



The politics of smiling: The interplay of emotion, power, and discourse in sensegiving and sensemaking

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Abstract

Purpose—This research investigates the politics of smiling as a central driver for employees to navigate power dynamics within the prevailing discourse at a Japanese retailer in Hong Kong. Existing critical management studies emphasize power in organizational language, often neglecting the role of employees' emotions in sustaining discourse. This paper examines employees' smiles as tools for legitimizing (sensegiving) and interpreting (sensemaking) discourse. It explores how the use of their emotional display influenced the outcome of the company's attempt to legitimize discourse. This research divides the discourse process into five phases: formation, codification, implementation, monitoring, and adaptation.

Design/methodology/approach—Using the critical sensegiving and sensemaking approach, this paper discusses how employees' interpretations of corporate policies shape the perpetuation of dominant discourse and outcomes. Data were collected through the author's long-term participant observation in the Hong Kong branches of Japanese retailers.

Findings—The formation phase discusses the emergence of a dominant discourse favoring Japanese practices in the company's Hong Kong operations. Codification involves the conceptualization of standard smiles in customer service policies. In practice (implementation, monitoring, and adjustment), employee smiles serve as tools for negotiating power—shaping careers, earnings, and shift preferences. This paper argues that this discourse shapes organizational norms while employees' sensemaking influences the discourse implementation. Furthermore, this paper highlights the transnational impact of Japanese culture in Hong Kong, which has shaped the way Japanese top management and local employees interpret the dominant discourse.

Originality—This study demonstrates the importance of discussing the display of emotions and employees' intentions to understand their impact on the outcome of discourse implementation. This study also reiterates the significance of discussing the influence of one culture on another to understand the broader social context that affects the perpetuation of discourse.

Keywords: politics of smiling, dominant discourse, power, sensegiving, sensemaking

Introduction

The processes of sensegiving (message delivery) and sensemaking (message interpretation) are essential to maintaining dominant discourses in organizations (Swanson, 2014). The inclusion of power in research on sensemaking has gained prominence (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). Largely influenced by Weick's (1995) studies on sensemaking, the literature on sensegiving has discussed how power over others' sensemaking is exercised through key players (Sparr, 2018), methods (Fiss and Zajac, 2006), and meaning-making processes (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). Critical management scholars have proposed a critical sensemaking approach that examines the spread or contestation of inequalities and exploitation (Mills, Thurlow, and Mills, 2010). In these studies, discourse has been extensively used as an analytical approach to explore power in sensegiving and sensemaking by shedding light on how cultural norms and practices are established and maintained in organizations (Brown and Colville, 2014).

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3 As an essential aspect of human life (Damasio, 2018), emotions have been widely studied
4 in relation to power, which is often exercised through discourse. Influenced by Hochschild
5 (1983), many have discussed how emotions in organizations are constructed through societal
6 and organizational expectations and exploited for economic gain (Ashforth and Humphrey,
7 1993). These studies address the recognition that emotions are not only personal experiences
8 but can also be politically significant and serve as tools for persuasion, mobilization, or
9 manipulation within the organization (Pujol-Cols, Dabos, and Lazzaro-Salazar, 2021). Their
10 findings highlight the explicit or hidden interaction between emotions and power in an
11 organization.
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14 What is missing in this work, however, is an in-depth understanding of how power intersects
15 with the use of emotions to maintain or challenge dominant discourse, particularly from a
16 transnational perspective. By treating policy implementation as a way of perpetuating dominant
17 discourse in a political arena (Mintzberg, 1985), I use the critical sensegiving-sensemaking
18 approach in this paper to examine the political activities of employees' emotional displays to
19 understand how they negotiate their power in the workplace and how this power play affects
20 the outcome of discourse dissemination. To better understand their emotional management, I
21 employ the example of smiling to explore the notion that while smiling is often perceived as a
22 universal symbol of happiness or friendliness (Nettle, 2005), it can also convey political, social,
23 or power-related implications. Thus, the central focus of this paper on the politics of smiling
24 refers to the cultural implications embedded in the act of smiling.
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27 This study uses documents and observations collected through participant observation at a
28 Japanese retailer in Hong Kong (referred to by the pseudonym ICHI) to further explore the
29 complex role of emotions in the realization of discourses. Using the example of this particular
30 company, I address two research questions in this paper: *How does a company disseminate its*
31 *dominant discourse through its customer service policies and practices? What is the role of*
32 *emotional display in influencing the dissemination process?* Based on a critical sensegiving and
33 sensemaking approach, this paper discusses the use of the smile as a political tool in five phases
34 of discourse dissemination: formation, codification, implementation, monitoring, and
35 adjustment. It demonstrates how ethnocentrism, which views one's own culture as superior to
36 others (Michailova *et al.*, 2017), was embedded in this process and illustrates how employees
37 interpreted and responded to this attempt through the act of smiling. Furthermore, this paper
38 adds a transnational perspective to understanding the influence of Japan in Hong Kong in
39 creating the dominant discourse and the meanings attached to it.
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42 Through this paper, I hope to contribute to the literature on emotion and discourse in critical
43 management studies by presenting the important role of emotional display in sensemaking and
44 determining the outcome of discourse dissemination. I aim to provide multiple perspectives
45 (power, discourse, and emotion) in examining the interplay between sensegiving and
46 sensemaking, which includes a broader perspective than organizational theory (Jordan and
47 Caulkins, 2012; Garsten and Nyqvist, 2013). Following Pettigrew's (1995) view that
48 anthropological research values the approaches of history (examining the past in which we live),
49 context (social and organizational context), and process (informal process), I extend this view
50 to regard the organization as a culturally constructed living organism. I propose a new direction
51 in workplace ethnography, arguing for the exploration of the interplay between emotions and
52 power in perpetuating discourse and its transnational context within the broader social
53 framework. This approach aims to enhance our understanding of cross-cultural operations
54 within modern organizations.
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57 In the following section, I review the literature on discourse and emotion in sensegiving and
58 sensemaking. I then address the methodological approach and discuss the five phases of
59 discourse perpetuation. I conclude with an account of the implications for critical management
60 studies scholarship.

Emotion, power, and discourse in organizations

Dominant discourse in sensegiving and sensemaking

Discourse refers to the language and patterns of communication that prevail in the workplace (Nissley, Taylor, and Butler, 2003). Scholars have shown how language is instrumental in reinforcing or challenging hierarchical structures, influencing decision-making processes, and shaping organizational control mechanisms (Foucault, 1977; Fairhurst, 2009). Research has shown how language contributes to the reinforcement of rituals, symbols, and everyday interactions, solidifying cultural norms and shaping organizational behavior (Schein, 2010; Trice and Beyer, 1993). Scholars have examined how language and discourse shape the expression, perception, and regulation of emotions, shedding light on the complex interaction between societal, cultural, and linguistic factors in influencing emotional discourse (Mackenzie and Alba-Juez, 2019).

Discourse has been discussed in relation to power in sensegiving and sensemaking (Brown and Colville, 2014). Research on sensemaking has been largely influenced by Weick (1995), who emphasizes the importance of conversations between individuals in a “constant state of becoming” (Benson, 1977). However, some studies have noted the absence of politics and power in his original work. Scholars have addressed this from a critical sensemaking approach by examining the role of corporate policies, discourse, and contexts of power (Mills, Thurlow, and Mills, 2010). While sensegiving has power over the sensemaking of others, who are often the recipients of the message, employees’ responses to top management’s message are crucial because they can influence its outcome. Kumar and Singhal (2012) discuss the need to align sensegiving and sensemaking, and Smollan and Sayers (2009) argue that employees will only respond positively to organizational change if their values are congruent with organizational values. However, it has long been argued that policy is not always reflected in practice due to an unbalanced power structure (Wankhade, 2011).

I use a critical approach to examine the dominant discourse in the interplay of sensegiving and sensemaking in this paper. The dominant discourse emphasizes the idea that certain voices or ideologies gain authority and control over others, influencing how reality is constructed and understood within a given society or setting (Fairclough, 1992). Studies have argued how dominant discourse influences the construction of nationalist ideology (Vaara, Kleymann, and Seristö, 2004), shared meaning (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld, 2009), oppositional voices, and employee resistance (Zhu, 2023).

Dominant discourse and emotions

In this paper, I focus on the role of emotions in the process of discourse perpetuation, which involves examining how emotional expressions, norms, and perceptions are shaped and influenced by dominant organizational discourses and how they reciprocally affect discourse outcomes. Indeed, emotions are a significant factor in the political sphere (Heaney, 2019), and this is particularly evident in power negotiations (Overbeck, 2010). It is impossible to fully understand organizations without understanding power and politics, as the communication of corporate messages often comes up against employees’ emotions (Jordan, 2009). A representative concept, emotional labor, introduced by Hochschild (1983), has illuminated the economic value of social interactions in service work and the exploitation of emotions in organizations.

Emotional labor is not spontaneous but is bound by societal and organizational expectations (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). Many studies have argued that surface acting, an act that does not change workers’ inner feelings, often leads to burnout and depersonalization (Pujol-Cols, Dabos, and Lazzaro-Salazar, 2021). Recent studies show that emotional labor involves both the expression and repression of emotions and that its consequences are not necessarily entirely negative (Harris, 2002). Moving from the individual to the collective level of emotion studies,

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3 Musolff (2021) contends that certain proverbs play an important role in fueling emotionally
4 charged discussions in conjunction with metaphorical narratives of liberation in public debate.
5 Koschut (2020) discusses how emotional discourse establishes, asserts, challenges, or
6 reinforces established power and status in politics, while Zappettini (2021) explores how
7 emotionally charged representations of particular ethnic communities influence public debate.
8

9 Among the various ranges of emotional expression, I focus here on the act of smiling, which
10 can be seen as a form of social control or conformity, where individuals may feel compelled to
11 smile in order to conform to societal norms, even when they may not genuinely feel happy or
12 comfortable. This phenomenon is particularly relevant in the service industry, where employees
13 are often expected to smile as part of their job, regardless of their actual emotional state. In
14 addition to Hochschild's (1983) influential work on airline workers, Van Maanen's (1991)
15 study of the "smile factory" at Disneyland explores the impact of organizational culture on
16 employee behavior and attitudes. His research offers insights into how Disneyland cultivates
17 and maintains its carefully curated image while managing the challenges faced by employees
18 in maintaining that image. Other studies have illustrated that smiling is a way to strategically
19 promote customer satisfaction and repeat business (Grandey *et al.*, 2005) and to present a visible
20 manifestation of core values, leading to better customer responses (Andrzejewski, 2016). Some
21 have investigated the cross-cultural differences in smiling, such as Matsumoto (1993), who
22 argues that Japanese people tend to use smiles to mask their emotions, and Kawamura (2006),
23 who suggests that smiling faces are perceived as more feminine in Japan.
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26 In this paper, I examine how employees use their smiles and the impact this has on
27 perpetuating the dominant discourse within an organization. In contrast to existing approaches
28 that view organizational emotions primarily as a means of commercial exploitation, I consider
29 smiling a proactive means for employees to negotiate their power and influence in the
30 workplace. Furthermore, I argue that, unlike theme parks, where such acts are directed at paying
31 customers, at the ICHI retail store, customers were not the primary audience for employees.
32 Instead, greater attention was paid to evaluators who visited stores infrequently, highlighting
33 the influence of the dominant discourse in shaping organizational expectations. As a result, the
34 frequency and degree of employees' smiling at ICHI were influenced to some extent. In
35 addition to internal factors like employees' emotions and interpretations, this paper
36 acknowledges the significance of a broader social context, such as the influence of Japan in
37 Hong Kong, as a crucial factor to be incorporated into the analysis.
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41 *Transnational context*

42 The study of sensegiving and sensemaking in a global context, such as the asymmetrical balance
43 of power between headquarters and subsidiaries and the transnational influence of the home
44 country (Japan) in the host country (Hong Kong), allows for a closer examination of power and
45 discourse. The geopolitical asymmetry in a global organization often leads to the creation of
46 differences (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). Instead of promoting diversified cultures in an
47 organization (Chanlat *et al.*, 2013), some global companies with an ethnocentric mindset tend
48 to expect a replica from a local subsidiary, resulting in the subsidiary becoming more dependent
49 on the company rather than positioning itself as an equal partner (Clark and Geppert, 2011).
50 This creates an asymmetrical power relationship in which the home country insists on using its
51 practices rather than proactively incorporating local practices. Scholars have examined the
52 sensegiving practices of a Japanese company's overseas operations and argued that they
53 practiced ethnocentric management (Makino and Beamish, 1999; Iwashita, 2023), although
54 some of these practices were challenged by local employees (Hong *et al.*, 2006).
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56 The influence of Japan (the home country) in Asia significantly shapes the way the Japanese
57 construct their discourse while at the same time influencing how Hong Kong (the host country)
58 interprets the dominant discourse. Studies of Japanese management overseas have pointed out
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that Japan tends to see the Japanese as superior to the locals. Wong (2014) argues that the sense of superiority of Japanese expatriates over their local counterparts has become a management issue. Products labeled with “Japan” have contributed to the promotion of national identity (Li, 2022) and the formation of a stronger ethnic identity (Fujimoto, 2002). These cases demonstrate an “ideological justification of the inequality between Japanese expatriates and local staff within the company” (Wong, 2001, p. 87). Impact of Japanese culture is evident through the consumption of Japanese culture in Asia, as noted by Iwabuchi (2002), who highlights the Japanese perception of their popular culture as “similar but superior” to that of other Asian regions. Furthermore, this nationalistic sentiment has been facilitated by the media’s attempt to reinforce cultural identity and highlight the country’s uniqueness (Hambleton, 2011).

The significant influence of Japanese culture in Hong Kong has been driven by Japan’s cultural products (Yu, 2012), and this is particularly evident in the region’s acceptance of contemporary Japanese culture and lifestyle, making it a major destination for Japan’s cultural exports (Otmazgin, 2014). Chan (2000) addresses the scant discussion of Japan’s three-year and eight-month colonial history from 1941, attributing it to a lack of interest among youth. The popularity of Japan was evident among Hong Kong people, who were some of the most frequent repeat tourists to Japan and enthusiastic consumers of made-in-Japan products (Zhu, 2021). The presence of Japanese service professionals in Hong Kong further reinforces this influence, as they market their services using Japanese values and concepts such as “selfless” hospitality (Aoyama, 2015). Scholars have suggested that a customer-centric approach (Toister, 2020), continuous improvement (Liker and Ross, 2017), and attention to detail (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 2011) are characteristics of Japanese customer service. My emphasis on the importance of using a transnational perspective reflects its relevance in the analysis of the dominant discourse and the role of emotional display in the process of discourse implementation.

Methodology

This study used participant observation at a Japanese fashion retailer (ICHI) in Hong Kong to illustrate the politics of smiling in the perpetuation of dominant discourse. I was introduced to a manager via my personal network, which led to subsequent interview sessions with the ICHI managers. I was granted permission to conduct research as a shop floor intern at ICHI in Hong Kong for one and a half years, beginning in 2009. I was introduced as an intern and university researcher and interacted with both headquarters staff and shop employees. A contract with the human resources department set out the terms of the research and provided access to company materials to study the translation and dissemination of formal discourse (written). In addition, my firsthand experience on the shop floor allowed for observation of how employees informally interpreted discourse (unwritten). Most of the employees with whom I worked were local people in their 20s and 30s, along with a few Japanese expatriates. More than half of the store employees worked part-time. Participant observation data were obtained through formal interviews (Table 1), which were conducted off-site with employees of various backgrounds. The interviews primarily focused on issues related to customer service policies and practices (e.g., perspectives on customer service at ICHI) and human relations relevant to this topic (e.g., perceptions of store managers’ involvement in improving customer service).

Table 1. Interview list

Initials	Occupation	Age range	Gender	Place of birth
A	Operations manager	40s	M	Japan
B	Store manager	40s	M	Japan
C	Store manager	40s	F	Hong Kong
D	Full-time salesperson	20s	F	Hong Kong

E	Full-time salesperson	20s	F	Hong Kong
F	Part-time salesperson	20s	M	Hong Kong
G	Part-time salesperson	20s	F	Hong Kong
H	Former store manager	30s	M	Hong Kong

Source: Created by the author. The initials of the interviewees are anonymized.

Turnbull (2001) notes that long-term engagement within an organization is a way for ethnographers to understand the belief systems that construct a critical part of the organization, both behind and in front of the scenes, when they are deeply involved in daily work life. This engagement is important for distinguishing between discourse and actual practices (Moeran, 2013). It is crucial to use such a method to analyze the role of discourse in the sensegiving process, as it takes a certain amount of time for the results to emerge and requires researchers to use multiple perspectives when analyzing the phenomenon.

To that end, I took field notes daily and carefully analyzed them based on thematic data analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). I began the analysis by organizing and categorizing the field notes and company documents to identify key codes. I identified codes relevant to customer service management and corporate policies and values. Because it is particularly important to provide both a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) and a holistic picture of the company, I worked to link various factors, such as formal and informal organization and unwritten and written documents, as well as policy and discourse. The second phase of the analysis was to categorize relevant codes into a theme, leading to discussions on the politics of smiling in the sensegiving-sensemaking process and its five phases. After extensive reflection and iterative analysis of the data, the final phase involved identifying the primary arguments within each of the five phases. I recorded interview data with the permission of the interviewees and transcribed them. I translated the non-English into English and ensured that the translations retained their original meaning.

Table 2. Data analysis process

1 st phase: Data	2 nd phase: Theme	3 rd phase: Analysis
Company’s interpretations of its past operations	Formation	Creation of a Japan-centric dominant discourse
Corporate policies, manuals, and documents	Codification	Codification of smiling as a customer-first mindset
Practice of policies in daily routines and training	Implementation	Various interpretations by employees and power plays
New policies to encourage practices	Monitoring	Increased impression management
Mystery shopper policy and visits	Adjustment	Limited impact of policy

Source: Created by the author.

Perpetuation of dominant discourse in the company

Using the example of the globalizing company ICHI, I examine how the dominant discourse was formed and the impact of the politics of the smile on the perpetuation of the discourse. By focusing on the company’s customer service policies and practices, I identify five phases of discourse distribution: formation, codification, implementation, monitoring, and adaptation. To better understand the process, I discuss it in two stages: policymaking (Phases 1–2: formation and codification) and policy practices (Phases 3–5: implementation, monitoring, and adaptation).

Policymaking

In this section, I discuss how top management has created a discourse that privileges Japanese practice over others and how their ideas have been translated into texts in the form of policies and written documents. I also address the various culturally specific meanings that top management attaches to these documents.

Phase 1: Forming a Japan-centric discourse. ICHI is known for providing affordable, high-quality clothing to a wide range of customer demographics. It has gained a position as a representative Asian company thanks to its continuously growing sales and global presence. However, before the company earned such a reputation, it had to overcome many challenges. Its first overseas venture in a European country was unsuccessful, which the company attributed to its overly centralized operating system. The next expansion into an Asian country failed, partly due to its overly localized business model. In the third overseas market, Hong Kong, local management decided to fully leverage the “Made in Japan” brand due to the popularity of Japanese branding. This was the first breakthrough, as the company achieved great financial success from the beginning of its market. After examining the reasons for its success in Hong Kong and its two previous failures, the company concluded that using the “Made in Japan” brand as a competitive advantage could be a way to succeed overseas. In addition to the popularity of the business model, the enthusiastic local consumers and their trust in Japanese products (Yu, 2012; Gürhan-Canli and Maheswaran, 2000) contributed greatly to the company’s success.

The success in Hong Kong was the beginning of a rapid overseas expansion, and the top management’s belief in the Japanese brand as a recipe for success was strengthened along with the financial success overseas. With increasing exposure to the global market, management became convinced of the importance of emphasizing its roots as a Japanese brand in its overseas subsidiaries. For example, a Japanese expatriate (A) expressed the need to identify what is unique about being Japanese:

Even though we all operate our shops under the name of ICHI, if customers see us differently in Hong Kong, we cannot fully communicate our brand value and how we are different from other Japanese companies. ... [W]e will adjust our way of working abroad, but we should never change our roots. We need to show what is good about a Japanese company and what we can do as a Japanese company.

In one of its recent annual reports, while underscoring the importance of embracing diversity and inclusion, the company insisted on keeping in mind that ICHI is the head of a Japanese company and mentioned the importance of transferring Japanese knowledge overseas several times. This emphasis on Japan shows that the top management still views Japanese practices as prestigious and believes that following them will lead to future success. Such interpretations of their successes and failures have been influenced to some extent by the way the top management regard Japan’s power in Asia. Japanese management has received a great deal of attention, especially in the 1970s and 1980s. As represented in the theory of the Japanese (*nihonjinron*), publications at that time claimed that the uniqueness of being Japanese was one of the main reasons for Japan’s economic miracle (Abegglen, 1973; Ouchi, 1981; Vogel, 1979).

However, along with declining economic power and long-term depression, later studies have mostly criticized the ethnocentrism in human resource management in many Japanese companies overseas (Wong, 2001; Li, 2002) and illustrated how the Japanese tend to consider themselves superior to the rest of Asia (Iwabuchi, 2002). Furthermore, this sense of nationalism was fostered by a series of governmental initiatives, such as “Cool Japan,” which aimed to promote the image of Japan through popular culture and played an essential role in reinforcing the idea of a uniquely Japanese cultural identity (Hambleton, 2011). This campaign was seen

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3 as a countermeasure to the country's identity, which was increasingly threatened by external
4 influence (Befu, 2001). All of these events contributed to the formation of a dominant discourse
5 that privileges Japanese practices over others.
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8 *Phase 2: Codifying discourse.* In this section, I focus on how the discourse of Japanese customer
9 service as a standard has been put into words. In the company's mission statements—a written
10 discourse—common key factors included having a customer-first mindset with Japanese
11 characteristics. The company clarified what employees needed to do to achieve this, with
12 examples in the policy sections. In practice, it is the management's role to decide how to codify
13 their ideas into policies. Among the various customer service practices, the company
14 emphasized *smiling as a customer-first mindset*, an attitude that employees should smile at
15 customers to show that they care about them. This mandate applied to employees at all levels,
16 no matter how long the workday or how busy they were.
17

18 Service with a smile has long been a universal rule in the service industry and is relevant to
19 emotional labor, where people must manage their emotions while working (Hochschild, 1983;
20 Pujol-Cols, Dabos, and Lazzaro-Salazar, 2021). Nevertheless, what is considered a “perfect”
21 smile varies from culture to culture and from industry to industry. Zhu (2023) observes that in
22 Japan, a smile is considered an essential part of its traditional hospitality; therefore, many
23 organizations put a significant amount of effort into training employees to smile. In Hong Kong,
24 however, customers expect perfect customer service when buying luxury items or experiences,
25 but not from a company like ICHI that offers an informal shopping experience.
26

27 On numerous occasions during my fieldwork in ICHI stores, I heard employees complain
28 about being forced to smile, and a full-time female salesperson (D) wondered:
29

30 Why do we need to smile at the customers? Does the company know what kind of business we are?
31 We are like a supermarket; we even use the same type of basket people use there. We are like a cheap
32 supermarket, to be honest. Customers also don't care if we smile or not. They just want the best and
33 cheapest clothing! We are not like Four Seasons hotels, right?
34
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36 In addition, no matter how an employee smiles, a customer may interpret it as superficial and
37 have a negative attitude toward them (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). For example, a
38 salesperson (E) once received a complaint from a local customer because of her poor service
39 attitude and she said the following to me in frustration:
40

41 I didn't do anything wrong, did I? I just didn't smile that much, but I did smile at the customer. I
42 don't know what happened to the customer that day; he was just unhappy with everything!
43
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45 Despite the frustration of the locals, employees were evaluated on whether they smiled at the
46 customers in the right way as part of regular monthly reviews and promotions. The Hong Kong
47 headquarters did very little localization for the handbooks, other than some conversation
48 scenarios that the local headquarters used to explain what was considered a standard smile. To
49 some extent, this silence encouraged ethnocentrism in customer service management. This
50 response was partly influenced by the way Hong Kong people perceived the Japanese as
51 superior to them in terms of attention to detail and cleanliness (interviewee D) and having
52 stricter requirements (interviewee F). The former store manager (H) expressed the gap between
53 Hong Kong and Japan:
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56 [W]e are not competing against the people of Hong Kong; we are competing against the people of
57 Japan. I feel I cannot win because they have worked diligently for decades, and their entire national
58 ethos aligns with corporate requirements. After a sports event, they leave no trace of litter. We
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3 struggle to achieve this in Hong Kong. I must work 10 times harder to match their efforts. When you
4 consider it, it's really not worth it, and I can't win.
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6 *Policy practices*

7 In this section, I describe how the concept of a standard smile was introduced into the system
8 and how employees responded to the concept and its implementation. I then analyze how
9 managers and headquarters were involved in monitoring progress and how new and additional
10 changes were introduced during the adaptation phase.
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13 *Phase 3: Implementation.* It was a fundamental requirement for each subsidiary to understand
14 and share the same concept of smiling and practice with the global headquarters to ensure and
15 facilitate discourse dissemination. This discourse was implemented mainly through written
16 documents, training, and daily routines. Performance review sheets and promotion exams were
17 important for employees to move up the career ladder. Smiling was also emphasized in written
18 documents, such as handbooks and manuals, as a way to put customers first. These methods
19 were a valuable and primary source of understanding for employees at all levels. Some
20 employees claimed that offering a genuine smile could lead to career advancement. One female
21 full-time salesperson (D) shared the following:
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23

24 Our area manager has already accepted the fact that our store has poor customer service performance.
25 He talks about that every time he visits, saying that we have no smile at all. What he wanted was a
26 genuine smile, but we were not able to provide that. So he didn't like us from the beginning. She
27 (another female salesperson) got transferred to a bigger store because the Japanese expatriates like
28 her because she smiles.
29
30

31 In order to monitor the dissemination process, managers and headquarters regularly evaluated
32 employees. During the implementation and monitoring stages, the conflict over reaching a
33 consensus on the understanding of the concept of a standard smile became apparent. While
34 some store managers asked employees to strictly follow the descriptions in the handbooks and
35 manuals, others explicitly ignored them. Some store managers told me which supervisor
36 emphasized customer service and which did not. A part-time salesperson (F) told me about the
37 different attitudes of the store managers:
38
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40 The company emphasizes customer service so much nowadays, but managers were not able to follow
41 that because they found these policies boring, although they will never spell them out.
42
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44 This confusion was evident in the gaps new employees experienced when they started their
45 work after a day of headquarters training in a store with a reluctant attitude toward customer
46 service. New employees spent half a day training on standard smiles with actual practices; most
47 felt uncomfortable about this training but were excited to begin their store work in the store.
48 However, they became confused after their first day of work in a store that did not encourage
49 employees to perform in this way. Some new employees were discouraged from following the
50 rules when they saw colleagues greeting them with a neutral facial expression and ignoring
51 customers when they saw them. When faced with such unexpected events, employees try to
52 make sense of what is happening around them (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014) and most adapt
53 to the situation. If a store strictly requires them to follow the rules, they will do so; otherwise,
54 they will be reluctant to follow them. A part-time salesperson (F) explained how he felt about
55 the smile training at the headquarters and the reason why he could not practice it now:
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3 When ICHI just entered Hong Kong, they did not pay attention to customer service, and there was
4 no training. ... You know we need to train how to smile in headquarters, right? That is just stupid. ...
5 When I just joined the company, I did smile a lot, but now I am too busy to do it.
6

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8 This comment implies that the employees understood what was required but chose not to do so
9 for various reasons. It also shows that employees' different sensemaking became an obstacle to
10 discourse dissemination, and the use of smiles became a main driver for them to negotiate their
11 power in the workplace.
12

13 *Phase 4: Monitoring.* The local headquarters was aware of the discrepancy between the
14 branches and therefore hoped that the monitoring system would help employees better
15 understand what was required. Managers should regularly review employees' customer service
16 performance and provide feedback. If employees were unsure about certain issues, they could
17 ask managers during regular monitoring visits, although this was rarely practiced. Local
18 headquarters held regular meetings where they stressed the idea of implementation, but the lack
19 of a compelling explanation of why a standard smile was important left the situation unchanged.
20 A Japanese store manager (B) said:
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24 It is very hard to train local employees to smile if they do not know how to do it, despite the training
25 that they have received at the headquarters. The operations manager said local employees could
26 learn in the long term, but I doubt it.
27

28 Due to the different interpretations of the concept and its practice among managers evaluating
29 employees, further confusion arose. Most employees decided to change their performance
30 depending on who was evaluating them. A part-time salesperson, for example, would
31 sometimes fight for a better work shift for a better financial benefit. They were aware that on
32 certain occasions, such as a supervisor's visit, they should put their best foot forward so the
33 store would be rated better. This rating would then contribute to a higher evaluation for the
34 store manager and other managers.
35

36 In contrast, in normal day-to-day operations, they did not feel that they had to perform as
37 the company expected them to because their audience was not the customers who could be seen
38 all over the store but the evaluators who visited them once a month. This differs from what Van
39 Maanen (1991) observed at Disneyland, where the audience consisted of paying customers who
40 were constantly near the performers. Such a surface act was evident in the managers' checks.
41 A store's atmosphere suddenly changed when a manager visited, and employees began to smile
42 at customers and greet them in a louder voice.
43

44 Although the monitoring system was introduced in Hong Kong with high expectations,
45 employees' customer service was far from meeting the company's expectations. In addition to
46 not sharing the importance of a standard smile, another factor was the lack of effective
47 incentives for local employees. In the face of increasing sales in Hong Kong, with most stores
48 experiencing a growth rate of 100% or even 150%, employees did not see the need to practice
49 customer service as the financial result was evidence of the company's performance. The lack
50 of a convincing explanation and an effective motivation system delayed discourse
51 dissemination; however, the lack of explicitness played a decisive role in the outcome.
52
53

54 *Adaptation of the dissemination process.* Based on the progress from monitoring, the global
55 headquarters would adjust the implementation levels by increasing and tightening the checkups
56 to manage employees' performance. After adjusting dissemination methods, the sensegiving
57 process returns to policy implementation, as illustrated by the examples of the local
58 headquarters providing incentives and the global headquarters using mystery shoppers.
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3 The local headquarters was concerned about the reluctance to practice a standard smile in
4 some stores, so they decided to implement incentives for part-time employees who worked at
5 70% capacity in the stores. They launched a customer service contest in each store where the
6 top-ranked part-timers could earn a bonus of up to a certain amount, although some part-timers
7 felt this was not fair. For the first few months, most of the part-timers were very motivated
8 because they were excited to receive a bonus. However, this enthusiasm began to wane as new
9 part-timers realized that only certain part-timers, mostly established part-timers, could rise to
10 the top, even if they did not perform well. On one occasion, a part-timer (G) told me:
11
12

13 You know, these people are the manager's favorite. We all know that. Someone like me who just
14 joined the store can't compete with them. This is so unfair!
15
16

17 It was indeed true that on many occasions, the top bonus was given to those who had worked
18 at the store for a relatively long time. This was intentional on the part of the store managers,
19 who saw it as a way to retain established part-timers who had many skills and contributed more
20 to the store than new part-timers. Managers often gave more care and attention to the part-
21 timers who had worked at the store for more than half a year since many new part-timers quit
22 after a few weeks or even a day. The difficulty in getting part-timers to understand and follow
23 the ICHI rules led managers to favor them over new part-timers who might leave the next day.
24 A former local store manager (H) expressed the difficulty of training customer service due to
25 the high turnover rate:
26
27

28 My main job is to make sure the shop floor is well managed, so I don't care about customer service
29 anymore. Many of my store employees are demotivated because they leave in a short period of time.
30 Compared to Japanese employees, Hong Kong people do not pay attention to details such as how to
31 smile properly.
32
33

34 This competition had some effects, but they were short-term and not sustainable. Instead, it
35 became a tool for managers to retain talent rather than disseminate the discourse.

36 Although not common, the global headquarters in Japan was also involved in adjusting the
37 discourse dissemination method by adding mystery shopper checkups in addition to regular
38 monthly checkups. A few years after entering Hong Kong, a group of top Japanese managers
39 who visited Hong Kong stores were surprised to find that Japanese practices had not been fully
40 incorporated. They were dissatisfied with the way these stores were run and decided to conduct
41 infrequent mystery shopper visits in addition to regular monthly visits. The mystery shoppers
42 could take photos of anything they deemed to be a "good" or "bad" example of customer service
43 in the store. After briefing the store managers, mystery shoppers sent their reports directly to
44 the global headquarters. No one was allowed to question the results. This adaptation, to some
45 extent, achieved what the company expected because employees, as well as store managers,
46 were afraid of being reported as a bad example by a mystery shopper. For example, a local store
47 manager I worked with reported questionable results from the mystery shopper. Despite her
48 insistence on asking the shopper for an explanation, she was silenced because no one could take
49 issue with the report.
50
51

52 After some trial and error, managers began to identify who the mystery shoppers were and
53 prepare for them, which in turn led to impression management. One day on the shop floor, the
54 store manager warned us over our walkie-talkies that a mystery shopper had arrived and
55 encouraged us to do our best. Suddenly, employees with neutral faces began to smile, and
56 greeting voices became louder. This change in behavior shows the impact of impression
57 management when employees felt they were being watched and that the evaluation mattered to
58 their work and future careers. The mystery shopper became an audience for the employees. The
59 reasons behind their efforts to perform impression management instead of trying to provide a
60

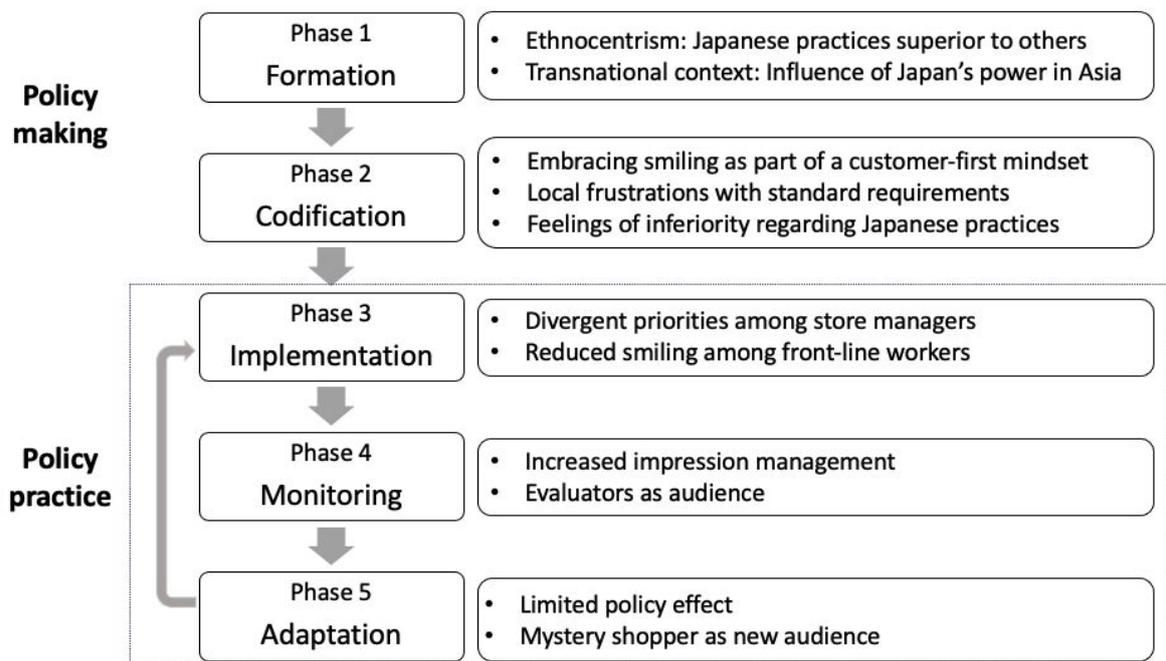
“genuine” smile could also have been influenced by their feelings of inferiority and lack of understanding of Japanese practices.

The mystery shopper visits, like the incentives, only had a short-term effect that did not contribute significantly to the dissemination process. Instead, these measures trained employees in how and where to behave when being observed, which encouraged them to engage in impression management. Although such practices did not necessarily contribute to sustainable and stable discourse dissemination, it reveals how employees used the politics of smiling to navigate their power in the workplace.

Discussion

In what follows, I elucidate the five phases of discourse dissemination (formation, codification, implementation, monitoring, and adaptation).

Figure 1. Discourse perpetuation map



Source: Created by the author.

In the discourse formation stage (Phase 1), I have shown that the logic behind the top management's positioning of Japanese practices over others reveals the ethnocentric ideology behind their interpretation of their success in Hong Kong. The findings highlight that the sense of superiority prevalent within Japanese organizations may extend to a broader societal context, especially when viewed through a transnational lens. Specifically, it shows how the Japanese tend to prioritize their distinctive cultural identity and perceive themselves as superior to other parts of Asia.

Codifying discourse (Phase 2) is where the management interprets the discourse and translates a key belief, *smiling, as a customer-first mindset*. The limited localization by the local headquarters in translating policies such as a standard smile shows that the local voice was not proactively shared with the global headquarters in Japan, even though most of the local employees interpreted the belief differently, and some were frustrated with its imposed standardization. From a transnational perspective, I argue that some local employees felt

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3 demotivated to smile because they perceived themselves as incapable of meeting Japanese
4 standards.

5 Policymaking stages—Phases 1 (formation) and 2 (codification)—show how the top
6 management created narratives to emphasize Japanese practice over others and how the local
7 headquarters helped push the corporate agenda forward. Codification also shows how top
8 management expected employees to follow rather than be inclusive. Many previous studies
9 have pointed to ethnocentrism as a negative factor (Zhang, 2013); however, its formation has
10 been neglected. Here, I provide insights into its formation and codification into policies to show
11 how nationalistic emotions were masked in the process of sensegiving.
12

13 A discussion of the policy practices based on an examination of the standard smile—Phase
14 3 (implementation), Phase 4 (monitoring), and Phase 5 (adaptation)—shows a sign of the
15 company's attempt to institutionalize the discourse so that employees would understand and
16 willingly assimilate into Japanese customer service culture. The implementation and
17 monitoring process show that the concept of a smile is a culturally specific term that can be
18 interpreted differently and underscores the company's failure to convey storytelling or
19 narratives effectively (Briody *et al.*, 2012) and provides a compelling explanation to justify the
20 practice. Instead, the monitoring system shows top-bottom enforcement of the system, resulting
21 in employees' impression management, which only promotes short-term discourse
22 dissemination. Thus, the employees have not yet internalized the discourse, which is essential
23 for sustainable discourse dissemination (LiPuma and Meltzoff, 1990). Even though the global
24 headquarters made adjustments, contests designed to encourage a standard smile and mystery
25 shoppers designed to promote a specific discourse produced only short-term and superficial
26 results.
27

28 Despite employees' reluctance to follow policies, they did not show clear resistance but, to
29 some extent, facilitated a unicultural discourse by disguising their performance. Employees
30 initiated such a policy of smiling to gain more power in the workplace. At ICHI, Japanese
31 culture was emphasized over other types of culture. This process of "Japanization," or the
32 replication of a Japanese ICHI store, was a dominant discourse, and the discussion on its
33 formation revealed how Japanese and Hong Kong people were affected by Japan's influence in
34 the region. Although the management in Hong Kong largely emphasized this discourse, the
35 efforts of local and global headquarters have not had a strong and sustained effect. Instead, I
36 show through this research that the act of smiling was used as a strategy for employees to
37 improve their impression management and how they flexibly changed their performance
38 according to the expectations of their audience. To be sure, employees actively navigated their
39 power through emotional display, thereby influencing the outcome of the dominant discourse.
40

41 While this paper provides an overview of the impact of store managers, it primarily touches
42 on the emotional display of employees in different stores. Future research could delve deeper
43 into the variations among stores managed by store managers with diverse interpretations of the
44 dominant discourse. Additionally, further exploration could focus on the influence of Japanese
45 store managers in Hong Kong stores, specifically examining their role in maintaining the
46 dominant discourse.
47

48 **Conclusion**

49 Following critical management studies, this study highlights the central role of emotional
50 displays in perpetuating discourses. It underscores the importance of incorporating broader
51 social contexts, such as transnational landscapes, into the analysis. Previous discourse studies
52 have emphasized the central role of power and politics in shaping meaning (Fairhurst, 2009;
53 Mackenzie and Alba-Juez, 2019). Here, I extend existing research on emotion and discourse by
54 focusing on the nuanced role of emotional displays, specifically smiling, as a tool for employees
55

to navigate power dynamics in the workplace. Through a critical sensegiving-sensemaking approach, this study delved into the politics of smiling, which is widely used by employees to negotiate power dynamics. I argue that smiling is not simply an expression of emotion; rather, it is intricately linked to organizational norms, power structures, and cultural expectations that significantly influence the outcomes of discourse dissemination.

This research illustrates the broader implications of adopting a critical approach to examine how employees utilize emotional displays to navigate power dynamics in the workplace and how they influence the perpetuation of discourse. Furthermore, this study contributes to the existing literature by highlighting the importance of addressing transnational elements, specifically the influence of Japanese culture in Hong Kong, in understanding the process of discourse dissemination.

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Policy making

Phase 1
Formatio

- Ethnocentrism: Japanese practices superior to others
- Transnational context: Influence of Japan’s power in Asia

Phase 2
Codificat
ion

- Embracing smiling as part of a customer-first mindset
- Local frustrations with standard requirements
- Feelings of inferiority regarding Japanese practices

Phase 3
Impleme
ntation

- Divergent priorities among store managers
- Reduced smiling among front-line workers

Phase 4
Monitori
ng

- Increased impression management
- Evaluators as audience

Phase 5
Adaptati
on

- Limited policy effect
- Mystery shopper as new audience

Policy practice

