

Customers behaving badly: a state of the art review, research agenda and implications for practitioners

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to highlight important issues in the study of dysfunctional customer behavior and to provide a research agenda to inspire, guide, and enthuse. Through a critical evaluation of existing research, the aim is to highlight key issues and to present potentially worthy avenues for future study.

Design/methodology/approach – In reviewing recent and past advances in the study of customers behaving badly, an overview of existing research into customers behaving badly and addressing issues of terminology and definition is provided. Thereafter, three perspectives that provide the most opportunity and insight in studying the darker side of service dynamics are outlined. This leads to a review of some of the research design and methodological problems and issues that are faced when rigorously studying these issues. Subsequently, the paper devotes a section to the provocative idea that while dysfunctional customer behavior has many negative influences on customers, employees, and service firms, there are actually some positive functions of customers behaving badly.

Findings – A research agenda is provided that is believed to identify and discuss a range of projects that comprises not only insightful theoretical contributions but is also practically relevant.

Originality/value – The paper identifies a range of issues about which managers should be aware and proactively manage.

Keywords Consumer behaviour, Consumers, Research, Service levels, Employee attitudes, Customers

Paper type Research paper

An executive summary for managers and executive readers can be found at the end of this issue.

Introduction

In promotional material employees are portrayed as smiling, happy workers cheerfully serving equally smiling, contented customers. This utopian existence seems somewhat divorced

from the reality of our service experience. All too frequently we observe customers and staff almost competing with each other to be the most abrupt, rude, and uncooperative. While this may well be a reflection of the service outlets we patronize, our research suggested differently (see Grove *et al.*, 2004; Keeffe *et al.*, 2008; Reynolds and Harris, 2005; Wirtz and Kum, 2004). We commonly find that customers seem reluctant to adhere to organizational or societal rules and

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norms that dictate they behave in a compliant and subservient way during service consumption. Indeed, at times we are left wondering if customers are even aware of the academic services models, frameworks, and theories that prescribe their behavior!

While our academic models and theories neglect more dysfunctional behaviors, practitioners are more pragmatic in their views. Grandey *et al.* (2004) find that US service workers fall victim to episodes of customer aggression ten times a day. The problem of customer misbehavior is not limited to the confines of the United States. A study conducted in the UK (USDAW, 2004) casts doubt on the stereotype of the English as reserved and polite and reveals that frontline retail 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 (Voss *et al.*, 2004). The costs of dysfunctional customers are also profound for the bottom line. Indeed, Covert (2007) recently found that just one form of customer misbehavior (theft) costs retailers \$37.5 billion annually.

The aims of this paper are to highlight important issues in the study of dysfunctional customer behavior and to provide a research agenda to inspire, guide, and enthuse. Accordingly, our paper is structured into five main sections. First, we provide an overview of existing research into customers behaving badly and address issues of terminology and definition. Thereafter, we outline the three perspectives that we believe provide the most opportunity and insight in studying the darker side of service dynamics. This leads to a review of some of the research design issues and methodological problems that face us when we rigorously study these issues. Subsequently, we devote a section to the provocative idea that while dysfunctional customer behaviors have many negative influences on customers, employees, and service firms, there are actually some positive functions of customers behaving badly. Thereafter, we outline a research agenda that we believe identifies and discusses a range of projects that would constitute not only insightful theoretical contributions but would also be practically relevant. Finally, we highlight a series of implications for practitioners, which we believe require attention and proactive management.

Defining dysfunctional customer behavior

When referring to deliberately deviant behavior by customers, this paper will employ the term dysfunctional customer behavior. This term is used for reasons of clarity, since extant research into such actions by customers has employed a wide and confusing range of terms and phrases. Popular terms include deviant consumer behavior (Moschis and Cox, 1989), aberrant consumer behavior (Fullerton and Punj, 1993), and consumer misbehavior (Tonglet, 2001), while less common terms include problem customers (Bitner *et al.*, 1994), and inappropriate behavior (Strutton *et al.*, 1994). Such a variety and divergence of labels reflects the diversity of perspectives and positions from which this phenomenon has been explored.

In contrast to Fullerton and Punj (1997a), who focus on externally directed acts of customer misbehavior and thus overt acts, Harris and Reynolds (2004) also refer to covert acts of customer deviance in their definition of dysfunctional customer behavior. This term refers to “actions by customers who intentionally or unintentionally, overtly or covertly, act in a manner that, in some way, disrupts otherwise functional service encounters” (Harris and Reynolds, 2003, p. 145).

Correspondingly, by defining customer deviance with regard to activities rather than the violation of social rules and norms, Lovelock (1994) forwards the term jaycustomers. Jaycustomers are defined as “ones who act in a thoughtless or abusive way, causing problems for the firm, its employees and other customers” (Lovelock, 2001, p. 73). Parallels may also be drawn between Lovelock’s (1994, 2001) service-specific jaycustomers and Bitner *et al.*’s (1994) problem customers, who were identified in a broader study of critical service encounters. Bitner *et al.* (1994, p. 98) define problem customers as patrons who are “unwilling to cooperate with the service provider, other customers, industry regulations, and/or laws”.

In their first conceptual contemplation of deviant customer behavior, Fullerton and Punj (1993, p. 570) use the term aberrant to denote customer “behavior in the exchange setting which violates the generally accepted norms of conduct in such situations and which is therefore held in disrepute by marketers and most customers”. In contrast to definitions used by both Siegel (1993) and Hoyer and Macinnis (2001), however, Fullerton and Punj (1993) stress that dysfunctional customer behavior is representative of customer behavior overall, rather than the behavior of a psychologically or physiologically inept group or an intentionally deviant splinter of society. In later studies, Fullerton and Punj (1997a, b, 2004) exchange the term aberrant consumer behavior for customer misbehavior when exclusively exploring deviant customer behaviors that are both externally-directed and visible. This term has been widely applied within the customer deviance literature (see Albers-Miller, 1999; Freestone and Mitchell, 2004; McGoldrick and Andre, 1997; Tonglet, 2001).

The terms and definitions mentioned are by no means all-encompassing. Consequently, a number of supplementary labels for deviant behaviors are adopted across a wide variety of contexts. For example, Grove *et al.* (1989) and Al-Khatib *et al.* (1989) use the term non-normative behavior to discuss what they consider to be unethical behaviors by customers. While investigating individuals’ psychological processes, Atkinson *et al.* (1996) refer to abnormal behavior. Strutton *et al.* (1994) explored shoplifting and Martin (1996) studied customer-to-customer relationships, but both employed the term inappropriate customer behavior. Yi and Gong (2006) discuss the antecedents and consequences of what they term badness behavior, while Berry and Seiders (2008) highlight the actions of unfair customers.

An overview of dysfunctional customer behavior research

Dysfunctional customer behavior is a relatively new area of research that has only recently attracted increasing attention from academics. However, other disciplines ranging from social psychology (e.g. exploring topics such as unethical behavior, lying, and unethical decision making) and organizational behavior (e.g. exploring topics such as dysfunctional employee behavior and fraud) to criminology, taxation, and insurance fraud have been researching dysfunctional behaviors for decades. For example, Ford and Richardson (1994) provide a good review of the literature on employee fraud, and Paternoster and Simpson (1996) provide a good review of the literature on corporate crime. These literatures mostly focus on intentional dysfunctional behaviors for some kind of gain. Likewise, early literature in marketing

also examined gain-oriented dysfunctional behavior such as shoplifting (e.g. Kallis and Vanier, 1985), wardrobing (i.e. the purchase, use and return of clothing, e.g. Longo, 1995), and cheating on service guarantees (e.g. Hart, 1993).

The motivation for much of this research has been the high economic cost of such behavior. For example, inflated and fake insurance claims are estimated to comprise 10 percent of total claims in the USA property and casualty insurance industry (Accenture Inc., 2003). Intellectual property theft is widely spread (e.g. music, film and software piracy). Tax deception, such as omitting income and inflating deductions, is also commonplace, with the IRS estimating a noncompliance rate of over 15 percent (Herman, 2005). Wardrobing (Chu *et al.*, 1998; Harris, 2008), shoplifting (e.g., an estimated four in ten people have stolen from a shop before; Kallis and Vanier, 1985; see also Cole, 1989; Cox *et al.*, 1993), writing compensation letters knowingly exploiting service recovery policies (Harris and Reynolds, 2003, 2004) and cheating on service guarantees (Wirtz and Kum, 2004) are all issues that service firms are forced to address.

Wirtz and Kum (2004) synthesized this stream of literature on intentional and economically-motivated dysfunctional customer behavior as a trade-off between the benefits and costs of such behavior. Specifically, their framework uses perceived rewards (i.e. motivators) and perceived costs (i.e. inhibitors) of dysfunctional behaviors, related situational and personality variables, and their interactions to predict dysfunctional customer behavior:

$$DB = P(M, I) + S(M, I) + PS(M, I),$$

where DB represents dysfunctional behavior, P represents personality factors, S represents situational factors, M represents the motivation to commit unethical behavior, and I represents the inhibition against committing that behavior. Table I provides an overview of the key variables they reviewed, integrated, and categorized.

More recently, services researchers have been looking at other types of dysfunctional behavior, many of which are not

economically motivated. Much of this research was inspired by Lovelock's (1994) anecdotal research, observations and categorizations of various types of dysfunctional behaviors. Although his jaycustomers included customers who "misbehaved" for some sort of benefit (e.g. the cheat and thief), he also included other types of customers such as the rule breaker, the belligerent, the family feuder and the vandal, none of whom are economically motivated. This latter group created a new stream of research that investigates the classifications, causes, and implications of the non-economically motivated dysfunctional customers (e.g. Harris and Reynolds, 2004).

Following Lovelock's (1994) categorization, the field expanded to initially focused on various aspects of dysfunctional behaviors, such as the contexts and types of dysfunctional behaviors, together with their triggers, causes, and motivations. This was followed by further research exploring the underlying psychological processes of dysfunctional behaviors. More recently, the consequences of dysfunctional customers for frontline employees and other customers have been receiving attention (e.g. Harris and Reynolds, 2003). Figure 1 provides an overview of the various areas of dysfunctional customer behavior research. As this research has developed, the different perspectives on dysfunctional customers and the methodological challenges of researching dysfunctional behaviors have been explored and the managerial implications fleshed out., Some of the key perspectives and challenges will now be discussed.

Perspectives on dysfunctional customer behavior

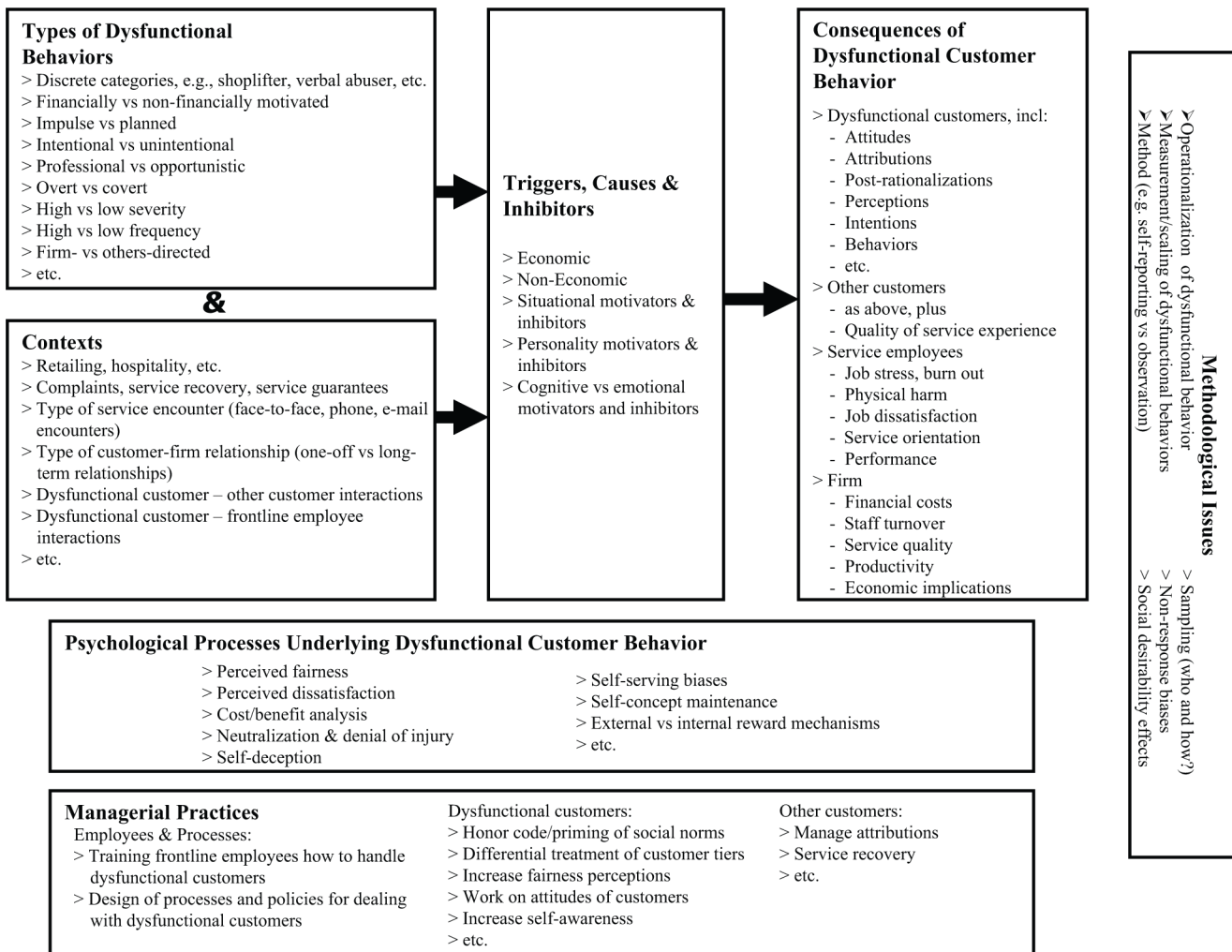
There are a variety of perspectives on dysfunctional customer behavior, its drivers, and its outcomes. As stated earlier, general forms of deviant behavior have been researched across a diverse range of academic disciplines, including sociology, criminology, medicine, ethics, and education. However, dysfunctional customer behaviors have been predominately investigated within the business disciplines of marketing and

Table I Determinants of financial or other benefit oriented dysfunctional behavior

	Situational factors	Personality factors
Motivators	Potential material gain, rewards, and benefits Opportunity to cheat Perceived injustice Dissatisfaction with a relationship External pressure	Machiavellianism Introversion and extroversion
Inhibitors	Sanctions (formal and informal) Risk of being detected Codes of conduct Perceived seriousness or magnitude of dysfunctional behavior Attitudes and norms Visibility of victim; personal contact with victim Commitment and loyalty; trust in a relationship High satisfaction with a relationship	Moral inhibitions Honesty Shame (or self-imposed punishment) Risk aversion Locus of control Self-esteem Self monitoring Religion Intelligence Gender Age

Notes: This table was adapted from Wirtz and Kum (2004). For a listing of relevant studies and their findings, please refer to Kum and Wirtz (2003, email jochen@nus.edu.sg for a copy of that working paper)

Figure 1 An overview of dysfunctional customer behavior



management, much of which was derived from the parent discipline of psychology, particularly social and organizational psychology.

Service encounters have long been understood to be “goal-oriented dyadic interactions” (Solomon *et al.*, 1985, p. 100). The sparse research that investigates customers who behave deviantly during these encounters presents a fragmented understanding of the phenomenon, because it encompasses everything from very general deviant behavior, such as customer aggression (Ben-Zur and Yagil, 2005; Grandey *et al.*, 2004; Keashly and Neuman, 2008; Yagil, 2008), to highly specific forms of deviant consumption behavior, such as purchasing illicit goods (Albers-Miller, 1999) or fraudulent returning (Harris, 2008). To add to the complexity of the field, marketing research on this phenomenon can be informed by management research that examines deviant customer behavior as a source of role stress and emotional labor for frontline service employees (e.g. Ben-Zur and Yagil, 2005).

Despite the fragmented nature of the field, the multiple perspectives that have developed during early research efforts have resulted in a rich, multi-disciplinary approach to deviant customer behavior. These varying perspectives have also resulted in a number of challenges, which emerge as

researchers seek to assimilate research across several disciplines. Three particular perspectives that challenge researchers of deviant customer behavior include:

- 1 the definitional perspective, where there is tension between definitions based on social norms and definitions based on harm;
- 2 the actor versus target perspective, where there is tension about which point of view to investigate; and
- 3 the psychological process perspective, where there is tension regarding the appropriateness of a cognitively-driven versus emotionally-driven explanation of the behavior.

These challenges are discussed in turn to examine whether these perspectives can further develop theories of customer deviance.

Definitional perspectives: norms, harm and intent

As mentioned earlier, deviant customer behavior (as well as its variants) has been defined as a violation of social norms. For example, Fullerton and Punj (1993, p. 336) described aberrant customer behavior as “behavioral acts by consumers which violate the *generally accepted norms* of conduct in consumption situations” (emphasis ours). These norms are typically formed through “customs, manners, rules

and regulations, laws, and mores” (Moschis and Cox, 1989, p. 732). Within the context of service encounters, norms are based on tenants of Role Theory that state that humans behave dynamically but predictably depending on their social identities and the situation (Biddle, 1986). By this definitional perspective, customer behavior is deemed to be deviant when it violates the accepted standards of exchange behavior.

Later, however, Lovelock (2001, p. 73) introduced a divergent perspective to the field by defining customer deviance from a harm-related viewpoint. He defined a jaycustomer as “one who acts in a thoughtless or abusive way, causing problems for the firm, its employees, and other customers” (emphasis ours). This definition implies that jaycustomer behavior causes harm to others rather than deviates from an accepted social norm, which shifts the focus of the definition of deviant customer behavior from a socially-constructed standard to a more target-constructed judgment. These different definitional perspectives of deviance are not confined to marketing research: studies of deviant service employee behavior also highlight a tension between norms- and harm-based definitions of deviance.

Actor and/or target perspectives

Given the dyadic nature of service encounters, a dysfunctional service encounter can be investigated from two primary perspectives: the actor’s (i.e. customer’s) and the target’s (i.e. frontline service provider’s). While both perspectives are equally valid and provide rich information on the phenomenon of interest, the information gleaned from each perspective is necessarily different. These differences can be explained by the attributions that drive deviant behavior and the social desirability biases inherent in these attributions.

At their psychological core, attributions are an individual’s perceptions of causation (Harvey and Weary, 1984; Kelley and Michela, 1980). Because they “constitute [an individual’s] understanding of the causal structure of the world”, attributions become “important determinants of [their] interaction with that world” (Kelley and Michela, 1980, p. 460). They are crucial to understanding deviant customer behavior (and the differences between actor and target perspectives on the phenomenon) because individuals typically interpret the cause of others’ behavior and then respond (deviantly) according to that interpretation (Harvey and Weary, 1984; Kelley and Michela, 1980). The key to understanding why customers respond deviantly during service encounters is likely to lie in the customer’s interpretation of the service provider’s prior behavior.

There are three broad antecedents of perception: information, beliefs, and motivation (Kelley and Michela, 1980). Given the complexity and interrelatedness of these antecedents, it is unsurprising that the attributions of customers and service providers do not necessarily match in every service encounter. This mismatch has serious implications for deviant customer behavior research, because investigating the phenomenon from either an actor perspective or a target perspective is likely to yield different results. These differences result from the attributions that each actor makes during the service delivery process. Both sets of results are valid, but they will necessarily be informed by the biases of the individual perspectives.

Psychological perspectives

Having considered both the definitional and actor/target perspectives that inform research in deviant customer behavior, it becomes apparent that researchers have predominately focused on cognitive explanations of customer deviance. For example, violations of perceived justice (Bechwati and Morrin, 2003), violations of perceived equity or fairness (Grégoire and Fisher, 2007), and levels of perceived risk (Albers-Miller, 1999) are all prevalent cognitive explanations for deviant customer behavior. Further, these cognitive explanations are paralleled in studies of employee deviance (Bennett, 1998; Everton *et al.*, 2007; Folger and Baron, 1996).

Despite this multi-disciplinary focus on the cognitive antecedents of deviant behavior, cognitive appraisals alone do not sufficiently explain the variety of deviant behavior that customers exhibit during service encounters. We propose that affective appraisals also play a part in eliciting deviant customer behavior (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996). However, separating cognitively-driven and emotionally-driven explanations of deviant customer behavior is overly simplistic because a service encounter appraisal will involve a range of cognitive, emotional, and motivational assessments (Lazarus, 1991). This inseparability of cognitive and emotional processes is summarized by Damasio (1994) in *Descartes Error*.

Recently, a number of researchers have started to investigate both cognitive and emotional antecedents of deviant customer behavior. For example, Aron (2001) outlined a consumer grudgeholding process that requires the consumer to expend both cognitive and emotional effort in order to maintain a grudge. Keeffe *et al.* (2007) similarly investigated how service recovery strategies influence the emotional, cognitive, and retaliatory responses of consumers to service failures. This combination of cognitive and affective antecedents is also evident in studies of employee deviance (e.g. Barclay *et al.*, 2005).

Overall, the variety of perspectives on dysfunctional customer behavior is challenging to assimilate but has resulted in a rich, multi-disciplinary approach to the phenomenon. Supplementing the challenges of assimilating these perspectives are the methodological challenges that are presented when researching the phenomenon. These methodological issues will now be addressed.

Methodological challenges

The study of dysfunctional customer behavior presents a serious challenge to researchers within this field. Here, in attempting to gauge the clandestine side of consumer activities, respondents may be asked to recall or imagine behaviors that are deemed undesirable, and in some cases illegal, within society. As a result, such questioning may cause offence, embarrassment, or stress to subjects (Brinkmann and Lentz, 2006; Lee, 1993), which represents an inherent and very problematic ethical dilemma to researchers.

A review of extant literature reveals no evident “best-practice” or championed approach to the study of consumer dysfunction. As a result, despite reports of the grave consequences to employees, fellow-customers, organizations, and broader society (Grandey *et al.*, 2004; Harris and Reynolds, 2003), dysfunctional customer behavior remains a relatively underdeveloped field of enquiry. However, our appraisal of existing research and perspectives indicate that this lack of development cannot solely be attributed to

academic or practitioner disinterest, but rather to a lack of coherency in what is defined, measured, and studied as constituting “dysfunctional” customer behavior. Prior to studying dysfunctional customer behavior, commentators must be clear about its composition. At even a very basic level, as discussed earlier, multiple labels are employed to describe the activities of consumers who behave in an unwanted manner (at least from the organization’s perspective). This multitude of labels raises an important question: are all of these terms, labels, and expressions referring to the same type of behavior? A review of past research highlights that these labels are commonly used interchangeably, which indicates a degree of consistency. However, a more detailed investigation reveals considerable differences between the classifications of these behaviors (see Fullerton and Punj, 2004a; Harris and Reynolds, 2004; Lovelock, 1994), which exposes a discrepancy about how the activities of dysfunctional consumers are defined.

Dependent variables

The lack of consensus concerning how dysfunctional customer behavior is defined is reflected in the numerous dependent variables and outcomes of interest studied in past research. For example, some of the dysfunctional customer literature centers on examining the likelihood that individuals’ will perpetrate specific forms of misbehavior. This is demonstrated in, amongst others, Harris’s (2008) study of fraudulent returners and Rose and Neidermeyer’s (1999) analysis of aggressive customer behavior. An alternative focus, which is common within the business ethics literature, centers on gauging individuals’ attitude toward individual acts of misbehavior. Mitchell and Chan’s (2002) comprehensive ranking of 50 unethical customer behaviors according to their perceived severity and commonness illustrates this approach. Divergently, Huefner *et al.* (2002), Mills (1981), and Tonglet (2001) all attempt to gauge the frequency with which consumers misbehave. To summarize, a review of extant literature reveals considerable variations in focus, thus highlighting an overall lack of consensus as to “what” researchers deem important and worthy of investigation when examining dysfunctional customer behavior. Incremental contributions to the study of consumer dysfunction are limited by this divergence. The inconsistency of focus between studies of consumer misbehavior is further confounded and perhaps symptomatic of the relativity of deviance (see Terry and Steffensmeier, 1988). That is, what one individual consumer thinks constitutes “dysfunctional” behavior may be considered as perfectly normal and acceptable behavior by others. Indeed, behavior that is deemed “dysfunctional” may differ according to individuals, contexts, cultures, and geographical locations (see, Fullerton *et al.*, 1997). For example, some individuals believe that taking a hotel bathrobe home with them is a legitimate perk of their stay. In contrast, many other individuals consider such behavior morally wrong. Similarly, within the context of bars, rowdy and raucous patron behavior is deemed to be part of the expected and desired service experience. However, in comparable venues such activities are viewed as deeply inappropriate and undesirable. Given these observations, should researchers solely investigate individual forms of consumer misbehavior that cannot necessarily be generalized to other contexts, or should we be looking at different dimensions and facets of deviance? Indeed, is some degree of

uniformity within the study of consumer dysfunction desirable, or would such an approach contradict the multiplicities and complexities of real-life dysfunctional customer behavior?

Methodological approaches: quantitative

The disparity of focus in dependent and outcome variables is further reflected in a divergence of methodological approaches employed. Here, there appears to be no commonly accepted methodological approach with which to study the activities of dysfunctional consumers. This denotes a challenge to researchers, given the unique characteristics of deviance research, in that all methods appear to have benefits and limitations.

The quantitative study of dysfunctional customer behavior is largely characterized by experimental design. Written scenarios, in particular, have been used to garner fascinating insights into various forms of consumer dysfunction, including shoplifting (Babin and Babin, 1996), consumer cheating behavior (Wirtz and Kum, 2004), and customer retaliation (Keeffe *et al.*, 2008). The ability of scenario-based approaches to depersonalize respondents by use of the third person is widely accepted as a means of improving the rigor of data that measures deviant behaviors (Hunt and Vitell, 1986; Mills and Bonoma, 1979). Despite its many benefits, however, experimental design has been subject to criticism (e.g. Sarel and Marmorstein, 1998). In particular, given the low levels of involvement associated with feigned scenarios, researchers should question the ease and authenticity with which interviewees are able to “imagine” behaving in a dysfunctional manner (see Jo *et al.*, 1997). Moreover, does the link between intent and behavior hold within the context of dysfunctional customer behavior?

Following the obvious ethical violations of inducing actual episodes of consumer dysfunction within either a real-life service or laboratory-based settings, simulated game environments provide an alternative experimental research design technique. In brief, a virtual context is created wherein interviewees interact with a simulated environment that might induce dysfunctional behavior (for a further discussion see Drennan *et al.*, 2007). This method overcomes many of the traditional problems associated with written scenarios and fosters a greater level of respondent involvement (Drennan *et al.*, 2007). However, despite its promise, this method is still very much in its infancy and requires application. Furthermore, uncertainty regarding the reliability of the link between virtual and actual behavior remains.

A review of past research reveals that surveys have been used as an approach to data collection. Specifically, two methods dominate: postal questionnaires and online surveys. To review each in brief, postal-return questionnaires have been adopted with both self-report and scenario-based data collection approaches (see Harris, 2008; Shoham *et al.*, 2008; Strutton *et al.*, 1997). Indeed, Albers-Miller (1999) champions the use of self-report data within the study of deviant customer behavior, a view that is echoed by Reynolds and Harris (2009). However, given the concerns pertaining to under- or over-reporting, truthful recall, and social desirability bias (see Brinkmann and Lentz, 2006), a faction of literature adopts a hybrid approach to survey design. Questionnaires designed using this technique are characterized by the inclusion of self-report *and* scenario-based components (for examples see Mills, 1981; Mills and Bonoma, 1979). Notwithstanding the traditional and well-

documented advantages associated with the use of postal surveys (see Churchill and Iacobucci, 2005), uncertainty remains concerning the identity of the respondent. In addition, given that the respondent's home address is known to the researcher, postal questionnaires may suffer socially desirable reporting (Fisher and Katz, 2000). Furthermore, given the sensitive nature of self-reported dysfunctional behavior, sampling is problematic. Specifically, how can and should deviant consumers be identified and approached?

The last decade has witnessed a surge in researchers studying online forms of consumer deviance and using the internet as a data collection method (see Cohn and Vaccaro, 2006; Denegri-Knott, 2004; Freestone and Mitchell, 2004; Saban *et al.*, 2002). The reason for this growth is two-fold. First, internet usage has grown hand-in-hand with internet-related abuse (e.g. illegal downloading) (Freestone and Mitchell, 2004; Saban *et al.*, 2002). Second, online surveys are recognized as a means with which to reduce social desirability bias, a key limitation inherent in much deviance research (see Chung and Monroe, 2003). Yet, despite the benefits of online-based research, akin to mail surveys, the researcher has limited assurances concerning the author of their data and the truthful and accurate recall of respondents (Grover and Vriens, 2002; Horne *et al.*, 2007).

Given the limitations of non-response and social desirability bias, in 1965 Warner forwarded a randomized response research design to be used within survey-based deviance research. This technique is founded on the principle that if respondents are assured that their answers cannot be attributed to them, then they will answer truthfully. The application of this technique requires that the research questionnaire is constructed into pairs of questions. Each pair of questions contains a sensitive and non-sensitive question. The question answered by the respondent is determined by flipping a coin; thus, the researcher is unable to discern which question (sensitive or non-sensitive) is attempted. Warner (1965) argues that with this assurance, there is no motivation for the interviewee to leave a question blank or answered untruthfully. Yet, in spite of the technique's guarantee of discretion, in practice the procedure is cumbersome, complex, and costly nature. Hence, its application within the field of consumer deviance is extremely limited (for examples see Geurts *et al.*, 1975; Mills and Bonoma, 1979).

Methodological approaches: qualitative

Research into the activities of dysfunctional customer behavior is not restricted to quantitative analysis. Several qualitative approaches, including face-to-face interviews and written accounts, are also evident in past research (see Harris and Reynolds, 2004; King and Dennis, 2006). Particularly common within face-to-face research is the use of critical incident technique (e.g. Bitner *et al.*, 1994; Reynolds and Harris, 2006), enabling the respondent and researcher to focus on a specific incident of witnessed or perpetrated misbehavior. While this approach benefits from the advantages of theory generation and contextual intricacies, it is hampered by socially desirable reporting, the over- or under-reporting of true events, and retrospective recall biases (King and Bruner, 2000; Randall and Fernandes, 1991).

To summarize, researching dysfunctional customer behavior is challenging. This area is fraught with difficulties owing to its sensitive nature and potential for bias. In reviewing past research for guidance as to how this field of

study should develop, we made a number of observations. First, as mentioned previously, there is lack of coherency in how commentators define dysfunctional customer behavior. Second, little agreement exists concerning which facets of dysfunctional customer behavior should be studied. Third, owing to their limitations, no single methodological approach emerges as best suited to the study of dysfunctional customer behavior. Consequently, in order to progress as a discipline, researchers should devote time and effort to exploring and refining the methodological approaches available to study this phenomenon.

The positive functions of customers behaving badly

To date, most of the attention regarding dysfunctional customer behavior is directed at those acts that result in harm to the organization, employees, other customers, or the physical service environment. Nonetheless, in this section we argue that sometimes there may be a silver lining to a dark cloud. In this case, that silver lining takes the form of potentially positive benefits that ensue from aberrant customer behavior. Such a proposition may seem paradoxical at first glance, but it is not without theoretical underpinning. Essentially, examining a phenomenon such as dysfunctional customer behavior to debunk its apparent core and uncover alternative explanations is a sociological enterprise (Anderson and Taylor, 2005; Berger, 1963), much like that which explains capitalism as an outgrowth of the Protestant Ethic (Weber, 2001) or the value-free research ideal as a concomitant to political conservatism and moral indifference (Gouldner, 1962).

Sociology offers various approaches to closely examine and generate a deeper, sometimes hidden understanding of a phenomenon (Perdue, 1986; Ritzer, 1980). Each one has its own particular slant (Coser, 1980) and different strengths and weaknesses. However, anchored in the structural-functionalism description of social phenomena (e.g. Parsons, 1951; Ritzer, 2008) is one approach that offers a means to systematically consider alternative explanations of social events and conditions such as aberrant customer behavior. That perspective is one linked to Robert K. Merton (1968) and it allows exploration of social occurrences across a variety of levels of understanding, while attending to important aspects found in functional sociology. Essentially, in the context of our discussion, it recognizes that the existence of any social phenomenon may have obvious as well as non-apparent consequences that contribute to or undermine society or the social unit at the same time. Similar to Gans' (1971) classic application of Merton's functionalism to analyze the existence of poverty, we apply Merton's functionalism to examine the phenomenon of customers behaving badly. In essence, instead of a traditional Mertonian analysis that illuminates the possibility of negative aspects (e.g. holy wars) related to what is a seemingly positive social entity (e.g. religion), this exercise considers the positive aspects (e.g. providing a market for outdated products) associated with a negative social phenomenon (e.g. poverty).

Our adaptation of Merton's approach involves assessing the manifest (i.e. observable and objective) and latent (i.e. unrecognized and unintended) consequences of aberrant customer behavior, as well as its potentially functional (i.e. positive) or dysfunctional (i.e. negative) character. A Mertonian mode of analysis, then, addresses the diverse

consequences of socio-cultural phenomena such as deviant customer behavior – whether those consequences are positive or negative, obvious or hidden – for individuals, groups, and the social system in general (Turner, 2002). While individual perspective or bias may affect one’s assessment, the upshot of such an examination is that there may be various benefits, some less apparent than others, which might ensue from customers behaving badly. Figure 2 provides a starting point for considering the multi-faceted and sometimes paradoxical consequences associated with customers who behave badly.

Most treatments of aberrant customer behavior address the obvious or manifest negative consequences of its occurrence, such as those highlighted in Cell 2 of Figure 2 and discussed elsewhere in this article. However, the following discussion focuses on the positive functions of customers behaving badly that can be classified as manifest or latent (see Cells 1 and 3) in order to illuminate the fact that even ostensibly negative customer actions may sometimes lead to beneficial outcomes. The following passages provide a glimpse into that possibility with several examples.

Manifest functions

One of the more obvious positive functions of deviant customer behavior is that its occurrence prompts the need for service jobs that are created to control such behaviors and, hence, creates employment opportunities. These positions may range from those that are quite evident, such as in-store security guards and personnel, to those positions that are often less apparent, such as the security role performed as part of Walmart greeters’ duties. The incidence of customers breaking rules and/or engaging in deviant acts has also encouraged many service industries to develop and install electronic security systems, thus supporting employment as well as potentially creating new expertise. For example, large casinos in Las Vegas have pioneered elaborate electronic security systems that can identify and track possible cheaters and undesirables among the throngs of visitors, a technology that has been adapted and applied in other contexts such as homeland security in the aftermath of 9/11 (Martin, 2007).

On a psychosocial level, one of the manifest positive outcomes that occur when customers behave badly is that such conduct starkly delineates the boundaries of acceptable conduct for everyone else. In other words, it communicates the point at which behavior becomes inappropriate. In doing so, it provides a reminder to most people regarding behavioral expectations, as well as alerting customers of potentially shifting definitions of unacceptable actions. In short, the

patron who speaks too loudly in the library, the guest who pilfers towels at the hotel, or the passenger who lights up a cigarette in flight is engaging in an act that reaffirms for everyone else what is socially appropriate and what is not.

One other example of a manifest positive function linked to customer misconduct is that when it occurs with regularity and is exhibited by a significant number of patrons, the circumstance signals the need for change. Regardless of the type of misconduct, when its incidence becomes widespread, it communicates to organizations and/or society that its rules or the procedures that are used to enforce them are either too rigid or too loose. The upside, then, is that in such situations customer misconduct plays a role in creating better or more sensitive systems of social control. Consider the case of multitudes of drivers exceeding a posted speed limit; it sends a message that agencies should examine whether the speed limit is too restrictive or the enforcement of it too lax, ultimately prompting change in either or both.

Latent functions

Somewhat less apparent as potentially positive consequences of customers behaving badly are its latent functions. On a broad level, one possible latent function is that the occurrence of customer misconduct affirms the cultural values and norms for society and/or the service organization by establishing that those values and norms are desirable and/or work. While it may not be apparent at first take, the fact is that without the values and norms that control the limited occasions of customer misconduct, the incidence of aberrant customer acts would likely be much greater and lead to more turmoil. Consider, for instance, how widespread the episodes of shoplifting would be if values and norms to protect against its occurrence were not in place.

A similarly broad contribution linked to the prevalence of customer misconduct is its latent consequence of fostering growth in education efforts and the body of knowledge in general. Programs of study such as Purdue University’s Homeland Security Institute and the University of Southern Mississippi’s Sport Security Management emerged in response to specific forms of customer transgressions (Joyner, 2009), while concentrations within academic disciplines like sociology and psychology have developed in part as means to better understand some behaviors that are reflected as aberrant customer conduct.

From a psychosocial perspective, another possible latent function of customer misbehavior is that its occurrence may actually help to foster positive self-images for those customers who diligently abide by the rules of proper conduct rather than break the rules. Essentially, the expression of customer misconduct allows those customers who do not engage in such acts to recognize that “I am not like them”, reifying their self worth. For example, the possibility that many citizens lie on their income taxes may help others who don’t cheat to feel better about themselves. Hence, customers who behave badly may contribute to other people’s personal sense of well-being.

Paradoxically, the same aberrant acts that may have latent positive consequences for society, service organizations, or rule abiders may also offer benefits to those who engage in the acts. For instance, the behaviors themselves – as dysfunctional or deviant as they may appear – may represent vehicles for self-expression, identity formation, and individuality for the perpetrator. In essence, some deviant acts may allow one to express him or herself despite the fact

Figure 2 Deviant customer behavior

		Consequences	
		Functional	Dysfunctional
Character of Phenomenon	Manifest	Creates jobs	Raging customers undermine others service experiences
	Latent	Misbehaving customers make the rest of us look good	Thievery increases prices

(or sometimes because of the fact) that others may be annoyed or upset by their behavior. For example, graffiti is typically considered a form of vandalism, yet to the people who mar the servicescape with their scrawlings and physical defacement, it may be considered a form of artistic self-expression or ownership.

In sum, customers behaving badly may have profoundly negative impacts on a service organization's customers, workers, and processes. Despite this reality, it is important to recognize that there are potentially positive aspects associated with customer misconduct. The challenge is to engage in a debunking activity to uncover these possibilities and to realize that, paradoxically, some good can come from dysfunctional customer behavior.

A research agenda

In order to guide future studies into dysfunctional customer behavior, what follows is a research agenda which broadly reflects the structure of this article.

An overview of dysfunctional customer behavior

As we learn more about the types, causes, potential inhibitors and implications of dysfunctional behavior, it seems timely to focus further research on service management practice. Although some work has been conducted on the frequency and trends of different types of dysfunctional behavior, there is limited empirical research on how service firms actually deal with dysfunctional customers. Which of the prescriptions and recommendations originating from academic research are actually being implemented? How successful are they? Are there other best practices currently not considered by academics? For example, credit card and telecommunications firms have sophisticated fraud detection algorithms and credit ratings, and best practice service firms like Singapore Airlines have excellent training programs and processes for dealing with difficult passengers. Exploring these questions (at worst) leads to a wider sharing of best practices, but will hopefully lead to new insights about variables, hypotheses, and approaches.

Perspectives on customers behaving badly

The variety of research perspectives around dysfunctional customers raises more questions than it answers. For example, is it more appropriate to define deviant customer behavior from a norms-based perspective, or a harm-based perspective? Are these definitions mutually exclusive? How do they address the issue of intent in deviant customer behavior? The implications of the intent/harm debate may call into question the potential antecedents and consequences of this behavior, as well as the best methodology to capture it. For instance, if misbehavior is defined as intentional, then it may (or may not) over-emphasize the level of cognition and deliberation that has occurred prior to the behavior.

Further, the actors involved in the process create issues for consideration. Is it valid to conduct deviant customer behavior research from a single perspective as opposed to multiple perspectives? Should we consider the perspective of third parties, such as other customers in the servicescape, the service provider's colleagues, or the service provider's manager(s) or supervisor(s)? Finally, if both emotions and cognitions are included in models of consumer misbehavior, what are the practical implications of managing both cognitive and emotional drivers of deviant behavior?

Research methodology

Research on the methodological approach to studying dysfunctional customer behavior is essential to the advancement and rigor of this research field. In particular, future research should identify and advance methods or techniques that are suited to the investigation of dysfunctional behavior in consumer and service settings. Given the limitations inherent to the instrumentation and collection of both qualitative and quantitative data, it appears that new innovative research techniques warrant development. An alternative approach might also involve incorporating multiple methods within a single study of customer dysfunction. Furthermore, in order to aid the overall development of this research field, scale development and refinement is needed. Which dependent variable/s should researchers focus on when studying the dysfunctional activities of consumers? Should researchers continue to focus on largely ungeneralizable individual forms of dysfunctional customer behavior, or should future researchers adopt and adapt somewhat abstract measures designed to reflect either the norms or harm-based view of dysfunctional behavior? Finally, future studies should consider in more detail, the ethical dilemmas of studying dysfunctional behaviors. How should deviant individuals be identified and thus sampled? What techniques and approaches can be employed to minimize/eliminate socially desirable reporting? How can researchers obtain rigorous data in an ethically responsible manner?

The functions of customers behaving badly

The examination of the positive functions of customers behaving badly does not easily lend itself to empirical research. The debunking activity that it involves is essentially the manifestation of a perspective that prompts one to consider alternative and sometimes unapparent consequences associated with a phenomenon. A research agenda that entails traditional data collection and analysis is difficult to fathom with respect to the debunking endeavor. With that in mind, however, one possible avenue for future research would be an effort that systematically and thoroughly delves into the manifest and latent positive consequences associated with a specific form of customer misconduct, such as shoplifting or vandalism. The result of such an in-depth examination would likely be a convincing explanation of the premise that, paradoxically, several benefits are inextricably related to the incidence of aberrant customer behavior. To demonstrate this relationship more broadly, an examination of the manifest and latent functions of customers behaving badly could be performed across a diverse set of customer misconduct and/or service types, perhaps focusing on its occurrence within services representing people, possession, mental-stimulus, and information-processing services (Lovelock, 1994), respectively. Again, the upshot of such an effort would be to confirm that benefits ensuing from customer misconduct are not limited to a particular type of behavior or a specific form of service. Both of these research foci would require creative inquiry and the investigation of pertinent literatures for their data rather than survey or experimental methods.

Implications for practitioners

As Berry and Seiders (2008, p. 37) suggest, “[c]ompanies must acknowledge the unfair behavior of certain customers and manage them effectively ... Denying the existence and impact

of unfair customers erodes the ethics of fairness upon which great service companies thrive.” However, the interpretations of deviance are largely segment- and situation-specific. When managers adopt a normative perspective towards dysfunctional customers, their assessment of misbehavior requires contextual adaptation. For instance, the norms for queuing vary across cultural contexts and industries, to the extent that dysfunctional behavior in one context may not be considered dysfunctional in another. “Acceptable” behavior varies according to different service industries. Alternately, a harms-based perspective is relatively universal but subject to a manager’s interpretation of what constitutes harm.

Given the contextual nature of behavior, the usefulness of using broad catch-all standards to categorize specific acts as deviant or acceptable is destined to be limited, and consequently the wisdom of traditional marketing advice to practitioners would be reinforced. Practitioners should: know their customer (e.g. What are their expectations/perceptions? What’s driving them?); not try to be all things to all people (e.g. think twice before growing the business by attracting new customers whose expectations may be incompatible with those of existing customers); and communicate (or negotiate?) the service organization’s expectations of customer behavior to (or with) customers in order to shape customers’ expectations of (un)acceptable behaviors.

For example, one (of many possible) defences customers might offer for their misbehavior is that they did not know the rules or standards of behavior. Another possible defence is that they knew the rules but did not agree with them. In both cases (and perhaps others), the rules were imposed upon them. When behavioral expectations are imposed on customers, they may feel little commitment to abide by them and subsequently may resent any sort of penalty or effort by the company to enforce the rules. Conflict, bitter feelings, and a host of undesirable behaviors may result. As most organizational behavior textbooks point out, people are most committed to plans, decisions (rules?), and goals if they participate in their formation. (The rich roots of this fundamental idea may be traced back to the early thinking of Management by Objectives (MBO) by Peter Drucker and others, and possibly earlier). Similarly, personal sales texts point out that buyers are more committed to buying decisions that they reach, rather than those forced upon them by others in the organization or, even worse, by arm-twisting high-pressure salespeople.

It follows that service customers are more likely to follow the “rules” (i.e. behavioral expectations) if they know what the rules are and ideally have a say in them (given that some rules may be negotiated). Service organizations might take steps toward this by explaining, and even promoting, the rules in straightforward language (i.e. not legalese hidden in piles of fine print), explaining the logic behind the rules (e.g. safety, fairness for all customers, operational efficiency to keep prices low, etc.), directly asking customer to commit to the rules (e.g. by signing customer charters), designating times or conditions in which deviations are acceptable (e.g. restaurant designating a special smoking section), providing incentives or rewards for customers who consistently abide by the rules, and so on.

Service managers and frontline workers are in a unique position to study and track episodes of dysfunctional customer behavior. Such insights may be garnered using multiple methods. For example, implementing observation and complaint feedback systems that foster not only the

habitual reporting and recording of incidents of misbehavior by customers, but also the ability to identify and track re-offenders, represents an indispensable managerial tool to understand the forms and patterns of misbehavior that occur within individual service settings. In addition, a service manager’s direct access to the point of service delivery and physical contact enables them to benefit from their closeness to both the customer and employee. Consequently, managers may wish to investigate incidents of customer misbehavior by engaging a dyadic viewpoint and utilizing the perspectives of both customers and employees while recording the servicescape variables impacting individual incidents of customer deviance. Such incidents offer service managers a unique and detailed picture of the dynamics of dysfunctional customer behavior within their individual servicescape.

Once they have established an understanding of dysfunctional customer behavior, service managers can choose to respond to future acts of deviance in either a reactive or proactive manner. Service organisations are typically defensive in their approach in that they aim to control consumers and prevent or reduce their dysfunctional behavior. However, this approach assumes that the responsibility for behavior change lies with the consumer. An alternative, proactive approach might involve managers recognising the emotional and cognitive cues that foreshadow dysfunctional behavior and using this information as feedback for service system changes.

The positive functions of customers behaving badly highlights the fact that proactive organizations can monitor the frequency and nature of dysfunctional customer behavior, which enables them to identify opportunities for improving their service delivery. When a particular type of aberrant customer behavior becomes commonplace it is a signal that broader changes in the service system are needed. Consider the case of rule breakers, one of the several categories of jaycustomers posited by Lovelock (1994). If numerous incidents occur of customers violating posted rules regarding appropriate behavior in the servicescape, then it may be time for management to rework the rules as suggested previously. The rules might be too restrictive or poorly implemented. Beyond prompting episodes of rule breaking, the existing policies may be turning some customers away and/or sending them to the competition. Of course, if safety and liability issues are at play with respect to the rule violations, rule breaking may also signal to management that improved security systems are needed, which will ultimately benefit the organization and customers in general.

Of course, service managers might choose to manage and mitigate acts of customer dysfunction by focusing their efforts on their frontline service workers and other more functional customers, rather than solely dysfunctional customers. For example, managers might recruit their frontline service workers based on their ability to actively manage dysfunctional customers, as well as conduct the more technical aspects of their jobs. They might also train their employees in conflict resolution in order to alleviate the impact of dysfunctional customers. Similarly, managers might create services recovery strategies for functional customers that witness another customer’s misbehavior. Taken as a whole, a proactive management approach would result in a holistic set of strategies for each key party to customer dysfunction: the dysfunctional customers themselves, other customers who are affected by such behavior, and the frontline service employee.

Conclusion

The intention of this paper is to present a critical evaluation of existing research into customers behaving badly. In reviewing this burgeoning literature, we find unresolved issues of definition, research design, and methods, and a myriad of perspectives and positions that can be used to study this fascinating phenomenon. We conclude the paper with a brief overview of potentially fruitful avenues and questions for future research and hope that this agenda inspires, enthuses, or even annoys others into delving into research on this darker side of service dynamics. May the Armadillo be with you.

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