



How uncivil customers corrode the relationship between frontline employees and retailers

Benoît Gaucher^{a,*}, Jean-Charles Chebat^{a,b}

^a HEC Montréal, 3000 Chemin de la Côte-Sainte-Catherine, Montreal, QC, H3T 2A7, Canada

^b The Faculty of Industrial Engineering and Management, Technion - Israel Institute of Technology, Technion City, Haifa 3200003, Israel



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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effects of customers' uncivil treatments on frontline retail employees' emotions, deviant behaviors and relationship with the retail organization. Our theoretical model is based on both marketing and personnel management literatures. 415 frontline retailing American employees answered our questionnaire. Employees treated uncivilly by customers feel angry but have to hide their negative emotions, which leads them to emotional exhaustion and deviant behaviors. Paradoxically, employees' strong commitment to their retailing organization brings about more deviant behaviors. We propose some managerial strategies to cope with uncivil customers, as well as future research on this important and under-researched topic.

1. Introduction

1.1. Shoppers' incivility toward retailers' employees: the elephant in the living room

Failed service incidents involve tensions between customers and frontline employees. They may also involve customers' incivility in the form of verbal aggression, that is, "verbal communications of anger that violate social norms" (Grandey et al., 2004, p. 398). Shoppers are increasingly violent on retail venues (e.g., Anonymous, 2001). Americans have drastically increased their yelling and cursing at customer service representatives between 2011 and 2013: "Yelling rose to 36% from 25% of the time, while cursing jumped to 13% from 7%." (Weisbaum, 2013). 98% of workers experience incivility, with 50% experiencing such conduct at least weekly (Porath and Pearson, 2013). Employees exercise revengeful behavior on their organization, which represents a cost estimated at \$14,000 per employee annually (Porath and Pearson, 2013). However, retail organizations request that their contact employees avoid showing their negative emotions and rather fake positive emotions during unpleasant interactions with customers (Goldberg and Grandey, 2007). Because of the intense competition between retailers, customers are granted power over the service organizations (Stern and Barton, 1997; Urban, 2004), which may lead shoppers to uncivil behavior toward employees.

The purpose of this research is to assess the cascade impact of customers' uncivil behavior on employees and on their link with their

retailing organization. Though the literature regarding the impact of uncivil managers on employees is abundant (e.g., Choi, 2008; Stoverink et al., 2014; Tepper et al., 2008), the uncivil customers' treatment of employees is almost ignored. Moreover, these studies focus primarily on employees' ability to hide negative emotions (Medler-Liraz, 2016; Rupp et al., 2008; Yoo and Arnold, 2016) and not on sensitive issues, such as employees' emotional exhaustion, burnout and deviant behaviors, which is the focus of the present study.

We examine the process through which uncivil shoppers' behavior toward frontline employees leads to employees' deviant behavior through the mediation of both genuine emotions (i.e. anger and emotional exhaustion) and fake emotions required by retailing managers, which leads to organizational deviance. We also investigate a paradoxical and significant impact of employees' commitment to their employers, which amplifies the effects of emotional exhaustion on deviant behavior.

1.2. Reversing the "Trickle Down Model of Organizational Justice"

The "Trickle Down Model of Organizational Justice" examines the effects of justice exercised by managers on the way employees treat customers: "employees' perceptions of fairness (...) affect their attitudes toward the organization, subsequently influencing their behaviors toward customers. In turn, customers should interpret these behaviors as signals of fair treatment, causing them to react positively to both the employee and the organization" (Masterson, 2001, p. 594). Ethical

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: benoit.gaucher@hec.ca (B. Gaucher), jean-charles.chebat@hec.ca (J.-C. Chebat).

leadership trickles down from the upper managers to lower level subordinates (Mayer et al., 2012; Schaubroeck et al., 2012). John Willard Marriott, the founder of the Marriott Corporation, translates the Trickle Down Model as follows: “Take good care of your employees and they’ll take good care of your customers and the customers will come back” (Marriott, n.d.).

In the present study, we reversed the direction of causality. We develop a Trickle Up Model from uncivil shoppers to the retail organization through its employees, as shown in the next section.

2. Conceptual framework and hypotheses

2.1. The Trickle Up Model of employees’ uncivil treatment by customers

Retailers grant customers a status of “second manager”, which gives them a significant power over the employees (Grandey et al., 2010, p. 391), and may lead to uncivil treatments (Grandey, 2003). Though justice on the workplace has been researched abundantly, most studies failed to take into consideration the specific sources of injustice (e.g., Hershcovis and Barling, 2010) and neglected customers as a potential source of injustice, which brings about significant biases in the analysis of the impact of organizational justice (Hershcovis et al., 2007). Most organizational justice studies focus mainly on unfair treatment of employees by managers (Kernan and Hanges, 2002; Mackey et al., 2015; Neubert et al., 2009) or by other employees (Harris et al., 2011; Liao and Rupp, 2005; Rupp and Cropanzano, 2002).

However, shoppers’ incivility is a major cause of both injustice (Rupp et al., 2008; Rupp and Spencer, 2006; Spencer and Rupp, 2009). Surprisingly, the effects of shoppers’ incivility on employees and the retail organization has not been investigated so far. In this section, we examine the cascade of causality from shoppers’ incivility to its ultimate consequence, that is, employees’ deviant behavior, through the mediation of emotional states (anger and emotional exhaustion) and behavioral state (surface acting) and the interaction effects of affective commitment.

2.1.1. Effects of uncivil customers on service quality

Contact employees need to deal with two opposite constraints. On the one hand, service managers want their employees to display emotions conform to emotional norms set by organizations (Ekman, 1973). On the other hand, most service employees are not trained to cope with their genuine feelings. Customers are used to perceive the faked emotions (Grandey et al., 2005), which affects the quality of services negatively (Liu et al., 2013). These faked emotions have been analyzed as “surface acting”.

2.1.2. Surface acting

The general process of hiding genuine emotions is called “emotional labor”, defined as “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7), or as “the effort, planning, and control needed to express organizationally desired emotion during interpersonal transactions” (Morris and Feldman, 1996, p. 987). Employees who are “surface acting” try neither to understand the customers’ feelings (such as frustration) nor to modify their own genuine feelings. Instead they limit themselves to simulate positive emotions toward the customers (Cropanzano et al., 2000; Gross, 1998; Rupp et al., 2008; Rupp and Spencer, 2006; Spencer and Rupp, 2009).

Interactional justice refers to the quality of the interpersonal interaction between individuals. It is defined as “actions displaying social sensitivity, such (...) respect and dignity” (Skarlicki and Folger, 1997, p. 435) and it is a major antecedent of surface acting (Medler-Liraz, 2016; Rupp et al., 2008; Yoo and Arnold, 2016): the lower the interactional justice, the higher employees are “surface acting”. In other words, shoppers’ incivility toward employees is expected to trigger surface acting.

Is the relation between interactional justice and surface acting

mediated by negative emotions, such as anger? Rupp et al. (2008)¹ did not find such a mediation. We follow Chebat and Slusarczyk (2005) who found that the effects of interactional justice are mediated by emotions, that is, in this study, anger. This leads to the first hypothesis:

H1. Interactional (in)justice (that is, shoppers’ incivility) toward frontline employees increases surface acting through the mediation of anger.

2.1.3. Emotional exhaustion

Surface acting drives emotional exhaustion and harms employees’ psychological health (Grandey, 2003; Wang et al., 2018). As shown in the next paragraphs, verbal mistreatment by the public and the suppression or modification of emotional expressions lead to emotional exhaustion and burnout (Grandey et al., 2012).

Emotional exhaustion is characterized by “a lack of energy” (the “tank is empty” (Babakus et al., 1999, p. 58)). Individuals feel “drained or used up” (Ledgerwood et al., 1998, p. 31). Emotional exhaustion is a major issue for employees in burnout (Maslach and Jackson, 1981), which is a common issue: in the United States, 40% of hotel middle managers score high on the Emotional Exhaustion scale (Hoel et al., 2003). Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H2. Surface acting increases emotional exhaustion.

2.1.4. Organizational deviance

Emotional exhaustion brings about organizational deviance (e.g., Mulki et al., 2006). Employees treated unfairly by a supervisor may develop organizational deviant behavior in order to get even with the organization (Wang et al., 2012) and may sabotage it, which reflects the concept of reciprocity (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). Abusive supervision is positively associated with employees’ service sabotage through surface acting (Chi et al., 2018). In this study, abusive behavior is that of shoppers which in turn causes surface acting.

We propose that employees uncivilly treated by shoppers may also seek to punish the retailers. This paradoxical behavior is explained by the “Displaced Aggression Theory” (Tepper et al., 2008). It predicts that, an individual treated unfairly may behave uncivilly toward a third party (Dollard et al., 1939) in order to restore his/her psychological balance. This individual does not aim at the actual source of the uncivil treatment, because this source is too powerful and may exert retaliation.

This study focuses on shoppers as the source of interactional injustice felt by frontline employees. Employees may consider that shoppers, who are empowered as the “second manager” (Grandey et al., 2010, p. 391), are too powerful to be the direct target of their revenge. Employees may also consider that retailers are responsible for creating (or at least not avoiding) situations where customers treat them in an uncivil way.

Employees may seek revenge on the organization through organizational deviant behaviors like absenteeism (to call in sick, to take a long break or to come late) or “presenteeism” (to work slow deliberately, not to respect supervisors’ instructions or to put little effort into their work). This leads to the following hypothesis:

H3. Emotional exhaustion is positively related to organizational deviance.

In the next paragraphs, we show how the negative effects of surface acting and emotional exhaustion are amplified by organizational rules

¹ They concluded that employees had to go through two processes simultaneously in order to display the normative emotions required by the organization: a “physiological modification” to cool down their own anger and a “response modification” to fit the emotions desired by the organization (Cropanzano et al., 2000, p. 59).

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