



Customers acting badly: Evidence from the hospitality industry[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The activities of misbehaving customers represent a significant problem for organizations across diverse sectors and industries. Customer misbehavior signifies behavior within the exchange setting that deliberately violates the generally accepted norms of conduct in such situations. The core aim of this study is to advance understanding of the antecedents to past customer misbehavior and examine the relationship between past misbehavior and future misbehavior intentions. Although prior studies offer insights into individual events or types of customer misbehavior, to date, empirical evidence of the antecedents to past misbehaviors and future behavioral intentions is lacking. Synthesizing literature from varied theoretical backgrounds, this study puts forth five personality-based variables (consumer alienation, Machiavellianism, sensation seeking, aggressiveness, and self-esteem) and four demographic variables (gender, income, age, and education) as antecedents to past customer misbehavior. In turn, this study reveals an association between past customer misbehavior and future misbehavior intent. Structural equation modeling procedures using a sample of 380 respondents reveals support for eight of the nine specified hypotheses. The article concludes with a discussion of the study's implications for theory and practice.

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1. Introduction

Consumers' deliberate acts of misbehavior are daily predicaments for firms across disparate sectors and industries (Fisk et al., 2010; Fullerton and Punj, 2004). As a result, the long-standing cliché that the “customer is always right” is outdated, unrealistic, and naive (Reynolds and Harris, 2006). Given that the dysfunctional activities of customers represent a considerable financial, psychological, and physical cost to organizations, their personnel, and patrons (Harris and Reynolds, 2003), an understanding of the antecedents that drive such behaviors is imperative. The number of calls for empirical research on the broader study of the drivers of customer dysfunction mirrors this recognition (Al-Rafee and Cronan, 2006; Fisk et al., 2010; Fullerton and Punj, 2004). However, empirical investigations of the antecedents of customer misbehavior are rare. Typically, such studies focus on examining antecedents to individual forms of misbehavior (see Grégoire et al., 2009; Harris, 2008) or focus on the severity of a specific episode of customer deviance (see Reynolds and Harris, 2009).

Similarly, although past actions are good predictors of future behavior (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990), existing research neglects

the association between previous acts of customer deviance and future customer misbehavior (Al-Rafee and Cronan, 2006; Babin and Griffin, 1995; Harris, 2008). Although such studies provide insights into individual events or particular types of customer misbehavior, to date, self-report empirical evidence of the antecedents to past misbehaviors is limited, and research into the link between past engagement in misbehaviors and future misbehavior intent is lacking.

This study builds on extant research to develop, evaluate, and test a model of the antecedents to past customer misbehavior and future customer misbehavior intentions. By developing a conceptual model of the antecedents to past and future customer misbehavior, this study synthesizes extant research into a clear predictive framework. This study also makes an empirical contribution by identifying core personal and demographic factors that link to actual past behaviors. Such insights help facilitate the description of the link between actual past behaviors and future behavioral intentions. That is, the study's key aim is to address the identified research gap and examine the extent to which past customer misbehavior relates to future misbehavior intentions. Thus, in simultaneously examining the specified relationships, the research contributes to extant literature within this research field.

2. Customer misbehavior

For reasons of clarity, this article employs the label customer “misbehavior” to denote behavior within the exchange setting that deliberately violates the generally accepted norms of conduct in such

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situations (Reynolds and Harris, 2009). However, a review of extant research shows a multitude of interchangeable terms. For example, Bitner et al. (1994, p. 98) adopt the expression “problem customers,” which signifies patrons who are “unwilling to cooperate with the service provider, other customers, industry regulations, and/or laws.” Conversely, Lovelock (2001, p. 73) refers to “Jaycustomers,” which depicts those “who act in a thoughtless or abusive way, causing problems for the firm, its employees, and other customers.” Finally, while Siegel (1993, p. 35) argues that deviants are “psychologically distinct,” Fullerton and Punj (1993) and Harris and Reynolds (2004) disagree and stress that deviant behavior is representative of customer behavior overall, not a divergent subcategory of society.

The various definitions and labels to describe the misdeeds of customers reflect the number of identified forms. A single type of misdeed does not characterize customer misbehavior; rather, prior research reveals multiple forms. Research that examines the forms of customer misbehavior comprises two groups. The first comprises studies that explore individual types of behavior. For example, King and Dennis (2006) investigate customer de-shopping activities, and Wirtz and McColl-Kennedy (2010) explore opportunistic customer claiming during service recovery. The second group of studies centers on developing categories or classifications of multiple forms of dysfunctional customer behavior. For example, Harris and Reynolds (2004) derive eight forms of service deviant from their qualitative research, including compensation letter writers, property abusers, and sexual abusers. Also recognizing a category of customer abuser in the form of “verbal abusers,” Berry and Seiders (2008) conceptualize five types of unfair customer. Adopting a broader non-context-specific perspective, Mitchell and Chan (2002) use qualitative and quantitative data to develop a comprehensive index of 50 unethical customer behaviors. Identifiable behaviors include queue jumping, price tag switching, and use of expired bus passes.

3. Theoretical framework

Empirical research on the antecedents of customer misbehavior is scarce. Consequently, this study draws on broader studies of human deviance from criminology, sociology, biology, ethics, and strategic marketing for insight. Specifically, the theoretical framework derives from Fullerton and Punj’s (1993) conceptual model of the antecedents of aberrant customer behavior. Focusing on the specified relationships between personality traits and demographic characteristics and customer misbehavior, the current research model also encompasses criminological theory. That is, while Fullerton and Punj’s model centers on explaining customer misbehavior at a single point in time, underpinned by criminological theory that champions a link between past and future acts of misbehavior, the current research model specifies Fullerton and Punj’s espoused relationships within this framework.

Multiple theoretical traditions within criminological thought rationalize the relationship between past and future criminality (see Burgess and Akers, 1966; Sutherland, 1947). Indeed, Nagin and Paternoster (1991, p. 163) argue that “among the best documented empirical regularities in criminology is the positive association between past and future criminality.” In their general theory of crime, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) also highlight the importance of individual and personality factors in relation to past and future criminal misdeeds. First, guided by these theories and literature streams, the forwarded research model conceptualizes five personality-related variables (consumer alienation, Machiavellianism, sensation seeking, aggressiveness, and self-esteem) and four demographic variables (gender, income, age, and education) to associate with past customer misbehavior. Second, past customer misbehavior precedes future misbehavior intentions. Fig. 1 presents these factors.

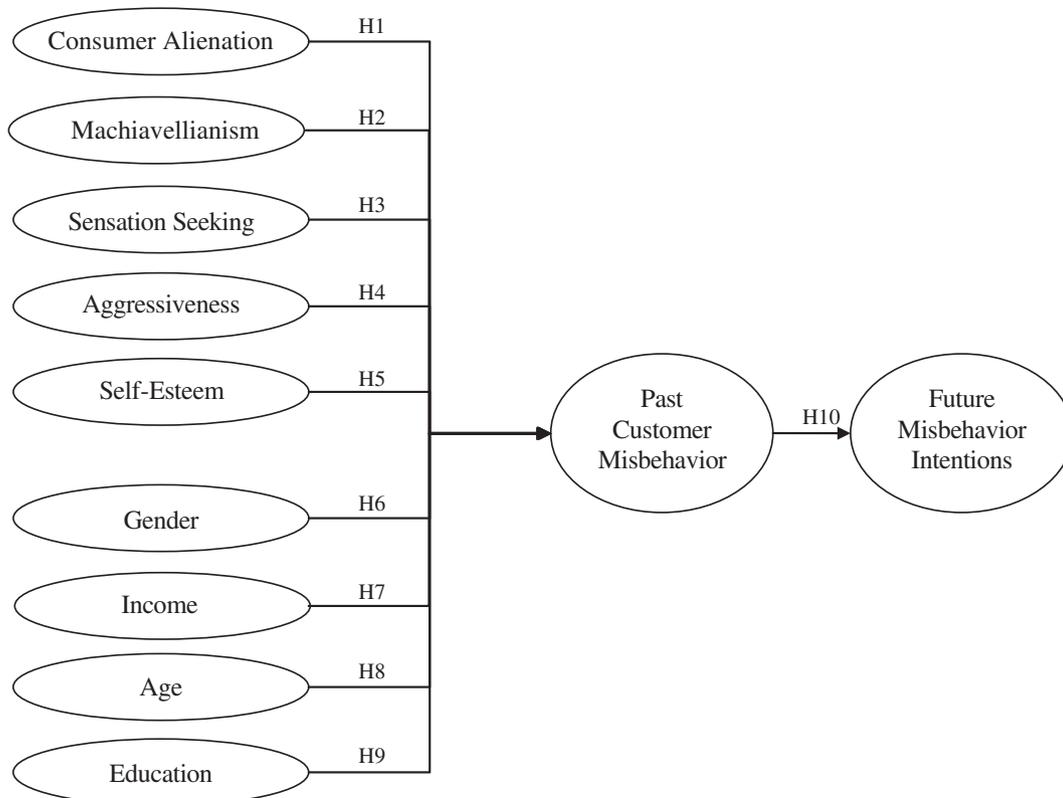


Fig. 1. Conceptual model of the antecedents to past and future customer misbehavior.

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