are more powerful than reality, and signs refer back to themselves in an infinite regression (Elliot, 2007, p. 140-141). This allows for an understanding of why the unconscious relentlessly desires for increasing emotional fulfillment. For the employers who pay to create the hyperreal emotional commodities, a lack of a self translates into dollars through increased sales based on the emotion(s) being sold. On the other hand, consumers obtain some degree of wholeness, completeness, and/or fulfillment by purchasing an emotional commodity attached to a material good or service.

The conceptual framework created in this discussion to analyze an emotional transaction undoubtedly needs to be further refined and developed. Having introduced three distinct areas in emotional transactions while at the same time providing a psychoanalytic rationale for the process is a big step forward in understanding the complex and understudied relationship between capitalism, commercial transactions, unconscious desires, emotions, and the self. A deeper integration of other psychoanalytic perspectives, combined with the identification of more subtle and specific stages in the transaction process, will provide a starting point for future research. Emotional transactions are present not only in the retail and service settings analyzed, but likely in all interactions individuals engage in, commercial and otherwise. No matter what we consciously buy, we are always unconsciously buying emotion.

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