

Customer-directed counterproductive work behaviour in a high-contact service environment – selected antecedent and consequent variables

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Abstract

The reliance of high-contact service industries on human resources to create high-quality service experiences explains why a great deal of attention has been paid to the behaviour of service providers, in particular those involved in customer–employee exchanges. Given the critical role of service interactions in the achievement of success by service organisations, there has recently been an increased focus on employee behaviour that deviates from organisational rules of customer service and, as a consequence, harms the interests of an organisation. The purpose of the paper is to explore selected antecedent and consequent variables of customer-directed counterproductive work behaviour in a high-contact service environment. The linkages among customers' deviant behaviour directed at employees, employees' deviant behaviour directed at customers, and the competitive performance of an employing organisation were examined. The study adopted a quantitative approach. Data were collected from 106 food service employees in Poland by means of an online questionnaire. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were performed to test the proposed hypotheses. The results show that employee-directed customer misbehaviour contributes to customer-directed counterproductive work behaviour. Customer-directed counterproductive work behaviour in turn leads to a deterioration in the competitive performance of a food service establishment; the importance of service process quality, as a success factor, serves as a moderator in this linkage. The present research adds to the ongoing debate about the antecedents of counterproductive work behaviour and its effects on the performance of service organisations. From a managerial perspective, the identified relationships emphasise the importance of actions to be taken by employers to neutralise the negative consequences of dysfunctional customer behaviour on employee behaviour and job performance.

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Introduction

The reliance of high-contact service industries on human resources to create high-quality service experiences and enhance organisational performance in the rapidly changing competitive environment explains why considerable scholarly attention has been paid to the behaviour of service providers, in particular those involved in customer–employee exchanges. It has been widely recognised that the dyadic exchange between customers and employees has an enormous impact on the success or failure of service encounters, as customers' evaluations of service experience are shaped by perceptions of the quality of interpersonal interactions (Groth and Grandey, 2012). Extensive empirical research in various service settings supports the effect of the course of customer–employee exchange on customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. Evidence of such linkages has been provided by studies carried out in the hospitality (Gazzoli et al., 2013), retail (Yavas and Babakus, 2009), healthcare (Wang, 2015), and banking industries (Karatepe, 2011), among others. Likewise, the critical role of the human touch in enhancing customer experience and customer value has been emphasised by leading business consultancies (e.g. McKinsey, 2016; PwC, 2018).

Given the immense significance of service interactions to the success of service organisations, an increased focus has lately been placed on employee behaviour that deviates from organisational rules of customer service (and as a consequence harms an organisation's interests) – customer-directed counterproductive work behaviour.

Although a growing number of research projects have investigated customer-directed counterproductive work behaviour and its correlates in high-contact service contexts (e.g. Hunter and Penney, 2014; Moon and Hur, 2018; Song et al., 2021), scholarly efforts to explain the phenomenon have been somewhat scant. Furthermore, studies on workplace deviant behaviour directed at customers predominantly seek to advance knowledge about the determining factors thereof (both dispositional and situational), while the effects remain relatively under-researched. Also, an understanding of the construct has been mostly developed from an individual perspective (Carpenter et al., 2021). A critical area that has not received a great deal of attention is the linkage among service employees' dysfunctional behaviour targeted at customers, its sources and outcomes at the organisational level. The present study therefore aims to explore selected unit-level antecedent and consequent variables of customer-directed counterproductive work behaviour in high-contact service settings. More specifically, it examines the relationships among customers' deviant behaviour directed at employees, employees' deviant behaviour directed at customers, and the competitive performance of an employing organisation.

The study is designed to contribute insights in several ways. First, when exploring customer and employee deviance, we take the social context in which negative interactions occur into account. Since dysfunctional behaviours can permeate the social landscape of an organisation and become

a defining characteristic of the work environment (Lim et al., 2008), customer-directed counterproductive work behaviour can be brought about by employees' overall impressions of customer misbehaviour regardless of whether or not they were direct targets of mistreatment. Second, our investigation provides further support for the utility of interactional justice (Bies and Moag, 1986) as a useful framework for examining the linkage between deviant acts by customers and employees in high-contact service organisations. Third, our study adds to the literature by testing a boundary condition, based on the combined rationales of the generic competitive strategies model (Porter, 1980) and the hierarchical service quality model (Brady and Cronin, 2001), under which customer-directed counterproductive work behaviour has an adverse effect on the competitive performance of a service organisation.

To achieve the purpose proposed, the remainder of the paper is structured as follows. To begin with, the literature on counterproductive work behaviour is reviewed and the research hypotheses, which are derived from this review, are presented. In subsequent sections, the research method is described and the findings of the study are reported and discussed. Finally, the main conclusions reached are summarised, the limitations of the study are provided and recommendations for future research are outlined.

1. Literature review

Due to its prevalence in workplaces and its adverse organisational outcomes, counterproductive work behaviour has become an increasingly popular research topic in the field of management in the last several decades. Counterproductive work behaviour is an umbrella term that refers to any volitional acts by an organisation's members that run counter to the legitimate interests of, or do harm to, an organisation or its

stakeholders (Sackett, 2002; Spector and Fox, 2005). This definition covers a wide spectrum of overt or covert actions that may either directly or indirectly impair individual or organisational performance. In other words, counterproductive work behaviour reflects conduct that an organisation would prefer its employees not to engage in. Owing to overlaps with other categories, the construct has been investigated under different labels – deviant or dysfunctional work behaviour in particular (e.g. Bennett and Robinson, 2000; Griffin et al., 1998).

The most well-established conceptualisation of counterproductive work behaviour is based on the targets of deviant acts and makes the distinction between behaviour that is directed at the organisation and behaviour that is directed at individuals with a stake in the organisation (Bennett and Robinson, 2000; Fox et al., 2001). Organisational counterproductive behaviour may take the form of wasting resources, sabotaging equipment, intentionally doing work incorrectly or handling personal matters during working hours. Interpersonal counterproductive behaviour may be manifested by acting rudely towards others, spreading rumours about others, sexually harassing others or withholding crucial information from others.

Recently, increased attention to counterproductive work behaviour research, particularly in service settings, has turned to external stakeholders, namely customers (e.g. Gong and Wang, 2022; Hunter and Penney, 2014; Song et al., 2021). Still, this attention is relatively scant. This is surprising, given that in the highly competitive environment service organisations invest massive efforts in attracting and retaining customers, and employees' engagement in customer-directed dysfunctional behaviour may significantly undermine the organisational goal of creating customer value. Therefore, customer-directed counterproductive work behaviour has the potential to impact an organisation's

bottom line more profoundly than other forms of workplace deviance targeted at organisation and its internal stakeholders (Hunter and Penney, 2014).

As noted by Fox et al. (2001), research on the antecedents of counterproductive work behaviour has portrayed it as an emotion-based response to stressful workplace events or as a cognition-based response to unfavourable workplace experiences. In the current study, the latter perspective is taken and customer-directed counterproductive work behaviour is viewed as a revenge-motivated reaction to customer misbehaviour, understood as acts that deliberately violate generally accepted norms of conduct in consumption settings (Fullerton and Punj, 2004). Forms of misconduct that are directed against employees are subjected to scrutiny, as such forms are reported to occur on an increasingly frequent basis in service settings (Daunt and Harris, 2012; Fisk et al., 2010).

One of the theoretical perspectives that help to explain service employees' negative reactions towards misbehaving customers is an organisational justice framework. Since work events involving customers and employees are interactive in nature, interactional justice (Bies and Moag, 1986) has been regarded as most relevant to this particular form of exchange (Rupp et al., 2008). Previous literature has identified employee-directed customer misbehaviour as a specific type of interactional injustice, as it involves the violation of norms in workplace social interactions (Koopmann et al., 2015; Lavelle et al., 2021). This perspective suggests that employees feel they have been unjustly treated when customers talk down to them, act rudely towards them, question their professional competences, complain for no reason or demand special treatment. When employees experience misbehaviour from customers, they make judgments about whether their fundamental right to be treated fairly has been violated

and are likely to express a desire to retaliate against perpetrators to punish them for their wrongdoings (Skarlicki et al., 2008) despite the potential economic and social costs (Ho and Gupta, 2014). In high-contact service settings, Sommovigo et al. (2020), in their experimental study among retail and restaurant employees in Italy and Ireland, found that exposure to a customer-initiated unjust event triggered individuals to experience negative emotions and led to the development of generalised customer-directed incivility intentions. In Jung, Brown and Zablah's (2017) study based on a sample of insurance agents in South Korea, perceptions of customer-initiated justice (in the form of interpersonal justice and informational justice) were found to predict employee-customer fit, which, in turn, exerted a significant influence on customer-oriented behaviour. Mullen and Kelloway (2013), who examined the effects of interpersonal customer mistreatment among contact centre customer service representatives in Canada, reported that employees drained by unjust customer interactions were more likely to engage in retaliation against instigators.

The service marketing literature suggests that interactional aspects of service performance have an enormous impact on customers' perceptions of service quality, and treatment by employees often is equated with the performance of service in the minds of customers (Cook et al., 2002). Thus, dysfunctional behaviour of employees is perceived as service failure (Groth and Grandey, 2012). As a result, a negative employee-customer interaction can have serious consequences not just for that relationship but also for the organisation as a whole. When faced with service failures, customers may choose to withdraw from the relationship and switch service providers, voice their concerns by spreading negative word-of-mouth or take revenge on employees by engaging in vindictive complaining (Li and

Stacks, 2017). In high-contact service contexts, Halpern and Mwesiumo (2021), based on the analysis of online passenger ratings of airports worldwide, found that the failure of any service attribute significantly reduced the probability of a passenger being a promoter of an airport, with failures associated with airport staff producing the strongest effect. Tsai et al. (2014), who examined food service experiences of Taiwanese customers, observed that the type of service failure had a significant effect on diners' responses – compared to outcome failures, individuals showed stronger negative reactions and feelings of betrayal when encountering process failures. Joon Choi and Sik Kim (2013), in their study on antecedents of customer satisfaction and customer loyalty in the Korean healthcare sector, reported that interaction quality was a mayor determinant of customer outcomes.

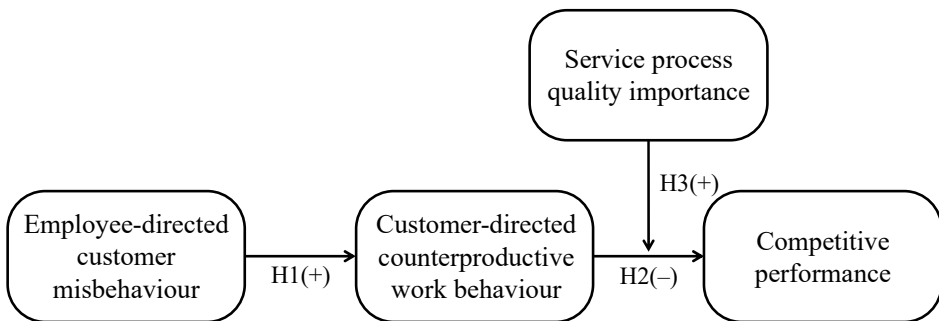
As posited by Porter's (1980) model of generic competitive strategies, quality serves as a driver of the market offering differentiation; therefore, it lies at the heart of an organisation's strategy to gain competitive advantage and enhance performance. It should be noted, however, that competitive performance can result not only from differentiation advantage, but also from cost advantage (Porter, 1980). Moreover, as Brady and Cronin (2001) propose in their hierarchical

model of service quality, customer evaluations of service quality are shaped simultaneously by interaction quality, physical environment quality and outcome quality. Although in high-contact service industries the former dimension is of paramount significance, the role of the latter two cannot be ignored. It seems plausible, then, to assume that the strength of the relationship between dysfunctional employee behaviour and the competitive performance of an employing organisation can vary depending on the importance of service process (interaction) quality as a success factor.

Based on the aforementioned theoretical and empirical evidence, we propose the following hypotheses (which are illustrated in Figure 1):

- H1: Employee-directed customer misbehaviour is positively related to customer-directed counterproductive work behaviour.**
- H2: Customer-directed counterproductive work behaviour is negatively related to competitive performance.**
- H3: The negative relationship between customer-directed counterproductive work behaviour and competitive performance is stronger at high level of service process quality importance as a success factor.**

Figure 1. Proposed research model



Source: own elaboration

2. Methodology

In order to test the proposed hypotheses empirically, we conducted a field investigation. The target population of this study comprised employees in the food service industry in Poland, which is a labour-intensive industry requiring regular and direct contact with customers. Therefore, food service establishments provide a useful environment for exploring high-contact services. We selected respondents using a non-probability sampling technique, namely voluntary response sampling. We posted invitations on social

networking sites to participate in our survey and asked potential informants who had professional experience in the food service industry to follow a link to an online questionnaire. In total, 116 employees took part in the study, of whom 106 returned fully completed questionnaires that were suitable for use in statistical analyses. As reported in Table 1, the majority of respondents were females (78%), aged between 21 and 25 years (65%). Most of the participants held frontline positions (86%), worked in full-service restaurants (70%), and had no more than one year of experience in the food service industry (51%).

Table 1. Respondent profile

Variables	Category	N	%
Gender	Female	83	78.3
	Male	23	21.7
Age	20 years old or less	19	17.9
	21–25 years old	69	65.1
	26–30 years old	9	8.5
	31 years old or more	9	8.5
Position	Frontline	91	85.8
	Non-frontline	15	14.2
Industrial tenure	1 year or less	54	50.9
	Between 1 and 3 years	31	29.2
	Between 3 and 5 years	11	10.4
	More than 5 years	10	9.4
Type of establishment	Full-service establishment	74	69.8
	Non-full-service establishment	32	30.2

Source: own elaboration

A self-administered online survey was adopted in the study in order to avoid interviewer bias. The questionnaire consisted of three sections. Section one dealt with dysfunctional behaviours of customers and employees and was developed based on a review of previous investigations into

antisocial activities of parties involved in service interactions. Employee-directed customer misbehaviour was measured by averaging 12 items derived from Dormann and Zapf (2004) and Szczygieł and Bazińska (2013), while customer-directed counterproductive work behaviour was measured by

averaging 12 items derived from Harris and Ogbonna (2006) and Hunter and Penney (2014). Following Carpenter, Whitman, and Amrhein (2021), we conceptualised deviant behaviours as unit-level constructs (i.e. as characteristics of the unit environment) and asked participants about their accumulated perceptions of negative exchanges between customers and employees in their workplace. They reported how often they witnessed manifestations of customer and employee deviances by rating the items on seven-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1–never to 7–on a daily basis. Section two was devoted to organisational performance and the determining factors thereof. Using a Likert-type item response format, we sought information about employees' opinions on the importance of six factors in the success of the establishment they worked at (possible responses ranged from 1–not important to 4–very important) and about the overall performance of the establishment compared to major competitors in the market (possible responses ranged from 1–much worse to 7–much better). In the final section, socio-demographic and job-related data were collected.

In order to analyse the data from the questionnaire, we employed descriptive statistics and correlations to portray the basic features of the variables under study and the associations between them. To test the proposed hypotheses, we performed hierarchical multiple regression analyses. Specifically, to examine the relationships between customer-directed counterproductive work behaviour and its hypothesised antecedent and outcome, we entered variables in two and

three separate steps, respectively. This procedure allowed us to verify whether the incremental variance explained by newly added variables was significant. The statistical processing of the survey data was conducted using SPSS software.

3. Research results

Before testing our hypotheses, we first examined the frequency of dysfunctional customer and employee behaviour witnessed in food service establishments. As presented in Tables 2 and 3, among the actions aimed at employees, the most frequent were blaming the staff for matters beyond their control, demonstrating a lack of understanding that employees must follow set standards, and expecting special treatment from employees. In the group of actions aimed at customers, relatively high scores were assigned to providing customers with incomplete or false information, putting little effort into customer service, and showing irritation/impatience towards customers. On the other hand, using threats scored the lowest for both parties to the interaction.

On the whole, behaviour targeted at customers was reported less frequently compared to that targeted at employees. It should be noted, however, that this study relied on data collected from service providers. In self-reports, organisational behaviour measures are prone to a social desirability bias caused by the tendency on the part of individuals to present themselves in a favourable light, regardless of their true opinions about an issue, due to the need for social approval (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Table 2. Employee-directed customer misbehaviour items

Items	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach's alpha
Customers blame employees for matters beyond the employees' control	5.05	1.681	0.927
Customers do not understand that employees have to follow set standards	5.00	1.486	
Customers expect special treatment from employees	4.67	1.541	
Customers complain about food or service for no reason	4.25	1.620	
Customers talk down to employees	4.23	1.629	
Customers expect actions that are beyond the scope of the responsibilities of employees	4.13	1.735	
Customers question the professional competences of employees	3.73	1.738	
Customers raise their voices to employees	3.24	1.496	
Customers make malicious or offensive comments about employees	2.88	1.510	
Customers use inappropriate or offensive vocabulary when communicating with employees	2.65	1.360	
Customers make inappropriate or offensive gestures towards employees	2.35	1.435	
Customers threaten employees	1.68	0.962	

Source: own elaboration

Table 3. Customer-directed counterproductive work behaviour items

Items	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach's alpha
Employees provide customers with incomplete or false information	2.99	1.404	0.831
Employees put little effort into customer service	2.94	1.365	
Employees show irritation/impatience towards customers	2.86	1.199	
Employees ignore customers	2.78	1.414	
Employees make malicious or offensive comments on the appearance or behaviour of customers	2.32	1.349	
Employees use inappropriate or offensive vocabulary in front of customers	1.91	1.134	
Employees hurry customers	1.86	1.183	
Employees raise their voices to customers	1.64	0.758	
Employees make inappropriate or offensive gestures towards customers	1.57	1.113	
Employees intentionally serve dishes that do not meet quality standards	1.50	0.918	
Employees intentionally serve dishes that do not comply with the customers' orders	1.48	0.875	
Employees threaten customers	1.17	0.560	

Source: own elaboration

Table 4 provides information about the importance of selected factors to the success of food service establishments. The picture that emerges from the table is that the organisations under study rely more heavily on differentiation advantage compared to cost

advantage. They also appear to find outcome quality (food quality, dish variety) a more important source of competitive performance than physical environment quality (establishment location, establishment design) and interaction quality (service process quality).

Table 4. Success factors

Variables	Mean	Standard deviation
Food quality	2.91	0.991
Establishment location	2.71	1.086
Dish variety	2.61	0.972
Service process quality	2.56	1.096
Establishment design	2.43	1.060
Dish prices	2.38	0.990

Source: own elaboration

Means, standard deviations, and correlations between the variables of interest are presented in Table 5. Overall, it shows that dysfunctional behaviour in food service establishments is more often directed against employees than customers. Counterproductive work behaviour has

a significant positive relationship with customer misbehaviour ($r=0.419$, $p<0.01$) and a significant negative relationship with the competitive performance of the food service establishments ($r=-0.310$, $p<0.01$). These results provide preliminary evidence for our hypotheses.

Table 5. Variable descriptive statistics and correlations

Variables	Mean	Stand. dev.	Correlations							
			1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. Gender	1.22	0.414								
2. Age	2.08	0.777	0.037							
3. Position	1.14	0.350	0.180	0.275**						
4. Industrial tenure	1.78	0.976	0.023	0.486**	0.230*					
5. Type of establishment	1.30	0.461	0.053	0.228*	0.264*	0.020				
6. Service process quality importance	1.77	0.420	0.011	0.082	-0.039	0.111	0.012			
7. Employee-directed customer misbehaviour	3.65	1.137	-0.129	0.036	0.005	0.088	0.185	0.012		
8. Customer-directed counterproductive work behaviour	2.08	0.672	0.024	0.202*	-0.028	0.055	0.037	0.035	0.419**	
9. Competitive performance	4.56	1.639	0.031	-0.235*	0.027	-0.108	0.087	0.102	-0.129	-0.310**

Gender: 1=female, 2=male; age: 1=20 or under, 2=21–25, 3=26–30, 4=31 or more; position: 1=frontline, 2=non-frontline; industrial tenure: 1=1 or less, 2=1–3; 3=3–5; 4=more than 5; type of establishment: 1=full-service, 2=non-full-service; service process quality importance: 1=low; 2=high

Significant at * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed)

Source: own elaboration

The results of hypotheses testing are summarised in Tables 6 and 7. To test hypothesis 1, which predicted that employee-directed customer misbehaviour is positively related to customer-directed counterproductive work behaviour, in the first step we included socio-economic variables to control the potentially confounding effects of gender, age, position held, industrial tenure

of respondents, and the type of establishment. As shown in Model 2 of Table 6, employee-directed customer misbehaviour significantly and positively contributed to customer-directed counterproductive work behaviour ($\beta = 0.447$, $p < 0.001$) above and beyond the effects of socio-economic variables and the type of establishment. Thus, hypothesis 1 was supported.

Table 6. Results of hierarchical regression analyses (customer-directed counterproductive work behaviour as the dependent variable)

Variables	Model 1	Model 2
Step 1 – control variables		
Gender	0.033	0.092
Age	0.247*	0.272*
Position	-0.093	-0.075
Industrial tenure	-0.045	-0.100
Type of establishment	0.004	-0.091
Step 2 – independent variable		
Employee-directed customer misbehaviour		0.447***
R ²	0.051	0.238
ΔR^2		0.187***
F	1.074	5.142***

Reference categories: gender – female, position – frontline, type of establishment – full-service
 Standardised beta coefficients are provided
 Significant at * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Source: own elaboration

To test hypotheses 2 and 3, which predicted that customer-directed counterproductive work behaviour is negatively related to competitive performance and that this relationship is moderated by service process quality importance as a success factor, in the first step we entered the aforementioned control variables. Next, we added independent and moderating variables, which were centred to address multicollinearity among product

scores and their components (Aiken and West, 1991). Finally, in the third step of the analysis, we included the two-way interaction term. As presented in Model 2 of Table 7, customer-directed counterproductive work behaviour significantly and negatively contributed to competitive performance ($\beta = -0.271$, $p < 0.01$) above and beyond the effects of socio-economic variables and the type of establishment. Thus, hypothesis 2 was supported.

Table 7. Results of hierarchical regression analyses (competitive performance as the dependent variable)

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Step 1 – control variables			
Gender	0.023	0.029	0.004
Age	-0.290*	-0.229*	-0.190
Position	0.067	0.053	0.083
Industrial tenure	0.014	-0.012	-0.025
Type of establishment	0.125	0.123	0.134
Step 2 – main effects			
Customer-directed counterproductive work behaviour		-0.271**	-0.121
Service process quality importance		0.132	0.120
Step 3 – interaction effect			
Customer-directed counterproductive work behaviour x service process quality importance			-0.297**
R ²	0.079	0.165	0.225
ΔR ²		0.086*	0.061*
F	1.713	2.759*	3.524**

Reference categories: gender – female, position – frontline, type of establishment – full-service
Standardised beta coefficients are provided

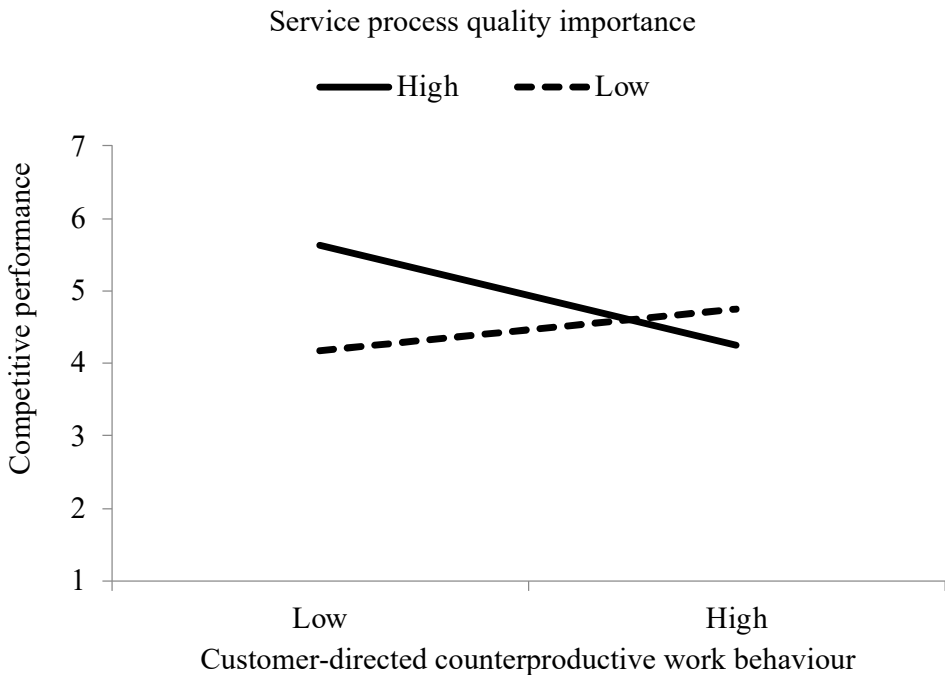
Significant at * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Source: own elaboration

Model 3 of Table 7 indicates that the incremental variance explained by the interaction term reached statistical significance. To examine the nature of the interaction, we analysed simple slopes by plotting the predicted values of competitive performance as a function of customer-directed counterproductive work behaviour and service process quality importance. As depicted in Figure 2, the relationship between the constructs of interest was negative at a high level of service process quality importance and positive at a low level of service process quality importance. In line

with expectations, the stronger effect was found in the subsample of employees who perceived service process quality to be an important success factor for the establishment they worked at. Following Dawson's (2014) recommendations, we performed simple slope tests, finding that the effect of customer-directed counterproductive work behaviour on competitive performance was statistically significant only at a high level of service process quality importance ($\beta = -0.397$, $p < 0.001$, for a high level; $\beta = 0.288$, $p > 0.1$, for a low level). Accordingly, hypothesis 3 found support in the data.

Figure 2. Moderating effect of service process quality importance on the relationship between customer-directed counterproductive work behaviour and competitive performance



Source: own elaboration

The study findings provide empirical validation for the proposed model. In particular, the results showed that when employees experience mistreatment from customers, they are more likely to engage in customer-directed counterproductive work behaviour. Furthermore, counterproductive work behaviour targeted at customers contributes negatively to competitive performance; this effect occurs in those establishments whose employees recognise service process quality as an important factor in achieving market success.

4. Discussion

Our research contributes to the existing body of knowledge and deepens the understanding of counterproductive work behaviour in several ways. First, when

investigating customer and employee deviance, we take the unit perspective and consider the social context in which negative interactions occur. In this vein, we concur with Lim et al. (2008) that deviant behaviour can permeate the work environment and become a defining characteristic of the organisational climate. We also share the view of Liu et al. (2021) that workplace interpersonal deviance is an organisational phenomenon involving a system of social interactions among customers, employees and organisations. Thus, mistreatment from customers not only concerns direct targets – through vicarious experiences its detrimental effects may extend beyond direct service providers to other organisational members who are embedded in that context. Consequently, customer-directed counterproductive work behaviour can be a function of employees'

overall impressions of customer misbehaviour regardless of whether they were directly subjected to the mistreatment or not.

Second, the results regarding the linkage between deviant acts by customers and employees further confirm the role of perceived organisational injustice in triggering counterproductive work behaviour in a high-contact service context. Specifically, we demonstrated that interactional injustice, manifested in dysfunctional customer behaviour, prompts reciprocal dysfunctional employee behaviour. Our findings are consistent with those obtained in other service organisations and regions. For instance, Skarlicki et al. (2008), using a sample of call centre employees in Canada, reported that interpersonal injustice from customers was positively associated with customer-directed sabotage over and above intra-organisational sources of justice. Similarly, Cheng et al. (2020), based on data gathered from hotel employees in China, concluded that customer incivility, as a source of the sense of unfairness, positively affected revenge motivation, which, in turn, increased service sabotage. Also, Harris et al. (2020), in their study of healthcare employees in the United States, found that perceptions of client-focused interpersonal justice uniquely predicted supervisor ratings of employee organisational citizenship behaviour towards clients.

Third, our investigation provides further support for the utility of the generic competitive strategies model (Porter, 1980) and the hierarchical service quality model (Brady and Cronin, 2001) for examining the consequences of customer-directed counterproductive work behaviour in high-contact service organisations. We showed that deviant actions by employees lead to a deterioration in the competitive performance of a food service establishment. This finding bears some resemblance to those of studies by Dunlop and Lee (2004) and Harris and Ogbonna (2006). The former, using

data from branches of a fast-food chain in Australia, revealed that both organisationally and interpersonally targeted workplace deviance was negatively associated with business unit performance; while the latter, based on a sample of customer-contact employees within the restaurant sector in the United Kingdom, demonstrated that service sabotage behaviour affected company performance both directly and indirectly through functional quality. Our study also sheds light on the boundary condition for the relationship of interest. The effect of employee deviance on competitive performance was significant solely among employees who viewed service process quality as an important driver of success for the establishment at which they worked.

The findings of this study carry several significant implications for business practice. Although managers may not be able to directly control the behaviour of customers, they are empowered to take initiatives to reduce the occurrence of customer mistreatment. Specifically, service organisations may consider educating their customers through awareness campaigns by showing what actions might violate general etiquette towards employees (Torres et al., 2017). Incidents of dysfunctional customer behaviour may be also managed, in part, through the control of service design (Harris and Daunt, 2013).

Furthermore, managers are in a position to influence the behaviour of employees and, consequently, mitigate the negative effects of customers' deviant acts on job performance. Among the initiatives potentially worthy of consideration offering training schemes is strongly advised. Training aimed at improving employees' ability to manage emotions during negative interactions as well as use problem-focused strategies to resolve conflicts is highly desirable (Little et al., 2013). Such programmes provide employees with personal resources that help them be less inclined to address experienced mistreatment

with retaliatory actions and service delivery sabotage (Hu et al., 2018).

Managers may also establish empowerment as an organisational practice. Supervisors adopting an empowering leadership style provide their subordinates with the necessary autonomy to exert control over decisions regarding service delivery. Promoting a working culture in which employees are empowered not only improves their resilience and well-being, but also builds a customer-oriented environment in which employees can respond to customers' needs and deescalate potential problems before they give rise to negative exchange spirals (Boukis et al., 2020). Empowerment may also be a signal of an organisation's trust in and respect for its employees, which increases their self-esteem and enhances personal resources that help them react to customer misbehaviour in a more adaptive manner (Choi et al., 2014).

Employers should not understate the importance of building a safe and respectful environment for their employees. To this end, managers could take procedural steps to help protect service providers from customer misbehaviour and implement formal policies to establish standards for dealing with deviant actions. Such procedures could boost employees' confidence in handling customer-induced stressors (Kim et al., 2014). They also demonstrate that an organisation doesn't rigorously enforce rules such as "the customer is king" or "the customer is always right" at the cost of disrespecting employees' viewpoints (Akkawanittha and Patterson, 2017).

Finally, the significance of social support in the workplace should be underscored. Support from members of an organisation mitigates the deleterious effects of stressful interpersonal relations on employee well-being and its behavioural consequences. Therefore, managers should promote a work environment in which employees have access to social support from supervisors and

co-workers, and are able to share their encounters with misbehaving customers and their experiences in dealing successfully with these adverse events (Wang and Wang, 2017). Such an environment has been shown to ease the strain of negative interactions with customers; hence, it diminishes the likelihood of engaging in acts of retaliation and compromising service quality (Groth and Grandey, 2012).

Conclusions

Given the social nature of service encounters and the critical role of service interactions in creating service experiences and sustaining competitiveness in the market, customer and employee deviance and the implications for the success of an organisation have received relatively little attention from researchers (Bednarska and Łuka, 2021; Daunt and Harris, 2014). The present study addresses this gap by yielding insights into the relationships among unit-level employee-directed customer misbehaviour, customer-directed counterproductive work behaviour, and competitive performance in high-contact service settings. The main contribution of our investigation is to provide empirical validation for the research model, based on the combined rationales of an interactional justice framework (Bies and Moag, 1986), the generic competitive strategies model (Porter, 1980), and the hierarchical service quality model (Brady and Cronin, 2001), which predicted that the experience of employee-directed customer misbehaviour triggers customer-directed counterproductive work behaviour, which, in turn, negatively affects the competitive performance of an employing organisation. The service process quality importance as a success factor serves as a moderator in the latter linkage.

There are some limitations that need to be taken into consideration when interpreting the results of this study. First, the field

investigation adopted a cross-sectional design. It is impossible, then, to unambiguously determine the direction of causality between the constructs of interest. Second, the study used data from a single source and the key variable was based on self-reported measures. Hence, there is the potential for common method variance to occur, including response consistency and social desirability effects. Third, organisational factors in the research model were considered through the lens of individuals. In other words, to test the proposed hypotheses, individual-level perceptions of unit-level constructs were employed. Fourth, the data collection relied on a non-random sampling technique and the use of an online survey, which may have resulted in a sampling bias, as suggested by the sizeable proportion of young employees in the sample. Moreover, the sample size was relatively small. Consequently, inferences about the population under study should be drawn cautiously. Finally, the survey was conducted among food service employees in Poland. Therefore, the findings may not be generalised to other service sectors and countries.

In light of the preceding comments, we suggest avenues for further research. Our findings are based on reports from a single source, namely employees. Future studies that can expand data collection to use multiple sources would shed more light on the relationships under investigation. It would be of interest to include customers' and managers' perceptions of employee-customer interactions and organisational outcomes, respectively. As much of the variance in the criterion variables remains to be explained, we recommend entering other factors into the research model. In particular, it would be of value to analyse other antecedents and consequences of customer-directed counterproductive work behaviour. We also suggest exploring the role of mediators, which could result in an enriched understanding of the mechanism through which customer

deviance translates into employee deviance and employee deviance into competitive performance. Still to be examined is the degree to which the results of the present study could be confirmed for other target groups. Further research is needed to verify these findings within different high-contact contexts.

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