

Dysfunctional Customer Behavior Severity: An Empirical Examination

Kate L. Reynolds^{a,*}, Lloyd C. Harris^b

^a Cardiff Business School, Cardiff University, United Kingdom

^b Warwick Business School, Coventry, United Kingdom

Abstract

Although many studies assume that customers monotonically act in both a functional and a good-mannered way during exchange, considerable anecdotal evidence suggests that customers routinely behave negatively and often disrupt otherwise functional encounters. However, to date, rigorous empirical evidence of this phenomenon is lacking. This study synthesizes extant literature from a broad range of areas and advances two alternative conceptions of the factors associated with dysfunctional customer behavior severity. That is, after controlling for a variety of factors, the authors suggest that psychological obstructionism, disaffection with service, and servicescape variables are significantly associated with the severity of deliberate dysfunctional customer acts. The results provide insights for researchers interested in the darker side of service dynamics and generate useful implications for services practitioners charged with reducing the severity and the frequency of episodes of deviant customer behavior.

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Keywords: Dysfunctional customer behaviour; Customer misbehaviour; Consumer deviance; Antecedent; Structural equation modelling

The majority of research into customer–firm interactions is founded on the assumption that customers act in both a functional and a good-mannered way (e.g., Ringberg, Odekerken-Schröder, and Christensen 2007). This contrasts with practitioner-oriented research that repetitively alludes to customers behaving badly (e.g., Dube 2003) and with intermittent scholarly studies that typically highlight the prevalence of a single form of customer misbehavior, such as shoplifting (Kallis and Vanier 1985) and illegitimate complaining (Reynolds and Harris 2005).

Despite limited academic attention, the pervasiveness of customer dysfunction appears global. Focusing on one individual form of customer misbehavior, Grandey, Dickter, and Sin (2004) reveal that, on average, service employees within the United States fall victim to episodes of customer aggression ten times a day. These findings are comparable to that of a study conducted in the United Kingdom (USDAW 2004), which reveals that front-of-store assistants are subjected to verbal abuse once every 3.75 days, to threatening behavior every 15 days, and to acts of violence every 31 days. Moreover, Bamfield (2006) provides evidence of the ominous rise in thefts by consumers across

several countries, including the Czech Republic, Japan, Iceland, and New Zealand. This leads Reynolds and Harris (2006) to argue that customer misbehavior is endemic within the service industry. Fullerton and Punj (2004) suggest that norm-violating behavior is pervasive and representative of everyday customer behavior, rather than constituting a segregate faction of society (see also Harris and Reynolds 2004).

The disparate focus on individual forms of dysfunctional customer behavior is detrimental to a broader understanding of these issues. Indeed, Fullerton and Punj (1993) argue that there is a need to elucidate the range of antecedents and to provide empirical insights into their dynamics. Thus, research that examines the factors associated with dysfunctional customer behavior is littered with calls for future studies to examine its antecedents more thoroughly (e.g., Al-Rafee and Cronan 2006). Fullerton and Punj (1993, 2004) stress the need for “better” data that captures a more inclusive investigative approach. Echoing this, Harris and Reynolds (2003) call for research to examine the antecedents of dysfunctional customer behavior more holistically.

The current research responds to these calls by investigating the factors associated with dysfunctional customer behavior severity, that is the extent to which a customer deliberately behaves in a way that violates the norms and unwritten rules of an individual service setting in a negative fashion. Our aim is to amalgamate previous insights and to examine empirically actual (as opposed to speculative) incidents of customer misbehavior.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: ReynoldsK1@cardiff.ac.uk (K.L. Reynolds), Lloyd.Harris@wbs.ac.uk (L.C. Harris).

In assuming a norm-breaking perspective, we draw on literature from diverse areas, including: sociology, psychology, criminology, ethics, environmental psychology, marketing, and employee deviance that offer insight into the constructs correlated with dysfunctional behavior. Synthesis of these literatures leads to the forwarding of three main constructs that associate with customer misbehavior severity: psychological obstructionism, disaffection with service, and servicescape variables. By integrating insights from wide-ranging literature streams and drawing on multiple theoretical bases, we develop and test our research model and a rival model. Specifically, our research model is founded upon the propositions of Bitner (1992) and Fullerton and Punj (1993). By contrast, our rival model is inspired by literature that approaches customer dysfunction in a linear and direct fashion (e.g., Phillips, Alexander, and Shaw 2005). Further details of which are explored in the later discussion.

The managerial relevance of this study is evident. Our model provides insights into customer dysfunction that may help managers reduce such behaviors. That is, we reveal that managers might manipulate many of the factors that associate with customer misbehavior. Our study is also of interest to marketing theorists. By drawing on diverse research areas, this paper makes a conceptual contribution in deepening the understanding of the factors that relate to customer misbehavior severity. Furthermore, this study makes a methodological contribution through the development and validation of multi-item scales. Finally, this study contributes to the theory of customer deviance by operationalizing and empirically examining conceptual frameworks that depict the constructs associated with dysfunctional customer behavior holistically.

Literature review

Evidence pertaining to the prevalence of dysfunctional customer behavior has drawn the attention of a small but growing number of academics that have supplied insights into this phenomenon. Such studies often adopt the label “dysfunctional customer behavior,” which refers to behavior by consumers within the exchange setting that deliberately violates the generally accepted norms of conduct in such situations. We use the term “dysfunctional customer behavior” because of its emphasis on the issues of intent and norm infringement.

We divide the studies that generate insight into dysfunctional customer behavior into three themes. The first theme focuses on profiling the different forms of customer misbehavior. Possibly the best-known categorization is from the anecdotal work of Lovelock (1994), who identifies six service-based jaycustomers. Contrasting typologies are also offered by Fullerton and Punj (2004), Harris and Reynolds (2004), and most recently, Berry and Seiders (2008). However, although these classifications offer notable insights into the diverse varieties of customer misbehavior, such studies lack empirical support. The second theme of research focuses on the consequences of dysfunctional customer behavior. Specifically, the effects of customer misbehaviors are wide-ranging affecting employees, firms, and fellow customers (Harris and Reynolds 2003). Yet, despite the grave

implications of customer deviance, research in this area is in its infancy and tends to be exploratory.

The third theme of research, and indeed, the focus of the current paper, pertains to the drivers of dysfunctional customer behavior. Typically, existing studies are framed within a specific academy, including sociology (Rosenbaum and Kuntze 2003), psychology (Al-Rafee and Cronan 2006), and business ethics (Fukukawa 2002). Here, the main research focus is on exploring the antecedents of individual forms of misbehavior. In particular, shoplifting and consumer fraud have received prolific attention over the past four decades (Harris 2008). However, although the majority of research into the antecedents of dysfunctional customer behavior has centered on shoplifting, sporadic insights into other forms of customer misbehavior include consumer resistance, vandalism, illegitimate complaining, and rage (see Grove, Fisk, and John 2004; Reynolds and Harris 2005).

Factors associated with dysfunctional customer behavior severity

Before we model the antecedents of dysfunctional customer behavior, the construct of dysfunctional customer behavior severity requires further elaboration. In an attempt to assimilate norm breaking into a conceptual structure and an actionable dependent variable, several studies support the validity of researching the perceived severity of dysfunctional behavior (see Lawrence and Robinson 2007; Vitell and Muncy 1992). Harris and Reynolds (2004) advocate the study of people who *knowingly* break behavioral norms. Given these arguments, the focus of our study centers on the severity of dysfunctional customer behavior in terms of the extent to which a customer deliberately behaves in a way that violates the norms and unwritten rules of an individual service setting in a negative fashion.

The disparate nature of existing research which offers insight into the factors associated with dysfunctional customer behavior results in a multitude of possible constructs of interest, thus representing a challenge to the researchers to identify those most suitable for study within the consumer and services context. Consequently, a number of iterative processes were employed by the authors to identify the most relevant constructs. These stages include reviewing the literature to ascertain the breadth and depth of study of each construct, and the contextual and methodological applicability of each construct. For example, the role of environmental (servicescape) variables in episodes of misbehavior is discussed across a wide range of disciplines including: ethics, environmental psychology, criminology, sociology, and strategic marketing. The cumulative outcome of this process revealed three reflective factors: psychological obstructionism, disaffection with service, and servicescape, as those most worthy of further examination.

Psychological obstructionism

In terms of the first of our three main associative factors, Fullerton and Punj (1993) draw a link between consumers' personality traits and predispositions, and dysfunctional customer behavior. Within the context of our research, we utilize

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