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Triggers and outcomes of customer-to-customer aisle rage

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ABSTRACT

Incidents of customer-to-customer aisle rage are on the rise, which raises questions about their triggers and outcomes, including customer responses that may affect the firm where the incidents take place. The results of 329 Critical Incident Technique interviews categorize triggers as interpersonal or situational, and suggest situational triggers that are under the firm's control (e.g., hunger, crowdedness, long waits for service) frequently co-occur with behaviors that negatively impact the firm (e.g., physical expressions of rage, exit, and revenge). Another important contribution is the identification of new responses to rage, including: commiserating with other customers, responding with humor/sarcasm, and boycotting the service provider because of shame or regret about personal reactions to the rage-inducing incidents. The results build on Affective Events Theory (AET) and contribute to our understanding of customer coping in customer-to-customer interactions.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research motivation

Six years ago, a Fort Myers man whacked a fellow Walmart shopper in the head with a dustpan, breaking the handle, after the two had a dispute over who was on the correct side of the aisle (NBC-2, 2010). Five years ago, Blackstein and Li (2011) characterized a woman as being engaged in 'competitive shopping' when she pepper sprayed other customers during a Black Friday sale so that she could grab additional discounted merchandise. At the time, Los Angeles Police Lieutenant Abel Parga described the incident as customer-versus-customer shopping rage. Pepper spray was also used by police in another aisle rage incident: to break up fights which broke out among customers who were shopping for Nike retro Air Jordan basketball shoes in a Seattle mall (Associated Press, 2011). Tragically, a more recent texting incident in a movie theater resulted in one customer fatally shooting another, which occurred after the theater was made aware of a conflict but failed to intervene in a timely manner (Almasy, 2014).

These newsworthy incidents of customer rage, which escalated to violence, and over 4500 YouTube search results from the term "Walmart Customers Fighting", including this 2015 viral video, are part of a phenomenon that led Grove et al. (2004) to characterize

the current time period as the "age of rage" in an executive briefing (p. 244). In the briefing, they developed a "4-Ts" framework of customer rage which considered interrelationships between targets of rage behavior, customer temperament (which may predispose the customer to rage), triggers that spark rage behaviors, and treatments for addressing rage. The current research is aimed at understanding the interrelationships between targets, customer temperament, and triggers of customer-to-customer rage, which should help inform the fourth T, treatments for addressing rage.

According to McColl-Kennedy et al. (2009), customer rage is "a form of anger comprised of a spectrum of negative emotions including ferocity, fury, wrath, disgust, contempt, scorn and resentment" (p. 222). Aisle rage is a subcategory of customer rage that customers experience while in a service or retail setting. Within aisle rage, there are two categories: customer-to-customer and customer-to-employee (Levy, 2007). Less is known about customer-to-customer rage, including *when* customers experience rage emotions as a result of their interactions with other clients and *how* their responses to these emotions affect the firm where the interaction occurs. One goal of the current manuscript is to help fill these gaps in the literature.

During aisle rage incidents, even though customers are responding to emotions that were triggered by another customer, the backlash of the rage may, indeed, be directed at the firm. Customer rage can result in behaviors that are more broadly categorized as dysfunctional customer behaviors, or behaviors in service settings that violate generally accepted norms of conduct (Reynolds and Harris, 2009). Fullerton and Punj (1993, 2004) called for a better understanding of norm-violating behaviors by

customers, as understanding dysfunctional customer behavior can help reduce behaviors that may be detrimental to the firm. As noted in the context of customer-to-employee rage, understanding the causes, contexts, and consequences of aisle rage can help organizations prepare to respond to customer-to-customer rage incidents in a way that minimizes danger and harm (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2009).

Thus, the aforementioned examples of customer rage have societal and managerial implications which should be of pertinence to a diverse collective of stakeholders. Though these rage incidents possessed the requisite notoriety to garner media attention, incidences of customer-to-customer aisle rage that either do not escalate to newsworthy levels or simply result in passive-aggressive responses may be overlooked, perhaps to the detriment of retail and service firms. It is essential for managers to understand these triggers so they can help govern and guide the relationships between customers, protecting the firm from potential liability issues and customer revenge which may be directed at the firm.

To this end, the current article begins to answer the following questions:

- What are the primary triggers of customer-to-customer aisle rage incidents?
- How do customers express rage toward the co-customer that triggered the rage?
- How do customers behave toward the firm where the customer-to-customer aisle rage occurs?

Following background information, the coded results of 329 critical incident technique (CIT) interviews are reported and representative examples are shared. A framework and model are developed. The model characterizes direct and indirect triggers of customer-to-customer aisle rage, identifies previously overlooked expressions of customer rage, and asserts a role for shame/embarrassment in customer rage behaviors, including behaviors that affect the firm. Finally, future directions and managerial implications are discussed.

1.2. Customer-to-customer rage background research

Customer rage is thought to be on the rise. The Australian School of Business (Knowledge@Australian School of Business, 2010) provided support for this presumption, reporting that 25% of US service workers had been victims of physical or psychological aggression from customers. Because the outcomes of customer rage include lower staff morale, a decline in business revenues, and a decrease in brand loyalty, managers have ample motivation to understand more about this trend.

According to Grove et al. (2004), customer interaction within a shared service setting can act as a catalyst for rage. They noted that the physical and social surroundings in a service environment, the temporal perspective, task definition and antecedent states may each trigger rage. As a result, other customers, employees and elements of the service environment becoming potential targets of the customer rage behaviors. Therefore, other customers can be the targets of rage, even if the rage is not triggered by an interaction with another customer.

Nicholls (2010) spoke with customer-to-customer interaction (CCI) experts to identify CCI, the active or passive interaction of two or more customers within or outside of a service setting, as an emerging mainstream service management topic. He noted that 42% of service industry employees in the United States work in industries that are sensitive to customer-to-customer interactions (Nicholls, 2010). The existing literature on customer-to-customer interactions has provided some insight into what customers consider negative incidents, which may, in turn, trigger rage. For example, Zhang et al. (2010) used critical incident technique to categorize customer-to-customer interactions as positive-negative and direct-indirect. They identified restaurants, movie theaters, and travel providers as key areas for customer-to-customer interactions. Although most of the interactions were categorized as positive and direct, about 15% of the incidents were determined to be negative and direct interactions (e.g., fighting and rudeness) – which could result in customer rage.

After integrating conceptual bases from several frameworks that informed our understanding of inter-client conflict, Grove and Fisk (1997) studied critical incidents resulting from interactions between tourists. Two hundred seventy-six of 486 tourists interviewed felt that their tourist visit was affected by the presence of others, and 169 reported that these were negative experiences. The negative incidents were ultimately categorized as protocol incidents (e.g., physical and verbal behavior while waiting in line) and sociability incidents (e.g., unfriendly/hostile co-customers and ambiance incidents). They concluded that "left unattended, customer-to-customer relationships may undermine an organization's overall performance from some patrons' points of view" (p. 75).

Of pertinence to managers is the burgeoning stream of empirical evidence which supports Grove and Fisk's (1997) statement. Extant research on customer-to-customer interactions indicates that these types of interactions can, in fact, change attitudes (e.g., Wu, 2007; Johnson and Grier, 2013) and behaviors toward the firm (Söderlund, 2011; Moore et al., 2005). Wu (2007) found that when fellow travelers engaged in protocol and sociable incidents, violent incidents, grungy incidents (hygiene/cutting), malcontent incidents (complaining about poor service/not ready), crude incidents (naked, dirty jokes, drunk), and inconsiderate incidents (loud shouting, children run around without supervision, smoking cigarettes), it affected tourists' satisfaction with their trips to Taipei.

Johnson and Grier (2013) utilized group dynamics (homophily, compatibility) and Distinctiveness Theory as conceptual bases and determined culturally compatible customers had more favorable interactions with each other, which impacted customer satisfaction with the firm. Söderlund (2011) also showed that other customers (i.e., number of other customers, what they consume and purchase, and how they interact with the customer) affected customer attitudes toward the retailer. Additionally, Moore et al. (2005) showed a relationship between customer-to-customer interactions and loyalty toward and word-of-mouth about the firm.

1.3. Conceptual basis: affective events theory

McColl-Kennedy et al. (2009) examined customer-to-employee rage following a service failure in three independent studies. They utilized Affective Events Theory (AET) as a conceptual basis. AET suggests consumers cope with negative events via a two-stage process, which helps determine how customers cope. Based on previous research in the contexts of marketing and social psychology, they expected that threats to one's self/self-esteem and/or threats of love ones would be among the triggers of extreme negative emotions, which would ultimately result in coping. The current research builds on the framework provided by McColl-Kennedy et al. (2009), and, thus, utilizes AET as a conceptual basis.

They identified two categories of rage – rancorous rage (feeling contempt or scorn) and retaliatory rage (characterized by malice or ferocity) – that may result in distinct behavioral outcomes (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2009). The behavioral outcomes were characterized as the result of problem-based coping, in which a customer might alter one's situation to remove the source of stress. While both types of rage increased verbal expressions like