



# Effectiveness of recovery actions on deviant customer behavior—The moderating role of gender

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to examine how gender interacts with various recovery actions on perceived employee effort, complaint handling satisfaction, and behavioral intention in the case of deviant customer behavior in an East-Asian context. Study 1, a qualitative study, reveals that consumers expect companies to take appropriate remedial actions when a service consumption experience is affected by deviant customer behaviors (e.g., smoking in non designated area). Study 2 employed a 2 (gender) × 6 (recovery actions) between subject design in a restaurant setting. Results show that confronting the deviant customer received the highest customer ratings in terms of perceived employee effort, complaint handling satisfaction, and behavioral intention. However, gender moderated the relative effectiveness of recovery actions. Relocating the focal customer was equally good as compensation for women while men were less appreciative of relocation than compensation. In sum, service providers are advised to initiate some form of recovery action in response to deviant customer behaviors.

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## 1. Introduction

Most services are delivered in the same location in which they are produced. Thus, the presence of fellow customers in the service delivery is well-recognized in the service literature (Grove and Fisk, 1997; Lovelock, 1994; Martin and Pranter, 1989). The adverse financial, physical, psychological, and social costs to organizations, service employees, and other consumers caused by deviant customer behaviors have been widely documented (Fisk et al., 2010; Fullerton and Punj, 1993; Harris and Reynolds, 2003; Reynolds and Harris, 2006). A deviant customer behavior can be defined as the conduct of customer violating the norms and unwritten rules of a service setting in a negative fashion (Reynolds and Harris, 2009).

A review of the literature on deviant customer behaviors revealed that research in a non-western context is scant (Huang, 2008, 2010). In addition, to echo the call for further understanding of culture in shaping customers' reactions toward service failures (Kanousi, 2005; Wong, 2004), this research extended previous literature in two ways. First, we broadened the scope of recovery efforts by examining the effectiveness of approach-avoidance corrective

actions in addition to the more conventional recovery methods (i.e., apology and compensation). Second, we propose that consumers will react differently to service recovery efforts for deviant customer behaviors depending on their gender. Over the years, consumer researchers have investigated a number of interesting issues relating to gender (e.g., Schmitt et al., 1988; Fischer and Arnold, 1990). Yet, research focusing on the impact of gender on customer evaluations of service encounters is sparse (Mattila et al., 2003, 2009). We first conducted a qualitative study to better understand the types of deviant behaviors and customer expectations in an East-Asian context—Malaysia and then examined the gender differences in an experimental setting.

## 2. Study 1

### 2.1. Background

In a service setting, customers might affect one another directly (e.g., through specific interpersonal encounters as in support groups) or indirectly (e.g., the enjoyment derived from crowds at sporting events, in movie theatres, and in other entertainment venues) (Baker, 1987; Bitner, 1992). Interactions with other customers can be positive or negative. For example, Arnould and Price (1993) found that an interaction with others in a water rafting context had a profound positive effect upon one's satisfaction. Unfortunately, customers frequently fail to fulfill their co-production roles.

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**Table 1**  
Typology of customer behavior.

Research	Typology
Customer perspective Lovelock (1994)	Vandals (who intentionally deface organizational property) Thieves (referring to customers who have no intention of paying for a service) Belligerents (represents customers who act in an argumentative or aggressive fashion toward service personnel) Family feuders (who quarrel with other customers and family members) Deadbeats (denotes customers who fail to pay for services that they have already received) Rule breakers (customers who fail to conform to the unwritten rules and norms of service encounters)
Martin (1996)	Gregarious (showing benevolent acts) Grungy (propping, smelly, and untidy) Inconsiderate (showing disrespect for the rights or feelings of others) Crude (lacking taste, polish, or tact) Violent (demonstrating excessive force or sudden intense behavior) Malcontent (chronically dissatisfied) Leisurely (not overly time-conscious or rushed) Protocol incidents reflecting violations of rules of conduct (physical incidents in line, verbal incidents in line, other incidents in line, other protocol incidents)
Grove and Fisk (1997)	Fellow customers' sociability (friendly and unfriendly incidents, ambiance incidents)
Employee perspective Bitner et al. (1994)	Drunkenness Verbal and physical abuse Breaking company policies Lack of cooperation
Harris and Reynolds (2004)	Compensation letter writers  Undesirable customers Property abusers Service workers Vindictive customers Oral abusers Physical abusers Sexual predators

More often than not, their behaviors contribute to other customers' dissatisfaction (e.g., Bitner et al., 1994; Grove and Fisk, 1997).

Over the years there have been many attempts to categorize deviant customer behaviors (Bitner et al., 1994; Grove and Fisk, 1997; Harris and Reynolds, 2004; Lovelock, 1994; Martin, 1996). These typologies are summarized in Table 1.

In sum, prior research shows that deviant behaviors reflect varying degrees of severity from passive complaining to active physical and sexual violence. In this study, we explore customers' deviant behaviors in Malaysia. To that end, Study 1 employed a critical incident technique.

## 2.2. Materials and methods

Data collection was conducted via two modes: personal interviews and self-administered open-ended questionnaires. To produce a knowledgeable sample, a purposive sampling plan was employed. Shoppers from a large mall in Klang Valley, a metropolitan area in Malaysia, were approached. Only those who indicated that they had experienced a dissatisfactory service experience caused by other customers were recruited. As a result, 148 participants were asked to elaborate on other customers' deviant behaviors. In addition, they were asked to indicate if a formal complaint was lodged. If a complaint was filed, participants were asked

to indicate (a) if the complaint was handled satisfactorily and (b) the expected recovery action if the complaint handling was dissatisfactory. If no complaint was voiced, participants were asked if the situation could have been changed and if so what could have been done.

A content analysis by two independent judges grouped the 150 critical incidents (two of the 148 participants gave two incidents) into the following categories: location, specific deviant behaviors, whether a complaint was made, satisfaction with complaint handling, and expected recovery actions. Subsequently, a discussion was held between the two judges to revise the categorization scheme. The typologies documented in previous research (Table 1) were reviewed and both judges agreed on the following six groups of deviant behaviors: (a) grungy (Martin, 1996), (b) inconsiderate (Martin, 1996), (c) rule breaking (Bitner et al., 1994; Lovelock, 1994), (d) crude (Martin, 1996), (e) violent or physical abuse (Bitner et al., 1994; Harris and Reynolds, 2004; Martin, 1996), and (f) verbal abuse (Bitner et al., 1994; Harris and Reynolds, 2004). In terms of the actual and expected recovery actions, the judges formed six categories: no action, compensation, apology, relocation of complainants, confronting the deviant customer, and others (preventive action by employees, companies, and government, promise of non-recurrence). The incidents were then reanalyzed and re-assigned into the agreed upon categories. By the end of the process, the inter-judge agreement for the categorization task was 0.84 and a full consensus was achieved for recovery actions. These values exceed the 0.59 required proportion of inter-judge agreement to achieve the acceptable Nunnally's reliability level of 0.70 (Rust and Cool, 1994). Disagreements on the deviant behavior categorization were resolved through discussion.

Below is an example to illustrate the categorization of deviant behaviors and recovery actions. The incident took place in a departure lounge (transportation). Two types of deviant behaviors were identified, namely yelling (crude) and using abusive language (verbal abuse). It is clear that the participant did not complain but expected some action from the service staff to approach the deviant customer.

My flight was delayed for more than 1 ½ hours. The [unfortunate] incident happened when the passengers were waiting to board the rescheduled flight.... a few passengers started to form a line leading to the departure gate... and "a few lines" of waiting passengers also developed, creating a slightly messy scene. All of the sudden, a yell was heard from behind the back of the pack of passengers. It was a very tall and big Caucasian. He yelled at the passengers blocking his way, as he tried to squeeze through. He also used abusive language along the way... I was shocked and disturbed by the man's threatening [behaviors]. I believe both his strong physical build and use of abusive language contributed to the threat I felt. Some other passengers were visibility disturbed. It was when the gate opened for boarding, that I realized he had bought an "express boarding" pass. As the incident unfolded, no one from the airline's ground crew approached the man to find out the reason, if any, for his unacceptable and threatening [behaviors]. I was disappointed with the airline staff's serious lack of initiative to take control of the situation.

## 2.3. Results

The majority of the participants were female (66%) and most of the incidents occurred in a foodservice context (45%). Movie theatres were the second largest group ( $n=45$ ) while the rest of the incidents included 13 in retail stores, six in banks, six in transportation companies (airlines and buses), two in hotels, and 10 in others

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