

SERVICE SABOTAGE: AN EXAMINATION OF SELECTED ANTECEDENT AND OUTCOME VARIABLES IN HIGH-CONTACT ORGANIZATIONS

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Purpose: The purpose of the paper is to explore selected antecedent and outcome variables of employee dysfunctional behavior directed at customers in a high-contact service environment. The linkages among customer mistreatment, service sabotage, and competitive performance of an employing organization were examined.

Design/methodology/approach: A quantitative approach was adopted, based on a self-administered online survey. Data were collected from 144 food service employees in Poland. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were performed to test the proposed research model.

Findings: The results demonstrate that both work-related and person-related mistreatment by customers contribute to service sabotage. Service sabotage in turn leads to deterioration of competitive performance of a food service establishment.

Research limitations/implications: The study adopted a cross-sectional design, which makes the direction of causality open to debate. Also, the data collection was based on the non-random sampling technique and the sample size was relatively small, which limits generalization of the findings beyond the specific context of this research.

Practical implications: From a managerial perspective, the confirmed relationships stress the importance of preventive measures to be taken to reduce the adverse effects of dysfunctional customer behavior on employee behavior and competitive performance of an employing organization.

Originality/value: The present research furthers the understandings of antecedents of service sabotage and its effects on service organization's performance.

Keywords: service sabotage, customer mistreatment, competitive performance, high-contact service organization.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

High-contact service organizations rely extensively on human resources to create customer-oriented culture and achieve competitive advantage in the marketplace. This is why service employee attitudes and behaviors, especially those pertaining to employee-customer relations, have attracted considerable research interest. It is generally acknowledged that the dyadic exchange between parties involved in a service encounter is at the core of the success or failure of the service delivery, as customers' evaluations of the service experience are affected by perceptions of the quality of interpersonal interactions (Groth, Grandey, 2012). Empirical research in various service settings provides convincing evidence that the course of employee-customer exchange exerts effect on crucial service outcomes, such as customer satisfaction, customer perceived value, and customer loyalty. Such links have been reported in studies carried out, *inter alia*, in hospitality (Uslu, Caber, 2022), recreation (Eskiler, Safak, 2022), retail trade (Hwang, Lee, Kim, 2021), ridesharing (Boninsegni, Furrer, Mattila, 2021), and beauty treatment (Delcourt et al., 2013).

The widespread recognition of the essential role of service interactions in achieving service organization's success has led to the increased attention being paid to employee behavior that deviates from organizational rules by sabotaging service delivery. Although a growing number of research projects have explored workplace sabotage targeted at customers in high-contact service contexts (e.g. Harris, Ogbonna, 2012; Skarlicki et al., 2016; Tan et al., 2020) scholarly efforts to understand the nature of the phenomenon and its correlates have been somewhat scant. Furthermore, studies on customer-directed workplace deviance mostly seek to advance knowledge about its determining factors, while its effects, at the organizational level in particular, remain relatively under-researched (Bednarska, Łuka, 2022; Liu et al., 2022). The present study's purpose, therefore, is to investigate selected antecedent and outcome variables of employee deviant behavior directed at customers in high-contact service settings. More specifically, it examines the linkages among customer mistreatment, service sabotage, and competitive performance of an employing organization.

To reach the purpose proposed, the remainder of the paper is organized as follows. First, the literature on service sabotage is reviewed and the research model, which is developed based on this review, is presented. In subsequent sections research method is described and the results of the study are reported. Finally, the main findings are discussed, limitations of the study are provided and avenues for future research are suggested.

2. Literature review

Employee sabotage, like other forms of counterproductive work behavior, has the potential to exert deleterious effects on organization's ability to achieve its strategic goals. Due to its pervasiveness in workplaces and adverse outcomes, it has aroused a growing interest among scholars. While early studies aimed at developing understanding of sabotage actions focused on manufacturing context, Harris and Ogbonna (2002) explicitly concentrated on the phenomenon in a service environment. As advocated by the authors, service sabotage has unique characteristics (compared to manufacturing sabotage) that warrant research attention. In service settings, sabotage is commonly public, the effects of sabotage are usually immediate, and the targets of sabotage are largely customers. Accordingly, sabotage behavior disrupts service encounters and negatively affects employee-customer dynamics (Harris, Ogbonna, 2006).

Service sabotage refers to any deliberate behavior by organizational member that is designed to affect negatively customer service (Harris, Ogbonna, 2002). Examples of service sabotage include providing customers with incomplete or false information, altering the speed of service to match personal needs, showing frustration or hostility to customers or blatantly ignoring customers. Reasons why service employees consciously choose to engage in antiservice behavior (and, as a consequence, harm service organization's interests) can be grouped into two broad categories: dispositional and situational (Harris, Ogbonna, 2012). The former relates to employees' individual dispositions (i.e. personality traits), while the latter includes intra- and extraorganizational factors. Previous research has demonstrated that there are meaningful linkages between customer-directed deviant work behavior and trait anger (Hunter, Penney, 2014), risk-taking proclivity (Harris, Ogbonna, 2006), core self-evaluations (Dai et al., 2019), abusive supervision (Ma, Zhou, Mu, 2021), co-worker undermining (Hongbo, Waqas, Tariq, 2019), customer negative events (Chi, Tsai, Tseng, 2013), labor market fluidity (Harris, Ogbonna, 2006).

Amongst multiple antecedents of service employees' dysfunctional behavior targeted at customers, customer-driven motives are major predictors of service sabotage (Harris, Ogbonna, 2012; Liu et al., 2022), which is in line with the social exchange-based target similarity model (Lavelle, Rupp, Brockner, 2007). It argues that employees who are mistreated are likely to direct their attitudinal and behavioral responses towards the party held accountable for mistreatment. Customer mistreatment, defined as low-quality interpersonal treatment received by employees from customers during their work-related interactions (Wang et al., 2011), refers to situations where customers act towards employees in an unreasonable, disrespectful, demeaning or hostile manner. Alike other negative acts in the workplace, customer mistreatment can take two main forms: work-related and person-related (Einarsen, Raknes, 1997). The former includes behaviors directed at tasks performed by employees in their

job positions (e.g. questioning employees' professional expertise or complaining without reason); the latter involves behaviors affecting directly employees' psychological or physical well-being (e.g. talking down to employees or acting rudely towards them).

Service employees' negative reactions towards misbehaving customers can be explained by an organizational justice framework. Since workplace encounters involving customers and employees are interactive in nature, interactional justice (Bies, Moag, 1986) has been considered most relevant to this kind of exchange (Rupp et al., 2008). Customer mistreatment has been conceptualized as a specific form of interactional injustice, as it violates norms of mutual respect during employee-customer social interaction (Koopmann et al., 2015). When employees are confronted with misbehaving customers, they judge whether their fundamental right to be treated fairly has been violated and are likely to show a desire to retaliate against wrongdoers to punish them for their transgressions (Skarlicki, van Jaarsveld, Walker, 2008). Customer-directed revenge-motivated behavioral reactions may take the form of service sabotage.

In high-contact service settings, Yeh (2015), based on a sample of Taiwanese flight attendants, reported that perceptions of customer verbal aggression predicted revenge motive, which resulted in service sabotage behavior to restore a sense of justice. Sommovigo et al. (2020), in their study among Italian retail and restaurant employees, showed that in response to a customer-initiated unjust event individuals experienced negative emotions, which exerted a significant influence on generalized customer-directed incivility intentions. Lavelle et al. (2021), who surveyed American employees in various service roles involving face-to-face customer interactions, found support for the linkage between perceptions of customer interpersonal injustice and customer-oriented counterproductive work behavior through emotional exhaustion and surface acting.

The service management and marketing literature suggests that the intangible nature of service encounters makes employee-customer interface particularly salient in customers' evaluations of the service quality as treatment by employees often is the performance of the service in the mind of customers (Cook et al., 2002). Quality, as posited by Porter's (1980) model of generic competitive strategies, serves as a driver of the market offering differentiation. Measures taken to assure quality enable an organization to distinguish itself from competitors and make its products perceived as unique. Therefore, quality, as a differentiating attribute that is valued by customers, lies at the heart of the organization's strategy to gain competitive advantage and enhance performance. Following this line of reasoning, it is plausible to assume that a negative employee-customer interaction, which is perceived as a service failure, can have serious consequences not just for that relationship but also for the organization as a whole (Groth, Grandey, 2012). When faced with service failures, customers may choose to avoid potentially dissatisfying experiences in the future by switching service providers or voice their concerns by complaining and spreading negative word-of-mouth (Singh, 1990), which indisputably impairs organization's performance.

In high-contact service contexts, Bonifield and Cole (2007), in their study on emotional and behavioral post-failure responses in restaurants in the US, found that consumers who blamed the service provider for a service failure experienced anger and reported a high likelihood of engaging in retaliatory actions against the organization. Su and Teng (2018), using a content analysis of negative reviews of museums worldwide posted on TripAdvisor, observed that service failures related to staff were among the top three reasons for voicing complaints. Köcher and Paluch (2019), who examined experiences of railway passengers in Germany, concluded that exposure to a service failure resulted in lower service satisfaction and service reusage intentions and that the negative link between a service failure and its effects was stronger for full-service (compared to self-service) delivery mode.

The aforementioned theoretical and empirical evidence leads to the following hypotheses (which are illustrated in Figure 1):

H1: Work-related customer mistreatment (H1a) and person-related customer mistreatment (H1b) are positively related to service sabotage.

H2: Service sabotage is negatively related to competitive performance.

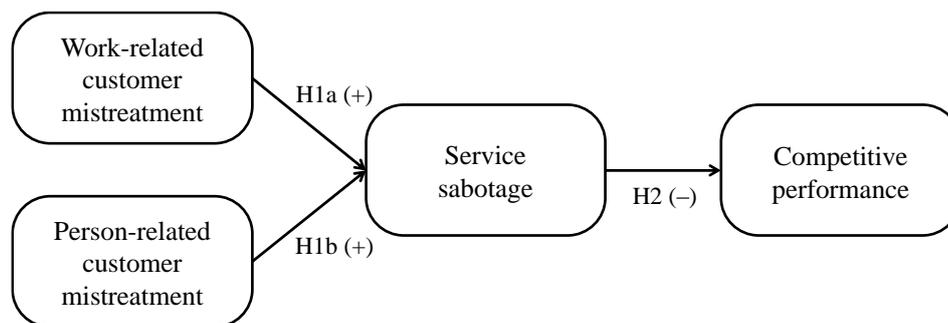


Figure 1. Proposed research model.

3. Methods

The data used to test the proposed research model were collected from employees in the food service industry in Poland. The chosen sector was deemed appropriate for exploring high-contact environment since it is a labor-intensive industry requiring regular and direct contact with customers. We recruited respondents using a non-probability sampling technique, namely voluntary response sampling. We posted invitations on social networking sites to take part 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, 167 employees participated in the study. Among the returned questionnaires, 23 were identified as containing incomplete information or showing implausible response pattern and these were excluded from the analysis, leaving 144 responses in the final sample. As presented in Table 1, the majority of respondents were females (78%), aged between 21 and 25 years (70%). Most of the participants

held frontline positions (89%), worked in full-service restaurants (74%), and had between 3 and 12 months of experience in the food service industry (35%).

Table 1.
Respondent profile

Variables	Category	N	%
Gender	Female	112	77.8
	Male	32	22.2
Age	20 years old or less	22	15.3
	21-25 years old	101	70.1
	26-30 years old	10	6.9
	31-35 years old	5	3.5
	36 years old or more	6	4.2
Position	Frontline	127	88.8
	Non-frontline	16	11.2
Industrial tenure	3 months or less	30	20.8
	More than 3 months to 1 year	50	34.7
	More than 1 year to 3 years	33	22.9
	More than 3 years to 5 years	20	13.9
	More than 5 years	11	7.6
Type of establishment	Full-service establishment	107	74.3
	Non-full-service establishment	37	25.7

Due to missing data, the number of observations varies for analyzed variables.

We adopted a self-administered online survey in order to avoid interviewer bias. The questionnaire was developed for the purpose of this study and it was comprised of three sections. The first one dealt with dysfunctional behaviors of customers and employees and these were measured with items derived from previous investigations on deviant activities of parties involved in service interactions (Dormann, Zapf, 2004; Harris, Ogbonna, 2006; Shao, Skarlicki, 2014; Szczygiel, Bazińska, 2013). Following Walker, van Jaarsveld and Skarlicki (2014), we conceptualized deviant behaviors as entity-level constructs and asked informants about their generalized perceptions of negative exchanges between customers and employees in their workplace. They reported how often they witnessed or were involved (as targets or instigators) in 6 manifestations of work-related customer mistreatment (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.909$), 6 manifestations of person-related customer mistreatment (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.855$) and 12 manifestations of employee service sabotage (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.821$). All items were measured on a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 – never to 7 – on a daily basis. Section two was devoted to organizational performance. Using Likert-type items, we sought information about employees' opinions on the establishment's overall performance compared to major competitors in the market. Response options ranged from 1 – much worse to 7 – much better. In the final section, socio-demographic and job-related data were collected.

To analyze the data from the questionnaire, we employed descriptive statistics and correlations to summarize the basic features of variables under study and associations between them. To examine the relationships between service sabotage and its hypothesized antecedent and outcome variables, we performed hierarchical multiple regression analyses. The data were processed utilizing the SPSS software.

4. Results

Means, standard deviations, and correlations between the variables under study are presented in Table 2. On the whole, it shows that in the food service establishments, work-related customer mistreatment was more common than person-related one and behaviors targeted at employees were reported with higher frequency compared to those targeted at customers. It should be noted, however, that the proposed model was tested with data obtained from employees. In self-reports, organizational behavior measures are prone to a social desirability bias, which is caused by the tendency on the part of individuals to present themselves in a favorable light due to the need for social approval (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Moreover, as expected, service sabotage is significantly and positively associated both with work-related ($r = 0.390$, $p < 0.01$) and person-related customer mistreatment ($r = 0.386$, $p < 0.01$). Also, as assumed, service sabotage remains in a significant negative relationship with competitive performance of an employing organization ($r = -0.339$, $p < 0.01$). These results give preliminary evidence for our hypotheses.

Table 2.

Variable descriptive statistics and correlations

Variables	Mean	Stand. dev.	Correlations							
			1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. Gender	1.22	0.417								
2. Age	2.11	0.854	0.087							
3. Position	1.11	0.316	0.190*	0.276**						
4. Industrial tenure	2.53	1.188	0.002	0.411**	0.214*					
5. Type of establishment	1.26	0.438	0.030	0.241**	0.246**	0.073				
6. Work-related customer mistreatment	4.40	1.369	-0.222**	-0.078	-0.039	0.175*	0.125			
7. Person-related customer mistreatment	2.81	1.039	-0.108	0.050	0.045	0.090	0.180*	0.666**		
8. Service sabotage	2.04	0.655	-0.012	0.148	-0.029	0.086	0.063	0.390**	0.386**	
9. Competitive performance	4.58	1.549	0.069	-0.197*	0.055	-0.073	0.045	-0.167*	-0.166*	-0.339**

Gender: 1 = female, 2 = male; age: 1 = 20 or less, 2 = 21-25, 3 = 26-30, 4 = 31-35, 5 = 35 or more; position: 1 = frontline, 2 = non-frontline; industrial tenure: 1 = 0.25 or less, 2 = 0.25-1, 3 = 1-3; 4 = 3-5; 5 = more than 5; type of establishment: 1 = full-service, 2 = non-full-service.

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

The results of hypotheses testing are summarized in Tables 3 and 4. To test hypothesis 1, which predicted that both forms of customer mistreatment are positively related to service sabotage, we entered variables in two separate steps. In the first step, we included socio-economic variables to control potentially confounding effects of gender, age, position held, industrial tenure of respondents, and type of establishment; next, we added independent

variables. As shown in Model 2 of Table 3, both work-related customer mistreatment ($\beta = 0.288$, $p < 0.01$) and person-related customer mistreatment ($\beta = 0.206$, $p < 0.05$) significantly and positively contributed to service sabotage above and beyond the effects of socio-economic variables and type of establishment. Thus hypothesis 1 found support in the data.

Table 3.

Results of hierarchical regression analyses (service sabotage as the dependent variable)

Variables	Model 1	Model 2
Step 1 – control variables		
Gender	0.009	0.089
Age	0.180	0.235*
Position	-0.092	-0.081
Industrial tenure	0.013	-0.073
Type of establishment	0.034	-0.051
Step 2 – independent variables		
Work-related customer mistreatment		0.288**
Person-related customer mistreatment		0.206*
R ²	0.036	0.223
ΔR^2		0.187***
F	1.036	5.540***

Reference categories: gender – female, position – frontline, type of establishment – full-service.

Standardized beta coefficients are provided.

Significant at * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

To test hypothesis 2, which predicted that service sabotage is negatively related to competitive performance, we followed analogous procedure. In the first step, we entered the aforementioned control variables; next we added an independent variable. As presented in Model 2 of Table 4, service sabotage significantly and negatively contributed to competitive performance ($\beta = -0.302$, $p < 0.001$) above and beyond the effects of socio-economic variables and type of establishment. Thus hypothesis 2 was supported.

Table 4.

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

Variables	Model 1	Model 2
Step 1 – control variables		
Gender	0.053	0.055
Age	-0.283**	-0.228*
Position	0.093	0.065
Industrial tenure	0.032	0.036
Type of establishment	0.094	0.105
Step 2 – independent variable		
Service sabotage		-0.302***
R ²	0.072	0.160
ΔR^2		0.088***
F	2.121	4.307***

Reference categories: gender – female, position – frontline, type of establishment – full-service.

Standardized beta coefficients are provided.

Significant at * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

To summarize, the study findings provide empirical validation for the proposed research model. Specifically, the results demonstrated that when employees experience or witness work-related or person-related mistreatment from customers, they are more likely to engage in generalized customer-directed service sabotage. Furthermore, service sabotage affects negatively competitive performance of a service organization.

5. Discussion

Our research contributes to the existing body of knowledge and furthers the understanding of service sabotage and its correlates in several ways. First, unlike the majority of the prior empirical work that deals primarily with factors contributing to antiservice employee behavior, this study's purpose is to explore both antecedent and outcome variables of service sabotage. In this way, we address the call by Liu et al. (2022) for empirical studies enriching the service sabotage model and take a step toward a more holistic view of the phenomenon of interest by placing it within a broader framework.

Second, the results regarding the relationship between customers' and employees' dysfunctional behaviors further confirm the role of perceived organizational injustice in fuelling acts of service sabotage and the presence of target similarity effect in a high-contact service context. Specifically, we demonstrated that interactional injustice, manifested in employee-directed customer mistreatment, prompts customer-directed reciprocal reaction in the form of service sabotage. Our findings are in accord with those obtained in other service organizations and regions. For instance, Skarlicki et al. (2016), based on data gathered from call center employees in the US and South Korea, reported that low customer justice was associated with high levels of customer-directed sabotage and this negative association was exacerbated by low supervisor justice. Similarly, Tan et al. (2020), in their study among retail employees in Hong Kong, found that jaycustomer behavior, as a form of perceived injustice, triggered anger and led subsequently to the development of sabotage towards customers.

Third, our investigation provides further support for the utility of the generic competitive strategies model (Porter, 1980) for examining consequences of service sabotage in high-contact service organizations. We showed that antiservice behavior exhibited by employees leads to deterioration of competitive performance of a food service establishment. This finding corresponds to the one provided by Harris and Ogbonna (2006), who revealed, using data from customer-contact employees within restaurant sector in the UK, that service sabotage behavior negatively affected company performance both directly and indirectly through functional quality. Our result is also in line with Grisseemann, Plank and Brunner-Sperdin's (2013) study, which showed, based on data from hotel managers in the Alpine regions of five countries, that a decrease in customer orientation was associated with a decrease in both financial and non-financial business performance.

Fourth, when investigating customer and employee deviance, we adopted the entity perspective and took into consideration the social context in which negative encounters take place. Due to the public nature of service interactions, negative exchanges have high potential to spill over to third parties (Groth, Grandey, 2012) and affect the organization's social landscape. Service sabotage, therefore, can be brought about by employees' overall perceptions of customer misbehavior regardless of whether they were directly affected by the mistreatment or not; accordingly, it can become a type of generalized reaction towards customers as a social entity (Sommovigo et al., 2020).

The findings of this study raise a number of implications for business practice. Unlike the behavior of customers, which is outside an organization's direct control, the behavior of employees may be shaped by managers with the goal of reducing the deleterious effects of customer deviance on job performance and, by extension, on organizational performance. A strongly recommended initiative organizations could consider is equipping employees – through the provision of training – with knowledge and skills on how to avoid or resolve conflicts, manage stress, regulate emotions during interactions (Sommovigo et al., 2020). Such programs enhance employees' personal resources that can be used to counter the demands imposed by challenging work events (Hu et al., 2018) and help resist the inclination to address experienced mistreatment with revenge-motivated service sabotage.

Managers may also adopt empowerment as an organizational practice. Empowering leadership style provides greater decision-making autonomy and expresses confidence in subordinates' capabilities. When led by empowering supervisors, subordinates are more likely to invest extra effort in their work and are more committed to their teams and organizations (Zhou, Ma, Dong, 2018). Empowerment may also be a signal of an organization's trust in and respect for its employees, which enhances their evaluation of the ability to cope with threats (Ben-Zur, Yagil, 2005) and elicits reactions to customer mistreatment that move beyond an eye-for-an-eye retributive response.

Organizations should not understate the role of social support from their members. Social resources are believed to mitigate the detrimental effects of stressful interpersonal relations on employee well-being and task performance. Hence, managers should ensure that employees have access to social support from supervisors and co-workers, can share their encounters with misbehaving customers and their experiences in coping effectively with these negative events (Wang, Wang, 2017). Such practices have been shown to present service provider with opportunities for recovery from demanding interactions with customers. Accordingly, they decrease the likelihood of engaging in acts of retaliations and degrading service quality (Groth, Grandey, 2012), as they make incidents of customer mistreatment a weaker catalyst for antiservice behavior.

Finally, employers should seek to build a safe and respectful environment for their employees. Managers are therefore recommended to develop formal policies or guidelines to establish standards for dealing with dysfunctional behavior exhibited by customers.

Such procedures could allow employees become more aware of violations of social interaction norms and strengthen their confidence in handling customer-related social stressors (Kim et al., 2014). Also, employees who operate in a psychologically safe environment may be more likely to engage in constructive resistance, which helps prevent negative behaviors from spiraling out of control (Greenbaum et al., 2013).

The findings of this study should be considered in light of its limitations. First, the investigation adopted a cross-sectional design, making conclusive causal inferences between the constructs impossible. Future research should be encouraged to use a longitudinal design to examine the relationship dynamics by addressing the temporal precedence of variables. Second, since the study relied on data from a single source and the key variable was based on self-reported measures, we cannot rule out the presence of common method bias resulting from social desirability effect and consistency motif. Further studies that can expand data collection to avoid single-source bias would shed more light on the relationships of interest. It would be certainly worthwhile to include customers' and managers' perceptions of employee-customer interactions and organizational outcomes, respectively. Third, as much of the variance in the outcome variables was left unexplained, we recommend incorporating other factors into the research model. In particular, it would be of value to explore the role of mediators and moderators, which could advance the understanding of the mechanism through which customer mistreatment translates into service sabotage and service sabotage into competitive performance as well as the boundary conditions under which the effects of interest are stronger or weaker. Fourth, to test the proposed hypotheses, we employed individual-level perceptions of entity-level constructs. Thus, future studies that pursue multi-level approach should be advised to account for data hierarchies. Finally, we employed a non-probability sampling technique and an online survey to collect data, which may have led to a biased sample. Moreover, the questionnaire was distributed among food service employees in Poland and the sample size was relatively small. Therefore, replication studies are required to examine the degree to which the results of the present investigation are industry- and country-specific or universally observed in high-contact organizations.

6. Summary

Customer and employee deviance and its implications for organization's success have captured relatively scant attention in the academic literature (Bednarska, Łuka, 2022). This is a serious omission considering that service interactions play a pivotal role in creating service experiences and sustaining competitiveness in the market. The present investigation addresses this dearth in research by offering insights into the relationships among customer mistreatment, service sabotage, and competitive performance in high-contact service settings.

The main contribution of our study is to provide empirical validation for the research model, based on the combined rationales of an interactional justice framework (Bies, Moag, 1986), the target similarity model (Lavelle, Rupp, Brockner, 2007) and the generic competitive strategies model (Porter, 1980), which predicted that exposure to work-related or person-related customer mistreatment triggers service sabotage, which in turn affects negatively competitive performance of an employing organization.

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