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## The interface between technology and customer cyberbullying: Evidence from India



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### ABSTRACT

Drawing on a phenomenological inquiry of the subjective work experiences of Indian call agents employed in international-facing call centres, this paper highlights the interface between information and communication technologies and devices and employee experiences of customer cyberbullying. Providing holistic and contextualized insights into the genesis, course and outcome of customer cyberbullying, the paper shows that whereas the absence of visual cues does not impede employees' accurate interpretation of their negative experiences, it exacerbates customers' misbehaviour since the latter feel dissociated from and cannot see the impact of their actions on employees. While the technology-linked pace of work affects employee coping with customer cyberbullying, the maintenance of records and archives brings in concreteness and permanence through which retaliation is ruled out but reviewing the interaction for purposes of learning and even redressal is possible.

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### 1. Introduction

Service work is defined as work, below professional level, in which a key part of the labour process involves interaction with customers (Korczynski & Evans, 2013). Frontline employees who perform such work become the face of the service providing organization and walk a fine balance between efficient and effective service that pleases customers and leaves the latter with a positive impression of the service provider. Employer competitive advantage in terms of financial gains and reputation as well as customer satisfaction and retention are at stake here (Bettencourt, Brown, & Mackenzie, 2005; Grandey, Diefendorff, & Rupp, 2013). The entrenchment of customer sovereignty in the service economy as organizations pursue success (Korczynski & Evans, 2013) accords customers a fair amount of freedom to behave as they please

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with frontline employees (Harris & Reynolds, 2003). As a result, customer bullying (alternatively termed customer abuse in this paper), defined as forms of customer behaviour that are perceived by frontline employees as aggressive, intimidating or insulting to themselves (Korczynski & Evans, 2013), is commonly reported in a wide range of service occupations (Korczynski & Evans, 2013; Yagil, 2008).

Empirical research on customer bullying which throws light on its antecedents, manifestations and outcomes remains concentrated in face-to-face, real or physical encounters. The rise of computer-mediated, cyber or virtual service interactions, which are only expected to increase as technology undergirds and drives business, adds an interesting and important dimension to the debate as it throws up the question of how customer bullying plays out in such circumstances. The present paper addresses this gap, highlighting the interface between information and communication technologies and devices (ICTDs) and employee experiences of customer abuse. Drawing on a study of Indian agents working in international-facing call centres, the paper focuses on how technology influences the genesis, course and impact of customer abuse. Following the section on customer bullying in service encounters (Section 2) and customer bullying and the mode of service (Section 3), the inquiry's method (Section 4) and findings are presented (Section 5) and discussed (Section 6).

## 2. Customer bullying in service encounters

Customer bullying, which is manifested mainly as person-related (D'Cruz, 2013) verbal aggression (Yagil, 2008), represents an extra-organizational source of misbehaviour operating at the interpersonal level of analysis (D'Cruz, 2013). Customer bullying is primarily fuelled by the ideology of customer sovereignty (D'Cruz, 2013; Korczynski & Bishop, 2008; Korczynski & Evans, 2013; Yagil, 2008). Indeed, protagonist-related factors such as personality, mood, attitudes, etc., invoking the psychological approach and situational-linked influences such as ambience and servicescape referring to the contingency approach (Korczynski & Evans, 2013; Yagil, 2008) are subsumed within sociological explanations which emphasize that customer bullying is systemically present in the service economy (Korczynski & Evans, 2013). This latter view maintains that customer bullying arises when the enchanting myth of customer sovereignty propagated by service organizations breaks down. With the pressures of balancing the contradictions between production and consumption nullifying the highly publicized and supposedly revered goal of customer supremacy, disillusionment gives way to aggression as customers encounter the reality of their powerlessness (Korczynski & Evans, 2013). Negative reactions are displaced on to frontline employees who are socialized by their employers into accepting customers' sense of entitlement, thereby not only legitimizing and normalizing customer abuse but also internalizing a sense of their own culpability (Korczynski & Bishop, 2008; Korczynski & Evans, 2013; Yagil, 2008). Operating under such imbalanced power equations, employees feel helpless and report having no choice but to please and indulge customers and to continue the service interaction with cordiality and engagement (Yagil, 2008).

Whereas most service interactions are disembodied (Korczynski & Evans, 2013), repeated encounters and/or extreme instances of customer bullying bring in the element of persistence or severity (D'Cruz, 2013) which occasion short-term and long-term emotional injury to frontline employees (Korczynski & Evans, 2013; Yagil, 2008). Apart from anger and depression, exposure to sustained customer misbehaviour depletes the employee's resources such that a state of burnout, manifested primarily as emotional exhaustion and a sense of worthlessness and humiliation, results (Yagil, 2008). Yet, employee coping is constrained by the ideology of customer sovereignty. With employers rationalizing customer bullying such that not only intra-organizational redressal mechanisms are unavailable (D'Cruz, 2013) but also performance appraisal systems accord customers reward and coercive power (Yagil, 2008), employees wishing to continue in such employment must invoke emotion-focused strategies to address the challenges of their negative experiences (Yagil, 2008). Employees consider cognitive restructuring, affective blunting and distancing, compartmentalization, social support, environmental manipulations and customer bribing as effective coping mechanisms (Yagil, 2008). Quoting Czarniawska's point that 'insult as such does not have to be humiliating', Korczynski and Evans (2013) hold that "it is the inability to meet the challenge constituted by an insult that is humiliating".

Though organizations promote customer sovereignty as means to competitive advantage, customer bullying carries indirect organizational costs. Poor morale and motivation and high absenteeism attests to employees' lowered job satisfaction and organizational commitment with spillover effects on performance (Yagil, 2008). Notwithstanding these outcomes, where employees do draw the line between legitimate

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