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BEYOND THE SMILE AND WAVE OF PETROL ATTENDANTS: A CASE STUDY ON MALE PETROL ATTENDANTS’ USE OF EMOTIONAL LABOUR

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ABSTRACT
In many occupations, especially in the service sector, employees are required to display emotions such as friendliness when helping customers. Apart from physical labour, the management and display of appropriate emotions such as friendliness as part of everyday work refers to emotional labour. Much of the research on emotional labour focuses on negative outcomes, such as burnout and emotional exhaustion. Despite these negative repercussions, the positive consequences, such as financial gain for employers and bonus incentives for employees for high sales figures, may be implied in the expectation of and reasons why employees perform emotional labour. However, little research focuses on the positive outcomes of emotional labour, where both employers and employees can benefit from it. Petrol stations are environments where emotional labour is part of the job description of petrol attendants. Apart from the physical labour, petrol attendants are obliged to display friendliness when helping customers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with managers and male petrol attendants of a petrol station in Stellenbosch, with the focus on how they use emotional labour to benefit themselves and their employers financially. It was found that petrol attendants use emotional labour for financial purposes, both for their employer and for self-interest.

Keywords: emotional labour, petrol attendants, petrol stations, service sector

INTRODUCTION
Valuable research contributions have been made with regard to looking at emotional labour in the service industry. Emotional labour broadly refers to ‘the modification of emotional expression which may involve faking and suppressing’ (Grandey 2000: 95) and ‘the effort expended in expressing appropriate emotions and not expressing inappropriate emotions on the job, as defined by role requirements’ (Glomb, Miner &
The value and importance of emotional display on the part of service employees in organisations – especially in the service industry – is crucial as it enhances the commercial value of the organisation and increases sales (Rafaeli & Sutton 1987: 29).

Past research on the use of emotional labour in service jobs includes flight attendants, bill collectors (Hochschild 1983), waitresses (Paules 1991), legal professionals (Pierce 1995), call centre representatives (Spies 2006) and beauty therapists (Toerien & Kitzinger 2007), to name a few. Research on the petrol industry and petrol attendants per se has mainly focused on crime-related aspects (Hadland 2002), health dangers such as the possible high risks of lung cancer and leukaemia (Jakobsson, Ahlbom, Bellander & Lundberg 1993) and the smoking behaviour of petrol attendants (Suksalee 2003). Research on petrol attendants using an emotional labour theoretical lens has not been done yet. This study can therefore make a meaningful contribution to new knowledge.

BACKGROUND OF THE PETROL INDUSTRY

The retail fuel sector in South Africa is a highly sophisticated industry, which is characterised by an extremely competitive environment. It is also highly labour intensive, with an estimated 55 000 to 60 000 people working on the forecourts and behind the tills of the country’s service stations (Hadland 2002: 12). Current statistics on petrol attendants in South Africa could not be found, but due to the noticeable growth of the petrol industry in this country it can be assumed that the number may be close to 65 000. The overwhelming majority of employees who work at the established 5 000 or more petrol stations in South Africa work for one of the big five: Shell, BP, Caltex, Engen and Total. The vast majority of these petrol stations are scattered along highways, across towns and suburbs (ibid: 12–14).

Generally, between ten and 20 petrol attendants are employed by managers of petrol stations in South Africa, but it depends on the size of the petrol station (ibid: 14). At the time of the study in 2009, all petrol attendants in Stellenbosch received R13.13 per hour (US$1.61 per hour). In 2012, they receive almost R17 per hour (US$2.09 per hour), which is the required minimum wage. However, it can be assumed that some petrol stations pay petrol attendants more than the required minimum to improve job satisfaction, loyalty and commitment. They are allowed to work 45 hours a week, and if they work longer hours they receive one-and-a-half times more in wages per extra hour. On public holidays and on Sundays they receive double pay. In 2009, on average, a petrol attendant in Stellenbosch received between R2 500 and R2 800 per month (US$306,75 and US$343,56 per month) in wages. In 2012, they receive between R3 060 and R3 420 per month (US$ 375,46 and US$ 419,63 per month) in wages. In addition, tips from customers, which on average vary between R20 and R50 ($2,55 and $6,38) per day make a sizable contribution to their monthly wage.

The actual service a petrol attendant provides (filling vehicles with petrol, checking the oil and water, and washing the windscreen) is generally similar at all petrol stations.
When a car drives in, the petrol attendant guides the customer to an open pump, greets the customer with a friendly smile and asks the customer what they need. After the customer has paid the petrol attendant, he has to smile again and then bids the customer farewell. This is the standard procedure of a petrol attendants’ job and they do it every day in eight- to ten-hour shifts.

The image and branding of petrol stations are particularly important as these aspects attract customers – something which has a marked impact on the profitability of petrol stations. One way to improve the image and branding of a petrol station is to take care of customer service. This means that the role of the petrol attendants (being the face of the petrol station) is critically important, as they are responsible for creating a pleasant service experience. Cox (1997: 28) argues that service is not just about the actual activity, but also about responsiveness and the attitudes of staff. An employee with the right attitude and the right emotional display skills can do wonders for the business. That is why the expression of appropriate emotions during face-to-face or voice-to-voice interaction is a job requirement for employees in many service sectors, such as at petrol stations, where employees interact with customers on a daily basis (Ashforth & Humphrey 1993: 2). Thus, a petrol attendant’s job does not only involve physical labour, but also emotional labour.

In terms of emotional display, employees at petrol stations are mostly given a pre-established script by managers, which states how they should regulate and display emotions while interacting with customers. Some managers personally train petrol attendants on customer service, while others send petrol attendants on an external training course which focuses on the nature and general characteristics of their job, as well as customer service. The reward for engaging in this specific type of labour is a wage as well as other possible rewards, such as tips from customers or bonuses from managers. However, the emotional exchange may become unequal, where customers feel it is their right to display dissatisfaction, while the service provider is expected to remain sympathetic and calm towards every customer (Bolton 2005: 6). Similarly, petrol attendants are paid not only for their physical work, but also their emotional labour. They are expected to be friendly towards customers and provide a service to them.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF EMOTIONAL LABOUR

In Hochschild’s (1983) breakthrough work ‘The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling’, she argues that emotional labour occurs when emotion management is transformed from an originally private act, which is influenced by cultural and social norms, to the public world of work where it is regulated and controlled by organisations. Hochschild (ibid: 7) defines the term ‘emotional labour’ as the ‘management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display that can be sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value’. In other words, what was once a private act of emotion management is now sold as labour in especially service jobs.
Hochschild (ibid: 19) further argues that ‘when deep gestures of exchange enter the market sector and are bought and sold as an aspect of labour power, feelings are commoditized’. Emotional labour typically occurs in three situations: 1) when employees are in direct contact with customers, for example in face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact (such as waiters or petrol attendants); 2) when organisations specify how and when emotions should be expressed – this is usually done by means of training by managers or supervisors, or by creating an organisational culture of care, for example, flight attendants are supposed to appear friendly and cheerful, because they are trained to display those emotions; 3) when organisations directly or indirectly control the emotional expression of employees, especially during face-to-face contact with customers (ibid: 147).

According to Hochschild (ibid: 33) there are two ways in which employees manage their emotions in order to meet work role demands, namely surface acting and deep acting. In surface acting, employees modify and control their emotional expressions by means of careful presentations of verbal and non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions and voice tones, even when they are in a bad mood or when they are interacting with a difficult customer. In other words, true feelings are suppressed in order to express desirable organisational emotions. In deep acting, employees control their internal thoughts and feelings to meet the mandated display rules of the organisation. Since Hochschild, a number of authors have defined emotional labour, but subtle differences are evident between these definitions.

Focusing on a more behavioural approach to emotional labour, Ashforth and Humphrey (1993: 90) define emotional labour as ‘the act of displaying the appropriate emotion as a form of impression management’. This definition of emotional labour differs from Hochschild’s, because Ashforth and Humphrey tend to focus more on observable behaviour, than the presumed emotional management underlying the behaviour. Instead of focusing on surface and deep acting as important parts of the internal management of emotions, they argue that a broader array of factors (i.e. situational, interpersonal and individual) may affect the emotional expression of the employee. Situational and interpersonal variables may include identity cues, consistency between employee and customer, duration of the episode, and degree of customer involvement, to name a few. Individual variables include gender, age, job involvement, and positive and negative affectivity (ibid: 107–108). The authors also argue that surface and deep acting may become routine and may improve task effectiveness, while becoming effortless for the employee.

There are two differences between the perspective of Ashforth and Humphrey and that of Hochschild. First, Ashforth and Humphrey (ibid: 90) focus on the observational behaviours of emotional labour, rather than the feelings. Second, they focus on the impact that emotional labour may have on task-effectiveness, rather than on stress or burnout as Hochschild did. However, a weakness in this approach is that it fails to develop a theoretical link between emotional labour and the proposed outcomes, such as burnout.
In comparison, Morris and Feldman (1996: 987) define emotional labour as ‘the effort, planning and control needed to express organizationally desired emotion during interpersonal transactions’. This definition is embedded in an interactionist model of emotion, where social factors determine the expression and experience of emotion. This perspective suggests that emotion is partially socially constructed, where individuals make sense of their understanding of the social environment. They argue that even in situations where the organisationally desired emotion and the individual’s felt emotion are congruent, some degree of effort or labour will still be required in expressing those emotions during interactions with customers (ibid: 988), for example, feelings of happiness have to be displayed in an appropriate smile. Their understanding of emotional labour is consistent with Hochschild’s (1983) definition, in the sense that they too suggest that ‘the expression of emotion has now become a marketplace commodity’ (Morris & Feldman 1996: 988).

This means that the emotional expression of the service employee has become part of his job description. Furthermore, Morris and Feldman’s (ibid.) definition of emotional labour also indicates that specific rules dictate how and when emotion should be expressed within the context of the service organisation. This is quite similar to Hochschild (1983) and Ashforth and Humphrey’s (1993) perspective, in the sense that it acknowledges that individuals have to control their emotions and that the social setting in which the interaction occurs, determines when and how the display of emotion happens. Hochschild (1983: 56) refers to this controlled emotional display as feeling rules ‘that guide emotion work by establishing the sense of entitlement or obligation that governs emotional exchanges’.

Similarly, authors Zapf, Vogt, Seifert and Isic (1999: 371) define emotional labour as ‘the emotional regulation required of the employees in the display of organizationally desired emotions’. They explain that expression and control refer to the emotional requirements of the employee when interacting with customers. Furthermore, these authors argue (ibid: 379) that only in short, script-like interactions might a person express emotions without trying to sense the emotion of others.

The literature on emotional labour particularly focuses on the negative consequences of emotional labour on service employees. Brotheridge and Grandey (2002: 17), for example, argue that the burnout syndrome may be one of the consequences of emotional labour. Burnout can be characterised by three conditions, namely emotional exhaustion (a condition where employees feel emotional drained), depersonalisation (detached attitudes toward others) and diminished personal accomplishments (low sense of self-efficacy) (Brotheridge & Grandey 2002: 17).

However, the theorist Sharon Bolton (2005) argues that the lack of conceptual clarity when describing emotions in organisations may be the reason why service employees remain unrewarded for their efforts. In fact, Bolton (ibid: 2) argues that not all the emotions of employees are controlled by the organisation, since they enter an organisation with certain ways of being. Bolton (ibid: 2–3) notes that service employees may energetically take on prescribed roles, where they can form friendships and present...
themselves differently to customers. This leads to the discussion of Bolton’s four categories of emotion management, which forms the basis for the positive consequences of engaging in emotional labour.

The first type of emotional management identified by Bolton (2005) is presentational emotion, which is managed according to general social rules and not by the organisation. This means that without knowing the rules of the organisation, an employee is already prepared with a basic understanding of how to behave (ibid: 133). The second type is philanthropic emotion management, which occurs when employees do not follow the rules of the organisation, but decide to ‘give that little extra during a social exchange’ (ibid: 141). This may similarly be described as ‘a gift’ or ‘emotional exchange’ (Hochschild 1983: 56). Bolton (2005: 141) argues that caring professionals (nurses, doctors and psychologists, for instance) use philanthropic emotion management while this is not necessarily used by front-line service employees (such as waiters). In fact, Bolton (ibid.) notes that waiters frequently disrupt an emotional atmosphere of servitude by presenting a hollow smile, and do not ‘give that little extra’ as nurses or doctors tend to do.

The third type is prescriptive emotion, which is managed according to organisational and professional rules of conduct, which the employee learns through training and socialisation (Bolton 2000: 92). For example, jokes and informal conversations with customers and colleagues may be encouraged by managers, in order to maintain a ‘high-energy working environment’ (Bolton 2005: 96). Restaurants and petrol stations are often guided towards the idea that ‘employees should love the company and love the products that they sell’ (ibid: 111). Not only can organisations benefit from this, but so can employees – which leads us to Bolton’s third type of emotion management, namely pecuniary emotion management. This occurs when emotions are managed for commercial gain, either for the organisation or personally, in the form of tips or other financial rewards (ibid: 113). Korczynski (in Bolton 2005: 116) argues that front-line employees can perform pecuniary emotion management according to carefully prescribed commercial feeling rules, which may be financially favourable to managers, customers and employees. For example, if a service employee satisfies a customer in terms of the service provided, this may result in the customer coming back more often, which may be potentially profitable for the organisation. The employee may also benefit financially, as managers may reward him/her for good service provided, while customers may reward him/her in the form of tips.

**FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE EMOTIONAL LABOUR**

In many service sectors, displaying appropriate emotions is a job requirement. Various factors can influence, create and maintain expectations about emotional expressions.

**Recruitment, training and teamwork**

Many organisations seek to employ people who convey emotions deemed appropriate for the job role, and candidates with the highest potential, necessary skills and abilities
for service performances are usually selected (Pugh, Dietz, Wiley & Brooks 2002: 81). Employees must display desirable emotions during interactions with customers, such as enthusiasm, friendliness and confidence, they must impress customers and have a sense of humour (Rafaeli & Sutton 1987: 26). Ashforth and Humphrey (1993: 102) refer to the recruitment and selection processes as cultural control. Organisational efforts to exert cultural control are positively associated with the perceived importance of customers. The frequency of contact between service agents and customers, and the potency of customers’ beliefs about appropriate emotional expression are two additional factors influencing the service agent’s emotional display. In other words, the more frequent an agent’s contact with important customers who hold high expectations, the greater the organisation’s effort will be to control the agent’s emotional expression (ibid: 103).

In terms of training, many organisations provide internal training about feeling rules. For example, managers use handbooks that typically command the following:

You are the company’s most effective representative. Your customers judge the entire company by your actions. A cheerful ‘Good Morning’ and ‘Good Evening’ followed by courteous, attentive treatment and sincere ‘Thank you, please come again’ will send them away with a friendly feeling and a desire to return. A friendly smile is a must. (Rafaeli & Sutton 1987: 23)

On the one hand, by means of direct training employers provide feedback, discussions and rituals, through which service employees learn the content, intensity and variety of emotions that are expected from them when performing the work role. When employees are on stage, they must follow precise guidelines provided by many organisations, about which emotions to follow and express (Ashforth & Humphrey 1993: 103).

On the other hand, teamwork is important as it creates synergy in work outcomes and performances, and sees that the management of emotion is positively linked to team performance, especially with regard to customer service (Feyerherm & Rice 2002: 344). Ultimately, team effectiveness is obtained through cooperation and conflict avoidance. In other words, the ability to perceive, understand, manage and use emotions in self and others is critically important for ensuring team effectiveness. Furthermore, teamwork plays an important role in teaching newcomers what is expected of them in terms of emotional labour (Pugh et al. 2002: 81).

Duration of interaction, display rules, rewards and punishments

Morris and Feldman (1997: 258) argue that appropriate employee behaviour and emotional expression are very important and clear indicators of emotional labour. They argue that customers or clients are more likely to comply with organisational goals when the affecting bonds of liking, trust and respect have been established. Thus, the organisation’s need to rely on regulated displays of emotion, to ensure compliance with organisational goals, is greater the more a work role requires contact with other people.
Research by Rafaeli and Sutton (1987: 24) indicates that short interactions between employee and customer/client usually involve a highly scripted interaction format, such as smiling, greeting or saying ‘thank you’.

Display rules refer to the norms on how and when emotion should be expressed and used during interaction with customers. An organisation can try to control the behaviour of employees by using explicit display rules on how to approach customers (Morris & Feldman 1997: 260). This also happens when there is stiff competition between two organisations, such as call centres or restaurants.

While socialisation teaches newcomers how to display appropriate emotions during interaction, rewards and punishments maintain such behaviour. Rewards and punishments can be both formally and informally supplied by the organisation. Good performance may be encouraged by praise, promotions, prizes and extra money, while bad performance may be discouraged by criticism, warnings and dismissal (Ashforth & Humphrey 1993: 103). Many organisations monitor employees to assure that they maintain and express the expected emotions during interaction – they do this by means of surveillance cameras, or use supervisors to monitor workers in various ways (Rafaeli & Sutton 1987: 28).

Another way to monitor service and appropriate emotional display is the use of mystery shoppers, who typically disguise themselves as normal customers, but then evaluate the service and emotional display delivered by employees. The ratings provided by these mystery shoppers are subsequently entered in the personnel files of service employees (ibid.).

Customer feedback is critically important to improve customer service. Pugh et al. (2002: 82) argue that managers and employees use customer feedback as a tool to judge the quality of customer service and to make improvements, where necessary. Their research proved that when customers’ ratings of services improve, employees’ perceptions of the service provided also improve (ibid: 73). Similarly, Hauser, Simester and Wernerfelt (1994: 328) argue that when customers are satisfied with services, employees are more satisfied and work more effectively and show greater customer loyalty. Customer loyalty leads to an improvement in sales, greater profit and possible rewards for the organisation and service employee (Pugh et al. 2002: 73). As a result, many managers use customer feedback to monitor the service provided to the customers.

**METHODOLOGY**

**Research problem and objectives**

The research question of this study was two-fold: ‘Are petrol attendants obliged to use emotional labour as a commodity for their employer and their own interest?’ Since petrol attendants’ use of emotional labour is unexplored in the literature, this article seeks to explore and extend the research on emotions in organisational life, in two ways: the first goal is to explore whether petrol attendants use emotional labour and, if so,
how they use emotional labour to benefit the employer and themselves financially. The second goal is to explore petrol attendants’ motivation for engaging in emotional labour if they indeed make use of emotional labour.

Selection of sites
The research of this study was conducted in the Stellenbosch area in 2009, where there are a number of petrol stations. Ten petrol stations in the Stellenbosch area are open 24/7, seven days a week. Some of them belong to the same company and have similar brand names, such as *Shell*, *BP* or *Caltex*. From these ten petrol stations three were selected purposively, and were coded X, Y and Z. The three petrol stations were selected on a number of different criteria. First, it can be assumed that these petrol stations would have a similar client base, because they are located around the Stellenbosch University campus and close to student accommodations. This is the main reason why petrol stations far from the campus and outside the Stellenbosch area were not selected. It can be assumed that the clientele of the three selected petrol stations are quite similar and that petrol attendants would treat customers similarly. However, it is obvious that petrol attendants at these selected petrol stations do not only serve students/the university population, regardless of their race or age, but adapt their emotional display to whether customers are local or outsiders, as was observed on several occasions. Second, the chosen petrol stations belong to different companies, which may be an important indicator because training, managers’ expectations and customer outcomes at the three stations may differ. Third, all the petrol attendants at the three selected petrol stations are African Xhosa-speaking males. Petrol stations that recruit female or coloured petrol attendants were not included in the sample. Since emotional labour is usually associated with female occupations (such as flight attendants, beauty therapists and hairdressers), it was important to understand how men – in this case, African Xhosa-speaking males – use emotional labour for various purposes.

Sampling selection and collection of data
In total 15 petrol attendants were interviewed, five from each petrol station. The managers of each petrol station provided a list of names from which five petrol attendants were randomly selected. All the petrol attendants were willing to be interviewed. They were also given the right to stop the interview at any stage if they wanted to, or if they needed to attend to a customer. When petrol attendants attended to a customer, the interviews were paused and then resumed afterwards. They were not forced to answer any of the questions.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the focus on emotional labour and customer service. The managers were interviewed in their offices at the petrol stations, and interviews with them varied between 45 and 60 minutes. The petrol attendants were interviewed in the small staff room where they normally relax. Those interviews varied
from 15 to 30 minutes, depending on whether the interview had to be paused to let them attend to customers. All three managers were white Afrikaans-speaking males, while the 15 petrol attendants were black Xhosa-speaking males. All the interviews were tape-recorded with the consent of the research participants.

## TYPES OF EMOTIONAL LABOUR IN THE PETROL INDUSTRY

From a study of the various definitions of emotional labour, it is clear that all petrol attendants in the sample performed emotional labour as part of their job routine. Petrol attendants have to help customers according to certain prescribed rules, which involve the regulation of emotions. All the managers in this sample noted that it is part of the petrol attendants’ job to smile and be friendly to customers. This clearly supports Zapf et al.’s (1999: 371) definition of emotional labour, namely ‘the emotional regulation required of the employees in the display of organizationally desired emotions’. Furthermore, the managers reported that the petrol attendants have to be friendly to customers in order to keep the customers satisfied with the services on offer. This supports Ashforth and Humphrey’s (1993: 90) definition of emotional labour as ‘the act of displaying the appropriate emotion as a form of impression management’.

It was found that petrol attendants use three types of emotion management, as identified by Bolton, namely presentational, prescriptive and pecuniary. In terms of presentational emotion management, one petrol attendant stated that he does not fight with his colleagues or with the manager, because he is proud to be a petrol attendant. Another said that ‘sometimes I get angry at him [pointing to another petrol attendant], but I do not fight with him, because if I fight with him I will lose my job’. This emphasises that petrol attendants know how to behave prior to training. They know what the consequences will be if they behave in an unsociable manner towards their colleagues. This clearly relates to Morris and Feldman’s (1996: 987) definition of emotional labour, as ‘the effort, planning and control needed to express organizationally desired emotion during interpersonal transactions’. The nature of these interpersonal interactions – whether they occur between petrol attendants as a group, or between petrol attendants and customers – does not matter, as petrol attendants always have to control, express and display desirable organisational and professional appearances and emotions during their job.

In terms of prescriptive emotion management, petrol attendants stated that they are given a pre-established script by managers, which states how they should regulate and display emotions when interacting with customers. Although this pre-established script differs from petrol station to petrol station because each manager has a unique management style, the basis is the same – it emphasises the importance of friendly customer service. Furthermore, managers also stated that they train petrol attendants to ‘remain calm and quiet’ when customers are offensive towards them. One petrol attendant, for example, said that he has to say ‘Ja, jammer meneer’ [Yes, sorry Sir], even if the customer is wrong. Another petrol attendant said the following: ‘I must be
friendly, smile, even if a customer is aggressive towards me. The manager expects me to be friendly. It is part of my job.’ This puts a lot of stress on petrol attendants, because they have to express certain emotions (such as friendliness and calmness) and suppress others (such as anger and frustration). Thus, the display rules are explicit for petrol attendants as they are trained how to approach customers, even if customers are rude to them.

Petrol attendants also use pecuniary emotion management by creating a desirable appearance and a pleasant emotional climate – they do this by controlling their own as well as the customer’s emotions, by means of display rules set out by the organisation. These display rules have been codified and include several basic steps: petrol attendants have to acknowledge customers and direct them to an open petrol pump; they must make sure that they wear the correct name tag and greet customers in a friendly manner; they need to confirm the amount and grade of petrol dispensed to customers; they need to offer to clean the windshield and check the oil and water; they need to handle payments, offer a receipt and give the correct change; and, lastly, they need to give customers a friendly farewell (Petrol attendants’ training card). Following these basic steps has financial value, as one petrol attendant said: ‘Sometimes I get a tip from the customer, if I’m friendly, when I smile.’ Another petrol attendant said: ‘If I’m friendly to the customers, I sometimes get a tip. I do it for the tips.’

This clearly relates to Hochschild’s (1983: 7) initial argument that employees manage their emotions for commercial purposes and that emotions ‘can be sold for a wage’. This is precisely what happens at petrol stations. Petrol attendants use their emotional labour skills as a commodity to benefit both their employer and themselves financially, by keeping customers satisfied with good service. The financial gain behind engaging in emotional labour is clearly a motivation for petrol attendants.

**MOTIVATION**

**Organisational profits**

The ability to use emotional labour as a commodity to improve organisational profit begins prior to employment. The selection of personnel (by managers) was identified as a crucial variable for organisational success. One manager stated, for example, that he employs petrol attendants who are able to communicate in both English and Afrikaans, because ‘it does not help if a petrol attendant is recruited in an Afrikaans community, but cannot understand a word of Afrikaans’. Another manager said he employs petrol attendants who are ‘well presented, appear neat and have a positive facial expression’. Petrol attendants are thus recruited in terms of how well they are able to use pecuniary emotion management, which is related to organisational success and profits.

Petrol attendants hold similar believes in terms of emotional labour and organisational success. One attendant excitedly stated that ‘it is part of my job and [that] everybody expects me to be friendly to customers’. This is an example of prescriptive
emotion management, where petrol attendants are taught how to manage their emotions according to the prescribed rules of the petrol station.

However, petrol attendants also acknowledged that they manage their emotions to derive commercial gain for their employer. One petrol attendant said that ‘friendly customer service results in customer return, which is good for business’. Another noted that ‘it is good for this petrol station if customers are happy, because ... you see ... they will run away if they are not happy’. This is an example of pecuniary emotion management, where petrol attendants manage their emotions for commercial gains for their employer. However, by engaging in pecuniary emotion management, petrol attendants can themselves benefit financially.

Personal profits

Petrol attendants know that if they smile and are friendly towards customers, they may receive tips from them or rewards from their managers. All the petrol attendants gave similar responses. At the time of the study in 2009, on average, petrol attendants in Stellenbosch received between R20 and R50 ($2.55 and $6.38) a day in tips.

Although petrol attendants are required to treat all customers equally, it was found that tourists and white customers are more willing to give tips than black customers, therefore petrol attendants provide friendlier and speedier service to the former. The petrol attendants explained that they either look at the number plate of the car or listen to the accent of the driver. One respondent stated that ‘they [tourists] look different. You can see it. They speak funny.’ Another said: ‘I know it’s a tourist. I see the car. I see it’s a GP car’ [referring to the number plates of Gauteng, which is a province in northern South Africa. Stellenbosch number plates contain the letters CL].

Petrol attendants use emotional labour in various ways to benefit themselves financially, irrespective of the customer’s characteristics. First, friendly and speedy service usually results in tips and other financial rewards from customers and managers. Petrol attendants provide speedy service by working in teams and then share the tips afterwards. For example, one petrol attendant noted: ‘If he gets a R5 (US$ 0.61) tip from the customer, he must give me R2.50 (US$ 0.30). Thus, sharing of tips mostly occur when petrol attendants help one another to provide speedy service. That is how it works.’ Second, they use the ‘power’ of language to evoke positive emotions in customers. They pick up on the language of customers and respond accordingly. In this regard one petrol attendant noted:

*Sometimes I hear that a customer says ‘Goeiemôre’ [Good morning], then I know he is Afrikaans and dan praat ek Afrikaans met hom [and then I speak Afrikaans to him]. Dan kan ek sé waarmee kan ek help [Then I ask him how I can help him]. The customers like it and they give me a tip.*

Third, petrol attendants use certain endearing phrases that demonstrate respect. For example, one petrol attendant stated: ‘When the customer stops, I greet him and we
talk. We laugh and make jokes together. The customer likes that and he gives me a tip.’ Some petrol attendants wave their arms cheerfully to direct customers to their pump. Emotional labour is, therefore, carefully controlled by petrol attendants to improve personal financial benefits.

Despite receiving tips from customers, petrol attendants receive verbal, material and/or financial recognition from managers too, if they provide good customer service. These rewards include bonuses at the end of the month or gifts such as food hampers, cutlery or crockery. For example, the manager at one of the petrol stations said they have an internal competition, where the best petrol attendant during a six-month period wins a cash prize of R1 000 (US$ 122,70) or a bicycle. At one of the other petrol stations, the manager focuses on verbal recognition in terms of good service provided by petrol attendants. One of the managers explained:

If a petrol attendant does a good job, I tell him that he has done a good job. To say ‘thank you’ will also motivate them to deliver good service. To give a petrol attendant a few extra Rands at the end of the month when he delivered good services to customers is also a way to motivate them to keep delivering good service. (Manager of petrol station X, 2009)

In addition to cash prizes and verbal recognition, petrol attendants at one of the other petrol stations can benefit materially, too, when they provide constant good service to customers. The manager explained that they ‘give presents to petrol attendants such as t-shirts or soccer balls. Even cutlery or crockery. Sometimes it is food.’

For these reasons, it is clear that petrol attendants regulate their emotions according to Bolton’s pecuniary emotion management, which is profitable both to employers and themselves. Not only can petrol stations benefit from emotional labour by keeping customers satisfied in terms of service provided, but petrol attendants can also receive tips and various kinds of rewards from customers and managers.

**Surveillance**

In order to make sure that petrol attendants provide friendly customer service, managers monitor them in various ways. First, the quality of customer service is monitored through Mystery Motorists, a company whose services are hired by the petrol companies. The managers explained that a Mystery Motorist is an ordinary customer who goes to a petrol station and rates the service provided by the petrol attendants. These ratings are important, because they can reflect negatively on both the petrol attendant and the manager. This puts further strain on petrol attendants to provide good customer service every time to every customer, because nobody knows who the Mystery Motorist is. Petrol attendants have to present themselves and their emotions according to the prescribed rules of the organisation, as they are constantly rated on these presentations. Not only does the manager expect petrol attendants to provide friendly customer service, but so do the headquarters of the petrol industry of South Africa.
Second, customer feedback is another way of monitoring service. If customers are not satisfied with the service they receive, the petrol station may lose that customer as well as other potential customers. One manager enthusiastically shared a letter he received from a customer, which stated how pleased he was with the service at that station. Below is an excerpt from the letter:

*Thank you ‘a thousand times’ for the most incredible wonderful forecourt service experience I had when I visited [petrol station Y]. I thank you with a deep appreciation and admiration for your immediate appearance and wonderful smile as I arrived and stopped at the pump. Thank you for your neat and sparkling appearance and sense of positive energy and purposeful spirit. Over the years I have witnessed an increasing deterioration in forecourt attendant service and possibly all around, BUT today you showed me that with people such as you, there was great HOPE for our future. I would like you to know that you ‘made my day’ today.*

This is a clear example of how customers play a crucial role in monitoring service. Both managers and supervisors use customer feedback as a tool to monitor and judge the services petrol attendants provide to customers.

Third, managers periodically work on the forecourt and monitor the conduct of petrol attendants to ensure good customer service. For example, one manager said doing so leads to happy customers as well as organisational and personal profits, which puts extra pressure on petrol attendants to provide friendly and speedy customer service. This is another form of prescriptive emotion management, which Bolton (2000: 156) refers to as the organisational and professional rules of conduct which an employee learns through training and socialisation. By working outside with the petrol attendants, managers can teach, observe and socialise with them – something which primarily improves service and is, in turn, financially beneficial to both the petrol station and the petrol attendants.

Finally, surveillance also occurs on a technical level through the use of surveillance cameras. Although such cameras are primarily used as crime prevention tools, managers tend to use them to monitor petrol attendants’ productivity and service. One manager said he uses surveillance cameras at random, especially during the night shift, to see whether petrol attendants are doing their job. This conforms to Bolton’s (ibid: 134) notion of presentational and prescriptive emotion management, where petrol attendants adhere to certain rules stipulated by the petrol station, whether it be 23:00 at night or 03:30 in the morning. Surveillance therefore puts extra pressure on petrol attendants to provide friendly customer service.

CONCLUSION

Although South Africa is one of only a few countries in the world to employ petrol attendants, it is clear that they fulfil an important role. The fact that the petrol industry is highly competitive emphasises the importance of petrol attendants and the contribution they make to the success of an organisation. Emotional labour is, therefore, part of the petrol attendants’ job, because by using it they contribute to the petrol station’s success.
However, petrol attendants also use emotional labour to benefit themselves. Customers are more likely to give tips to petrol attendants who provide friendly customer service. ‘Service with a smile’ is related to organisational and personal profits, which are measured in terms of customer returns and tips, as well as rewards from managers. For these reasons, the obligation to use emotional labour during the service provided in the petrol industry is crucial for both organisational and personal success.

Customer characteristics, however, play a major role in the service petrol attendants provide. They are more willing to help white customers and tourists, because those groups are more inclined to give tips. Apart from customer characteristics, petrol attendants also invest in personal tactics when helping customers, such as addressing customers in their mother tongue. Some have a personal technique for ‘beckoning’ customers to their pump, while others just give their best smile. For these reasons, it is clear that a petrol attendants’ job involves ‘more than smiling and waving’. It requires careful and articulate planning and controlled emotions to ensure organisational and personal success.

Limitations of the study

Some of the limitations of this study include the focus of the sample, which only included Xhosa-speaking African male petrol attendants. It can be argued that female petrol attendants use emotional labour differently from male attendants. This study did not take race or age into consideration, which may influence how petrol attendants use emotional labour. Another limitation is the sample size. Only 15 petrol attendants and three managers were interviewed, and it may be necessary to select a bigger sample for more conclusive results. The size of the sample also does not allow the results to be generalised. Another limitation is that the study did not investigate the possible negative outcomes of emotional labour, such as burnout, emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation (Brotheridge & Grandey 2002: 17).

Recommendations for future research

This study only focused on certain positive aspects, such as receiving tips and rewards for engaging in emotional labour. However, petrol attendants’ working hours are between eight and ten hours a day. Future research is necessary to establish whether they suffer from burnout, emotional exhaustion or depersonalisation, for engaging in emotional labour for such lengthy periods of time. Furthermore, this study only focused on Xhosa-speaking male petrol attendants, and future research is necessary to determine whether age, race and gender are contributing factors for engaging in emotional labour. Another recommendation for future research is to establish whether petrol attendants who work at petrol stations located along the highways of South Africa use emotional labour differently than those attendants who work in suburban areas, where certain customers become familiar faces.
REFERENCES


**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

**David du Toit** obtained his Honours (cum laude) and MA degree in Sociology at the University of Stellenbosch. In 2012, his career as a junior lecturer at North-West University commenced where he teaches various undergraduate modules. While his Honours project focused on the use of emotional labour by male petrol attendants in Stellenbosch, his Master’s thesis focused on housecleaning services in Stellenbosch and the changing nature of domestic work in South Africa.