



Customer responses to frontline employee complaining in retail service environments: The role of perceived impropriety

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ABSTRACT

Substantial research recognizes the importance of understanding employee-customer interactions in order to optimize the customer experience. While most retailing and services research focuses on frontline employees' handling of customer complaints, the present studies take an inverse approach by examining a relatively unexplored phenomenon: customers' perceptions of frontline employee complaining. First, a pilot study confirms two commonly overheard types of employee complaints - complaints about the company and customers. Next, Study 1 provides empirical support for the effects of overhearing employee complaining on relevant customer outcomes and identifies perceived impropriety as the mediating mechanism underlying these effects. The results of Study 2 indicate that soliciting customers' feedback about their experience attenuates the indirect effects of one type of employee complaint - complaints about the company. We conclude with a discussion of our findings and provide practical suggestions to retailers and service providers for reducing the harmful effects of overheard employee complaints.

1. Introduction

For > 40 years, marketing scholars and practitioners have studied and integrated customer complaint behaviors into the development of successful customer experience management (Yilmaz, Varnali, & Tari Kasnakoglu, 2016). However, extant literature lacks research investigating the impact of *employee* complaining on customer experiences. Marketing and management research suggests customers observe interactions between frontline employees and make inferences about the firm from these observations (Porath, Macinnis, & Folkes, 2010; Wan, Chan, & Chen, 2016). As negative exchanges among workers at the point of service delivery are not rare (Albrecht, Hattula, Bornemann, & Hoyer, 2016; Porath et al., 2010; Wan et al., 2016), we investigate customer reactions to frontline employee complaining.

Specifically, we aim to determine if, and how, exposure to frontline employee (FLE) complaining in retail service environments impacts customer outcomes. For example, how do customers react when they hear an employee complain about an overbearing boss, long work hours, or difficult customers? To answer these questions, we first conduct a pilot study to highlight customer awareness of employee complaining and to confirm two common forms of frontline employee complaints – those about their company and those about customers. We then develop and empirically assess a model to examine customer

impropriety perceptions of FLE complaining across two main studies. Study 1 provides support for the impact of FLE complaining on customer perceptions of impropriety, negative attitudes toward the employee and firm, reduced patronage intentions, and negative word-of-mouth (NWOM) intentions. Importantly, in line with the dual threshold framework (Geddes & Callister, 2007), our results highlight perceived impropriety as the mechanism underlying the effects of FLE complaining on customer outcomes. Study 2 then examines the moderating effects of customer feedback solicitation on the mediating role of impropriety. Finally, we discuss the theoretical and practical contributions of these findings and suggest future research in this area.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Script theory & role theory

Script theory (Solomon, Surprenant, Czepiel, & Gutman, 1985; Walker, Churchill, & Ford, 1975) and role theory (Solomon et al., 1985) provide a theoretical explanation for determining acceptable FLE behavior. Many service firms dictate appropriate FLE behavior through service scripts, defined as “the precise specification of actions to be taken by service staff in particular situations” (Harris, Harris, & Baron, 2003; p. 186; see also Nguyen, Groth, Walsh, & Hennig-Thurau, 2014).

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Scripts additionally provide rules and protocols for managers in evaluating FLE performance (Nguyen et al., 2014).

In this same vein, role theory suggests that customers and FLEs exhibit ritualized behaviors that govern the course of a retail encounter (Fließ & Kleinaltenkamp, 2004; Solomon et al., 1985). Role expectations refer to the privileges, duties, and obligations of a person occupying a particular social position (Sarbin & Allen, 1968). In other words, the dyadic interaction between an FLE and a customer is defined by socially-constructed norms which dictate a set of behaviors that are appropriate for each party's role. In retail service environments, the implied roles of employees and customers drive these expected behaviors (Bitner, Booms, & Mohr, 1994). For example, a customer signals his/her desire to dine at a restaurant by sitting at a table. This behavior allows the restaurant employee to initiate actions pertaining to his/her role as a server. Thus, common expectations of both customers and employees shape appropriate role behaviors, and patron responses are a function of the congruence between expected and observed employee behaviors (Churchill & Surprenant, 1982; Solomon et al., 1985). The present research examines situations where FLEs deviate from acceptable service role behaviors by complaining in the presence of customers. We next draw from existing literature on workplace incivility and impropriety to predict how customers may respond to such situations.

2.2. Incivility and perceived impropriety

Prior research defines incivility as “acting rudely or discourteously without regard for others, in violation of norms of respect in social interactions” (Andersson & Pearson, 1999, p. 455). Broadening this conceptualization, Kowalski (2003) defines incivility synonymously with impropriety, which is a perceived deviation from acceptable behavior. Here, we similarly conceptualize impropriety in a retail service context as a deviation from what customers view as acceptable FLE role behaviors (i.e., a deviation from the appropriate role-specific behaviors that customers expect them to display in retail service encounters).

The dual threshold model of anger in organizations (Geddes & Callister, 2007) may help further explain why, and to what extent, customers perceive FLE complaining as improper. According to this framework, the *impropriety* threshold is crossed when an expression of anger “goes too far” and is deemed “inappropriate, damaging, and/or unacceptable given the circumstances” (Geddes & Callister, 2007, p. 732). The dual threshold model takes a dyadic approach to interactions in organizational contexts and emphasizes the role of observers (e.g., customers) in deciding the appropriateness of employees' behavior. We propose that when employees are overheard complaining (i.e., an incongruity between expected and observed FLE behavior), customers will perceive this behavior as improper, and will express negative attitudes and behavioral intentions toward the employees and firm as a result.

Previous research recognizes two prominent sources of employee incivility and negative work experiences: other individuals within an organization (e.g., supervisors) and customers (Schilpzand, De Pater, & Erez, 2016; Van Jaarsveld, Walker, & Skarlicki, 2010). We operationalize these here as two types/sources of FLE complaints: complaints about the company and complaints about customers (i.e., company-framed and customer-framed complaints, respectively). From a customer sovereignty perspective, FLEs should behave in a customer-focused manner that is both rational and functional, even when dealing with unreasonable or rude customers (Reynolds & Harris, 2009; Van Jaarsveld et al., 2010). In line with this, an employee complaining about his/her customers in front of another customer should represent a particularly severe violation of role expectations, as the observer is also a customer. Thus, a customer should consider employee complaints about fellow customers to be relatively more improper (i.e., a more egregious deviation from acceptable FLE role behaviors) than complaints about the employee's company. In sum, we expect customers to perceive both types of complaints as improper compared to a no-

complaint control condition; however, customer-framed complaints should be viewed as relatively more improper than company-framed complaints.

H1. Both company- and customer-framed employee complaints increase customer perceptions of impropriety compared to a control condition.

H2. Customer-framed employee complaints are perceived as significantly more improper than company-framed employee complaints.

2.3. Customer outcomes and the mediating role of perceived impropriety

We propose that observable employee complaining will also affect customers' attitudes and behavioral intentions (Cortina, Kabat-Farr, Leskinen, Huerta, & Magley, 2013; Pearson & Porath, 2005; Porath et al., 2010). Scholars contend that it is critical for market-oriented organizations to have customer-friendly FLEs, as patrons' observations of FLE behavior influence their attitudes toward the employees (Brady & Cronin, 2001; Roggeveen, Goodstein, & Grewal, 2014), as well as the firm (Albrecht et al., 2016; Kalamas, Laroche, & Makdessian, 2008; Porath et al., 2010; Wan et al., 2016).

From a behavioral standpoint, reduced patronage and increased NWOM represent two potential customer outcomes that may result from overhearing FLE complaining. Consumers employ these reactions as a way of coping with the negative aspects of the customer-provider interaction (Ashley & Noble, 2014; White, Breazeale, & Collier, 2012; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2004). Thus, employee complaints (whether about the company or customers) should solicit reduced patronage and increased NWOM intentions among customers. Further, similar to H2, we expect customer-framed complaints to have a greater impact on customers' behavioral intentions toward the firm compared to company-framed complaints.

Relatedly, the reviewed literature and our discussion to this point suggest that perceived impropriety should underlie, or mediate, the effects of employee complaints on these customer outcomes. That is, customers should react negatively when observing employee complaining, as it represents a deviation from acceptable FLE behavior. This should, in turn, lead them to express negative attitudes and behavioral intentions. We offer our formal hypotheses for the direct effects of FLE complaining on customer outcomes and the mediating role of impropriety below.

H3. Both company- and customer-framed employee complaints result in more negative attitudes toward the employee, negative attitudes toward the firm, reduced patronage intentions, and increased negative word-of-mouth intentions compared to a control condition.

H4. Customer-framed employee complaints result in more negative attitudes toward the employee, negative attitudes toward the firm, reduced patronage intentions, and increased negative word-of-mouth intentions compared to company-framed complaints.

H5. Impropriety perceptions mediate the relationship between employee complaints and negative attitudes toward the employee, negative attitudes toward the firm, reduced patronage intentions, and negative word-of-mouth intentions.

2.4. The moderating role of customer feedback

Lastly, given the proposed negative effects of employee complaining detailed in H1–H5, we also examine whether incorporating a different FLE behavior into the service experience can minimize customers' impropriety perceptions (and thus, their resulting negative attitudes and intentions). Specifically, we suggest that soliciting feedback, defined here as proactively garnering customers' feedback about their retail

service experience, may be one such opportunity (Bone et al., 2017; Challagalla, Venkatesh, & Kohli, 2009).

Prior research notes the importance of understanding the effects of asking customers for feedback (Bone et al., 2017; Voorhees et al., 2017). Proactive approaches to garnering feedback generally enhance customer satisfaction, strengthen relationships with the service provider, and increase loyalty (Merlo, Eisingerich, & Auh, 2014; Ping, 1993). In fact, the mere act of soliciting feedback can positively enhance attitudinal and behavioral customer outcomes (Bone et al., 2017; Morwitz, Johnson, & Schmittlein, 1993), as feedback solicitors are rated as more likeable and conscientious by customers (Ashford & Northcraft, 1992; Challagalla et al., 2009; Morrison & Bies, 1991).

Previous service research suggests that displaying customer-oriented behaviors enhances patrons' evaluations of FLE performance (e.g., Brady & Cronin, 2001). Feedback solicitation represents one such behavior, as it reflects the FLE's proactive attempt to facilitate the organization's gathering customer information in order to optimize the provider-customer relationship (Rapp, Trainor, & Agnihotri, 2010). Thus, feedback solicitation from the employee should represent a customer-oriented behavior that reduces the perceived impropriety of the observed FLE complaining. More specifically, we hypothesize in H6 that feedback solicitation attenuates perceived impropriety for both types of employee complaints (customer and company), alike. We further hypothesize that feedback solicitation moderates the mediating role of impropriety, such that the indirect effects of employee complaints (through impropriety) are relatively weaker when feedback solicitation is present (compared to absent).

H6. Customer feedback solicitation moderates the effect of employee complaint frames on customer impropriety perceptions. Specifically, perceived impropriety is lower for company-framed and customer-framed complaints when a feedback opportunity is present (compared to when it is absent).

H7. Customer feedback solicitation moderates the indirect effects of employee complaint frames on negative attitudes toward the employee, negative attitudes toward the firm, reduced patronage intentions, and negative word-of-mouth intentions. Specifically, the indirect effects of company-framed and customer-framed complaints are relatively reduced when a feedback opportunity is present (compared to when it is absent).

In Study 1, we test H1–H5 which suggest that (1) company- and customer-framed FLE complaining increase perceived impropriety and negative customer outcomes; (2) customer-framed complaints have a stronger impact on impropriety and outcomes than company-framed complaints; and (3) impropriety mediates the relationship between employee complaint frames and customer outcomes. In Study 2, we test H6 and H7, which suggest that customer feedback solicitation moderates (1) the effects of employee complaint frames on perceived impropriety, and (2) the indirect effects of employee complaint frames on customer outcomes. Fig. 1 presents the conceptual model.

3. Pilot study

Due to the lack of published marketing research on consumer perceptions of employee complaining, we conducted a pilot study with a sample recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) (n = 418; 51% male; 81% ages 25–54) to validate the proposed forms of commonly overheard employee complaints (company and customer-framed complaints). Respondents were asked if they had ever witnessed an employee complaining while on the job, and if so, to describe the nature of the incident.

Seventy-seven percent of respondents (n = 320) reported over-hearing an employee complain while on the job. Of these responses, 81% of the descriptions provided focused on complaints about the company or customers. The most commonly reported complaints

pertained to the company (e.g., long hours, not enough breaks, inadequate staffing, poorly managed work environments; n = 161), as reflected in selected comments below:

“A checker at the grocery store was complaining about his schedule to another employee while checking me out.”

“The employee was complaining about having to stay late and close, overworked, understaffed.”

“I've heard employees multiple times at different establishments complaining about co-workers being lazy or their bosses not making sure they get their breaks on time or being overworked due to not enough employees available on shift.”

“An employee walked in to where me and my children were sitting and eating (at a local restaurant), and loudly complained about being there past his shift, and “I guess I'm getting overtime” etc... and finally shuffles over to me and my kids and lets me know, the restaurant is closing in 5 min.”

The second most frequently mentioned type of complaint focused on customers (e.g., tipped poorly, demanding, arrived near closing hour expecting full service; n = 97). A few representative examples are offered below:

“I overheard a customer service person at a local hardware store begin to loudly complain about pushy and overly demanding customers, the last time I visited.”

“It was on a very busy Friday night and the person seating [customers] was frazzled and complained about people not being patient.”

“One time a waitress complained to a fellow waitress when we walked in ten minutes before closing time.”

“I overheard an employee talking about how dumb customers were because they couldn't read the signs to find out where things were in the store.”

These findings coincide with prior research on sources of employee discontent (Schilpzand et al., 2016; Van Jaarsveld et al., 2010) and were used to guide the employee complaint frame manipulations in Studies 1 and 2. These experiments contain scenarios which take place in a local restaurant setting. We selected the restaurant industry because it requires a high degree of customer/server interaction (Allen, Brady, Robinson, & Voorhees, 2015).

4. Study 1

4.1. Sample

The sample was recruited from MTurk, resulting in 184 adult respondents (52% male, age range 18–65). Recent research shows MTurk to be a high-quality data source for marketing research (Kees, Berry, Burton, & Sheehan, 2017), and it has additionally been used in scholarly investigations that examine consumer evaluations of customer-retailer interactions (e.g., Mukherjee, Jha, & Smith, 2017). We manipulated employee complaint frame by randomly assigning respondents to one of three conditions: 1) a scenario in which the respondent overhears a restaurant server complain about his/her company (company-framed [COMP]), 2) a scenario in which the respondent overhears a restaurant server complain about his/her customers (customer-framed [CUST]), or a 3) a no-complaint scenario (CON).

Respondents in the company-framed complaint condition read: “You go to a local restaurant for dinner and order your meal. You notice that your server appears tired. You overhear your server complaining to another employee, saying the following: *I'm so overworked. The boss is making me close tonight too. This is ridiculous.*” Respondents in the customer-framed complaint condition read: “You go to a local restaurant

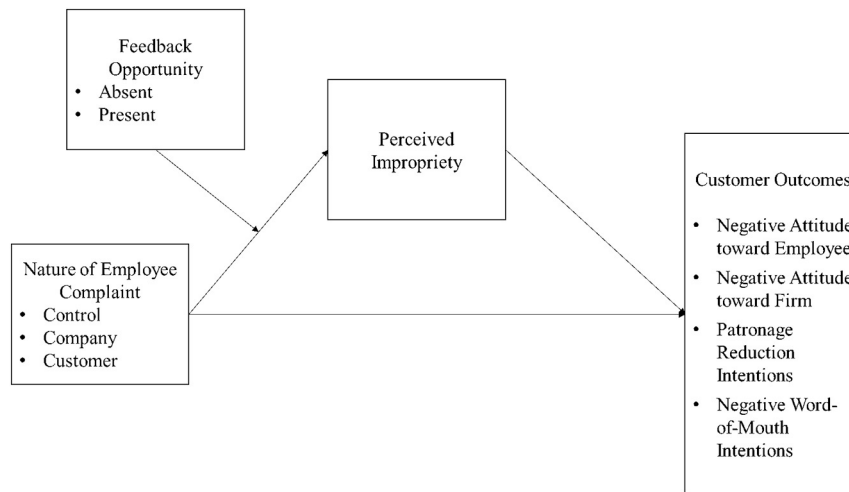


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

for dinner and order your meal. You notice that your server appears tired. You overhear your server complaining to another employee, saying the following: *I'm so overworked, and I just got more customers. Don't they know we close soon? This is ridiculous.*” Respondents in the control condition only read: “You go to a local restaurant for dinner and order your meal. You notice that your server appears tired.” All respondents answered the dependent measures after reading their assigned scenario.

4.2. Measures

All variables were measured using 7-point Likert-type scales (endpoints: 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; see Appendix A). Negative attitudes toward the employee [firm] was measured using 3 items (e.g., “This employee [restaurant] does not take good care of its customers”; $\alpha = 0.90$ [0.95]) (adapted from Roggeveen et al., 2014). Reduced patronage was measured using 4 items (e.g., “I will eat less often at this restaurant”; $\alpha = 0.94$) (adapted from Ashley & Noble, 2014). Similar to Rahman and Yuksel (2009), NWOM intentions was measured using 2 items (e.g., “I would advise my friends and family against going to this restaurant”; $r = 0.86$) (adapted from White et al., 2012). We measured impropriety with four items (e.g., “The employee's behavior is inappropriate”; $\alpha = 0.92$) (see Appendix A).¹ Finally, a manipulation check assessed respondents' ability to accurately recall their assigned scenario (“In the scenario you just read, the employee was complaining about” with options of 1) their boss, 2) their customers, or 3) nothing-the employee did not say anything).

4.3. Results

Collectively, 96% of respondents accurately reported the nature of their scenario (company-framed, customer-framed, or control) ($\chi^2 = 327.64$, $p < .001$), suggesting a successful employee complaint frame manipulation. We performed a confirmatory factor analysis using Mplus version 8 to assess discriminant and convergent validity, composite reliability, and the overall fit of the measurement model. The results (see Appendix A) indicate acceptable model fit ($\chi^2 = 179.46$,

¹ We conducted a pretest with 94 MTurk respondents who were randomly assigned to a complaint scenario (COMP vs. CUST) and completed the measure. We assessed the items using principal components analysis with oblique rotation (Aiken, Bee, & Walker, 2018). The analysis produced one factor (communalities > 0.40; factor loadings > 0.50), which explained over 50% of the observed variance. Given these results, we proceeded with the 4-item measurement instrument.

$df = 93$, $p < .001$; TLI = 0.97; CFI = 0.98; RMSEA = 0.07; SRMR = 0.03; Hu & Bentler, 1999). Further, the average variance extracted for each construct exceeded 0.50, all composite reliabilities were above 0.70, and the shared variance between constructs did not exceed the average variance extracted per construct in the pair (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

We next tested H1–H4 using MANOVA and one-tailed planned contrasts. Results indicate a significant main effect of employee complaint frame on perceived impropriety ($F(2,181) = 48.09$; $p < .001$). Follow-up contrasts (see Table 1) reveal that perceived impropriety was greater for both company- ($M = 3.74$) and customer-framed complaints ($M = 5.30$) compared to the control condition ($M = 2.94$) (both p 's < 0.001). Additionally, perceived impropriety was greater for customer-framed complaints than for company-framed complaints ($p < .001$). Collectively, these results support H1 and H2.

Results also reveal significant main effects of employee complaint frame on negative attitude toward the employee ($F(2,181) = 34.28$; $p < .001$), negative attitude toward the firm ($F(2,181) = 25.25$; $p < .001$), reduced patronage intentions ($F(2,181) = 30.51$; $p < .001$), and NWOM intentions ($F(2,181) = 24.81$; $p < .001$). Contrasts with the control condition show that respondents exposed to company-framed complaints report more negative attitudes toward the employee ($p < .01$) and the firm ($p < .04$), and greater reduced patronage intentions ($p < .02$). However, these contrasts reveal a non-significant difference in NWOM intentions ($p < .10$). Additional contrasts with the control condition show that customer-framed complaints lead to more negative attitudes toward the employee and the firm, greater reduced patronage intentions, and greater NWOM intentions (all p 's < .001). Thus, H3 is partially supported. Contrasts also reveal that respondents exposed to customer-framed complaints report more negative attitudes toward the employee, negative attitudes toward the firm, greater reduced patronage intentions, and greater NWOM intentions than those exposed to company-framed complaints (all p 's < .001), providing full support for H4.

Lastly, we constructed bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals (CIs) with 10,000 draws in Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 2017) to test the Complaint Frame → Impropriety → Outcomes mediational paths proposed in H5 using the product of coefficients method (Hayes, 2018; Shrout & Bolger, 2002; Zhao, Lynch, & Chen, 2010). Because complaint frame is comprised of three levels (control, company, and customer), dummy variables were created to determine the respective indirect effects (IEs) of company- and customer-framed complaints (through impropriety) compared to the control condition (Hayes & Montoya, 2017). Mediation is supported when zero does not fall between the range of the lower and upper limits of the CI associated with the IE of

Table 1
Study 1 & 2 results.

Study 1	Means and planned contrast results (one-tailed <i>p</i> -value)		
Main effects	CON	COMP (vs. CON)	CUST (vs. CON/vs. COMP)
IMP	2.94	3.74 (< 0.001)	5.30 (< 0.001/ < 0.001)
NEMPA	2.71	3.30 (< 0.01)	4.60 (< 0.001/ < 0.001)
NFIRM	2.87	3.30 (< 0.04)	4.47 (< 0.001/ < 0.001)
PAT	2.80	3.31 (< 0.02)	4.67 (< 0.001/ < 0.001)
NWOM	2.93	3.32 (< 0.10)	4.59 (< 0.001/ < 0.001)
Indirect effects	Unstandardized estimates (SE) [95% confidence intervals]		
COMP → IMP → NEMPA	0.55 (0.18) [0.198, 0.930]		
COMP → IMP → NFIRM	0.29 (0.12) [0.104, 0.568]		
COMP → IMP → PAT	0.39 (0.14) [0.150, 0.699]		
COMP → IMP → NWOM	0.34 (0.13) [0.121, 0.654]		
CUST → IMP → NEMPA	1.61 (0.19) [1.274, 2.003]		
CUST → IMP → NFIRM	0.84 (0.19) [0.480, 1.239]		
CUST → IMP → PAT	1.14 (0.19) [0.773, 1.520]		
CUST → IMP → NWOM	1.00 (0.19) [0.651, 1.396]		

Study 2	Index of moderated mediation		
Conditional indirect effects	FB absent	FB present	Index of moderated mediation
COMP → IMP → NEMPA	1.24 (0.17) [0.928, 1.577]	0.46 (0.17) [0.149, 0.801]	-0.78 (0.22) [-1.216, -0.351]
COMP → IMP → NFIRM	0.71 (0.12) [0.507, 0.976]	0.27 (0.10) [0.088, 0.488]	-0.45 (0.13) [-0.744, -0.212]
COMP → IMP → PAT	0.74 (0.14) [0.483, 1.040]	0.28 (0.10) [0.092, 0.495]	-0.46 (0.15) [-0.799, -0.203]
COMP → IMP → NWOM	0.56 (0.14) [0.298, 0.844]	0.21 (0.09) [0.068, 0.415]	-0.35 (0.13) [-0.645, -0.145]
CUST → IMP → NEMPA	1.73 (0.19) [1.386, 2.143]	1.49 (0.21) [1.101, 1.934]	-0.24 (0.22) [-0.682, 0.184]
CUST → IMP → NFIRM	1.00 (0.16) [0.708, 1.335]	0.86 (0.16) [0.590, 1.203]	-0.14 (0.13) [-0.414, 0.100]
CUST → IMP → PAT	1.04 (0.17) [0.717, 1.383]	0.89 (0.17) [0.591, 1.257]	-0.14 (0.13) [-0.425, 0.105]
CUST → IMP → NWOM	0.78 (0.19) [0.416, 1.176]	0.68 (0.17) [0.376, 1.052]	-0.10 (0.11) [-0.358, 0.070]

CON = Control; COMP = Company-framed Complaint; CUST = Customer-framed Complaint; FB = Feedback Solicitation; IMP = Perceived Impropriety; NEMPA = Negative Attitude toward Employee; NFIRM = Negative Attitude toward Firm; PAT = Patronage Reduction Intentions; NWOM = Negative Word-of-Mouth Intentions.

interest (Hayes, 2018). As shown in Table 1, the results revealed a significant IE of company-framed complaints through perceived impropriety on negative attitude toward the employee (0.55, CI [0.198, 0.930]), negative attitude toward the firm (0.29, CI [0.104, 0.568]), reduced patronage intentions (0.39, CI [0.150, 0.699]), and NWOM intentions (0.34, CI [0.121, 0.654]) compared to the control condition. Similarly, there was a significant IE of customer-framed complaints through perceived impropriety on negative attitude toward the employee (1.61, CI [1.274, 2.003]), negative attitude toward the firm (0.84, CI [0.480, 1.239]), reduced patronage intentions (1.14, CI [0.773, 1.520]), and NWOM intentions (1.00, CI [0.651, 1.396]) compared to the control. Together, these results fully support H5.

4.4. Study 1 discussion

Study 1 provides an initial controlled test of the effects of employee complaining on several customer outcomes. As compared with the control group, respondents exposed to either type of employee complaint reported greater perceived impropriety, more negative attitudes toward the employee and the firm, and greater reduced patronage intentions. Respondents were also significantly more likely to spread NWOM about the firm after hearing customer-framed complaints, but were not more likely to do so after hearing company-framed complaints. Study 1 also highlights impropriety as the mechanism underlying the effects of FLE complaints. Specifically, the mediation analysis provides evidence that the effects of complaint frames on all constructs of interest are linked by customers' perceived impropriety of the employee's behavior.

Next, Study 2 empirically tests an actionable strategy that managers can utilize to potentially mitigate the negative impact of FLE complaining documented in Study 1. In particular, we test whether soliciting feedback from customers about their experience attenuates the undesirable indirect effects of FLE complaining on the outcomes of

interest (see H6–H7).

5. Study 2

5.1. Sample

For Study 2, Qualtrics Panels, a professionally-managed online panel service, procured the sample. All respondents were subjected to screening questions prior to participation to ensure that the sample accurately reflected the demographics of a typical U.S. consumer. Survey respondents passed a series of rigorous control measures designed by the Qualtrics Panels administrative team. In addition, a panel project manager was employed to gather and screen respondents and provide initial data cleaning, a service that “offers a huge advantage in terms of objectivity” (Babin, Griffin, & Hair, 2015; p. 3135). The resulting sample consisted of 287 adult respondents (51% male; age range 18–79).

Study 2 utilized a 3 (employee complaint frame: company-framed vs. customer-framed vs. control) × 2 (customer feedback solicitation: present vs. absent) between-subjects design to test H6 and H7. The initial complaint scenarios from Study 1 created the employee complaint manipulation for Study 2. For customer feedback solicitation (FB), respondents in the FB-present condition were additionally told the following: “After you've paid for your meal, the server highlights the bottom of your receipt where there is a link to an online customer survey. The server tells you that you can rate your dining experience in a quick survey.” Respondents in the FB-absent condition were not given this additional information (consistent with Study 1).

5.2. Measures

All measures from Study 1 were used in Study 2 (see Appendix A). In addition to the manipulation check from Study 1, we assessed the

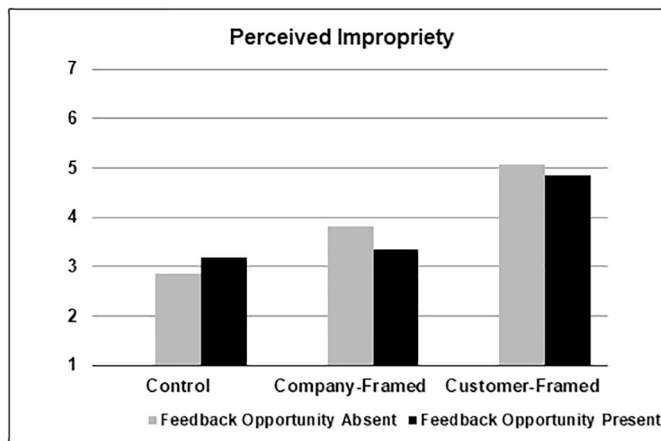


Fig. 2. Study 2 effects of employee complaint frame and feedback solicitation on perceived impropriety.

Note: Higher values on the Y axis indicate higher levels of perceived impropriety based on three levels of the employee complaint frame independent variable (control, company-framed and customer-framed) in the presence or absence of customer feedback solicitation.

effectiveness of the feedback solicitation manipulation by asking respondents “After your meal, did the server highlight a survey link on your receipt where you could evaluate your experience?” with options of yes/no.

5.3. Study 2 results

For Study 2, respondents were required to pass manipulation checks for both the complaint and feedback solicitation manipulations, along with attention checks. Therefore, all respondents correctly identified their assigned scenarios. Next, confirmatory factor analysis results suggest good model fit ($\chi^2 = 222.37$, $df = 93$, $p < .001$; TLI = 0.96; CFI = 0.97; RMSEA = 0.07; SRMR = 0.03; Hu & Bentler, 1999; see Appendix A). As in Study 1, the average variances extracted, composite reliabilities, and tests of convergent and discriminant validity meet established thresholds (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

H6 proposes that feedback solicitation moderates the effects of the employee complaint frame on perceived impropriety. ANOVA results indicate that the overall complaint frame X feedback interaction on perceived impropriety was significant ($F(2,281) = 6.51$, $p = .002$). As shown in Fig. 2, follow up contrasts revealed that providing the FB opportunity significantly lowers perceived impropriety of the company- ($p < .001$) and customer-framed employee complaints ($p = .005$) compared to when FB solicitation is absent. However, perceived impropriety does not differ between the feedback-present and -absent control conditions ($p = .18$). These results provide full support for H6.

Lastly, to test H7, we conducted moderated mediation analyses in Mplus by creating interaction terms for each complaint frame with feedback, simultaneously assessing the respective effects of each on impropriety, along with their respective conditional IEs on customer outcomes in the presence (absence) of FB solicitation (Hayes & Montoya, 2017).

As shown in Table 1, when the FB opportunity is *absent*, comparisons to the control condition reveal that both the company- and customer-framed complaints have significant IEs on respondents' negative attitudes toward the employee (COMP = 1.24, CI [0.928, 1.577]; CUST = 1.73, CI [1.386, 2.143]), negative attitudes toward the firm (COMP = 0.71, CI [0.507, 0.976]; CUST = 1.00, CI [0.708, 1.335]), reduced patronage intentions (COMP = 0.74, CI [0.483, 1.040]; CUST = 1.04, CI [0.717, 1.383]), and NWOM (COMP = 0.56, CI [0.298, 0.844]; CUST = 0.78, CI [0.416, 1.176]).

When the FB opportunity is *present*, comparisons to the control also

find significant IEs of both the company- and customer-framed complaints on respondents' negative attitudes toward the employee (COMP = 0.46, CI [0.149, 0.801]; CUST = 1.49, CI [1.101, 1.934]), negative attitudes toward the firm (COMP = 0.27, CI [0.088, 0.488]; CUST = 0.86, CI [0.590, 1.203]), reduced patronage intentions (COMP = 0.28, CI [0.092, 0.495]; CUST = 0.89, CI [0.591, 1.257]), and NWOM (COMP = 0.21, CI [0.068, 0.415]; CUST = 0.68, CI [0.376, 1.052]).

Most pertinent to H7, we calculated the index of moderated mediation (IMM) for each dependent measure as the difference between conditional IEs for the FB-present and FB-absent conditions (see Hayes, 2018). Evidence of a significant difference in conditional IEs is provided when the CI corresponding with the IMM does not contain zero. As expected, the IMM's were significant for company-framed complaints on respondents' negative attitudes toward the employee (-0.78 , CI [-1.216 , -0.351]), negative attitudes toward the firm (-0.45 , CI [-0.744 , -0.212]), reduced patronage intentions (-0.46 , CI [-0.799 , -0.203]), and NWOM (-0.35 , CI [-0.645 , -0.145]). Thus soliciting feedback attenuates the unfavorable indirect impact of company-framed complaints on customers' attitudes and intentions (compared to not soliciting feedback).

However, these same comparisons with the control condition for customer-framed complaints show that the IMM's are *not* significant for any of the dependent measures (i.e., all CIs contain zero; see Table 1). This suggests that feedback solicitation does not reduce the IEs of customer-framed employee complaints on the dependent measures in reference to the control. These results also highlight the severity of overhearing FLE complaints about customers from the consumer's perspective. The findings here collectively provide partial support for H7.

6. General discussion

Although customer-employee exchanges receive much attention in the literature, more research is needed on customers' observations of frontline employee (FLE) behaviors, particularly in the realm of misconduct and incivility (Brady, Voorhees, & Brusco, 2012; Porath et al., 2010; Wan et al., 2016). It is vital that managers recognize the importance of the human element during employee-customer interactions (Homburg, Jozić, & Kuehnl, 2017) and consider the impact of observable, unacceptable employee behavior. The current studies indicate that FLE complaining in the presence of customers represents one such deviation from acceptable FLE behavior that has negative outcomes for firms. Our findings suggest that employee complaints about their company appear slightly less inappropriate, overall, than those about their customers. However, both types of employee complaints have negative effects through customers' impropriety perceptions on several customer outcomes. Additionally, Study 2 results suggest that soliciting customer feedback about their service experience can effectively offset the perceived impropriety of company-framed complaints and their negative (indirect) impact on several customer outcomes. In contrast, soliciting feedback appears to be much less impactful in reducing the negative indirect influence of complaints about customers. The theoretical contributions and managerial implications of this research are discussed below.

6.1. Theoretical contributions

Previous research on complaint behavior primarily focuses on employees' reactions to, and handling of, customer complaints. By contrast, the present studies serve as one of the few endeavors in the marketing literature to assess customers' reactions to employee complaining (Porath et al., 2010; Wan et al., 2016). Our results therefore supplement existing literature in this area and broaden the conceptualization of the employee-customer interface by examining a specific employee behavior commonly observed by customers.

Second, the current research bridges extant marketing and management research by using the dual threshold model of anger in organizations (Geddes & Callister, 2007) to assess the effects of employee complaining on customer outcomes. We provide empirical support for the model in a retail service context by demonstrating that observable employee complaining crosses the threshold of impropriety, resulting in negative outcomes. We further show that employee complaints about customers are considered more improper than those about the company.

Third, this research importantly offers insight into *how* employee complaining behavior negatively impacts customer outcomes. Specifically, our findings highlight perceived impropriety as the mechanism underlying the effects of employee complaining on the observed outcomes. That is, the perceived impropriety of the FLE's behavior strongly influences customers' negative attitudes and intentions due to deviation from role expectations.

Lastly, the results of Study 2 show that customer feedback solicitation moderates the effects of employee complaint frames on impropriety. However, we further find that soliciting customer feedback reduces the mediating effect of perceived impropriety when the employee complaint is about the company, but not customers. Thus, we identify an important boundary condition for the effects of FLE complaining. One potential explanation for this finding is that customers who overhear FLE complaints about other patrons may be offended, as they are also in the customer role at the time of the complaint.

6.2. Managerial implications

Our findings also have important practical implications. Prior research indicates that 40% of customers reconsider their purchase intentions based on their in-store interactions with employees (Court, Elzinga, Mulder, & Vetvik, 2009). Our findings suggest that overhearing employee complaining has undesirable consequences for firms (e.g., negative attitudes toward the employee and firm, reduced patronage, and increased NWOM intentions). As a result, when training FLEs, managers should specifically address and emphasize the importance of refraining from complaining in the service environment (no matter the nature of the complaint). Given the difficulty of realistically eliminating employee complaining altogether, managers need to recognize, and better prepare for, situations that may trigger such behavior (e.g., peak service times, rude customers, and extra shifts). Another way to monitor employee behavior is by providing customers with access to kiosks, such as HappyOrNot, to evaluate customer satisfaction with staff in real-time. Careful monitoring of FLE behaviors in such instances may reduce complaining in front of customers and potentially reduce negative outcomes for the firm.

Also, consistent with the dual threshold model (Geddes & Callister, 2007), managers may minimize employee complaining in public by providing them an opportunity to vent their frustrations privately in controlled settings. For example, management may hold employee “gripe” sessions to give employees an opportunity to air their frustrations away from customers. Interestingly, frustration among FLEs has

become so widespread that both employee- and company-generated websites have been created that allow employees to complain in community forums (e.g., www.customerssuck.com; www.WalmartOne.com) (Kowalski, 2003). Encouraging employee complaining in the proper settings (i.e., not in front of customers) may promote employee morale in addition to curbing negative customer outcomes.

Lastly, the current findings suggest that managers may be able to alleviate some of the negative effects of employee complaining by ensuring customer feedback solicitation is a routine FLE behavior. Since impropriety perceptions were shown to be an important facilitator of negative customer outcomes, managers may further consider explicitly measuring these perceptions when soliciting customer feedback about their service experiences (e.g., “Did the employee behave appropriately/professionally throughout the customer experience?”). Doing so can help managers better monitor FLE behavior and ensure that employees do not cross the impropriety threshold in customers' eyes.

6.3. Limitations and future research

The present research has several limitations that offer opportunities for future research. First, we only examine customer reactions to FLE complaining in a single (restaurant) setting, with a limited set of dependent variables. Future research should empirically test these effects in other customer service/retail environments, and also measure retail switching intentions, for example. Additionally, examining the interaction effects of feedback solicitation and FLE complaints on customers' intentions to actually provide feedback about their experience could offer valuable insights toward understanding patrons' intentions to engage directly with the provider after the incident. Different variations of feedback solicitation may prove more effective than others and should be explored (e.g., incentivized vs. not). Second, the online nature of the studies may limit the generalizability of the findings to an extent. Exploring employee complaining in field experiments could enhance the external validity of the current studies. Third, future research could investigate situations where the effects of employee complaining are minimized or reversed. Specifically, are there instances in which employee complaining can result in *positive* customer evaluations and intentions? For example, upon hearing an employee complain about being overworked due to customer specials (e.g., happy hours), promotional sales, or the volume of customers who patronize the establishment, a customer may infer that the firm is in popular demand and react less negatively to the employee's behavior. Additional studies might also consider moderating effects of customers' individual traits (e.g., mood, firm loyalty, or self-monitoring tendencies) on the influence of FLE complaining, and also among subsamples of different genders and ages to identify potential differences. Finally, we only examine two forms of employee complaints. Future research could investigate whether subcategories exist in each of these broad categories. For example, company-framed complaints may stem from interpersonal conflict with management or be the result of managerial policies. Overall, a number of meaningful opportunities exist to further explore FLE complaining.

Appendix A. Construct definitions, measurement items, & confirmatory factor analysis results

	Study 1	Study 2
	Standardized loadings (SE) ^a	Standardized loadings (SE) ^a
Items		
Perceived Impropriety (a customer's opinion of how inappropriate an employee complaint is; $\alpha = 0.92^b$)		
The employee's behavior was unprofessional.	0.88 (0.021) ^a	0.89 (0.017) ^a
The employee's behavior was unacceptable.	0.94 (0.013)	0.94 (0.013)
The employee's behavior was inappropriate.	0.92 (0.015)	0.87 (0.018)
The employee's behavior would be considered misconduct.	0.79 (0.030)	0.78 (0.025)

Negative Attitude toward Employee (a customer's opinion of an employee, focusing on how well the employee satisfies its customers; $\alpha = 0.90^b$)		
This employee does not take good care of its customers.	0.87 (0.021) ^a	0.81 (0.024) ^a
This employee is unfair to customers.	0.90 (0.018)	0.83 (0.023)
This employee does not have an objective of satisfying customers.	0.92 (0.015)	0.90 (0.017)
Negative Attitude toward Firm (a customer's opinion of the provider, focusing on how well the business satisfied its customers; $\alpha = 0.89^b$)		
This restaurant does not take good care of its customers.	0.96 (0.010) ^a	0.85 (0.021) ^a
This restaurant is unfair to customers.	0.93 (0.013)	0.89 (0.017)
This restaurant does not have an objective of satisfying customers.	0.91 (0.015)	0.88 (0.018)
Reduced Patronage Intentions (a customer's intentions to reduce future visits to the retailer; $\alpha = 0.94^b$)		
Based on my experience, I will eat less often at this restaurant.	0.92 (0.013) ^a	0.82 (0.023) ^a
Based on my experience, I will not return to this restaurant.	0.92 (0.014)	0.88 (0.017)
If I could do it again, I would have eaten at a different restaurant.	0.87 (0.020)	0.86 (0.018)
Based on my experience, I would not consider this restaurant next time I dine out.	0.94 (0.012)	0.89 (0.015)
Negative Word-of-Mouth Intentions (a customer's intention to disseminate negative word-of-mouth about the retailer; $\alpha = 0.84^b$) ^c		
I would not recommend this restaurant to my friends.	0.87 (0.023) ^a	0.88 (0.021) ^a
I would advise my friends and family against going to this restaurant.	0.87 (0.023)	0.86 (0.022)
Model fit statistics: Study 1		
$\chi^2 = 179.46$, $df = 93$, $p < .001$		
CFI = 0.98, TLI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.07, SRMR = 0.03		
Model fit statistics: Study 2		
$\chi^2 = 222.37$, $df = 93$, $p < .001$		
CFI = 0.97, TLI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.07, SRMR = 0.03		

^a Denotes a constrained relationship to 1.00 in order for identification.

^b Denotes the minimum alpha across studies.

^c Scale reduced from 4 to 2 items due to lack of discriminant validity in the original measurement assessment.

* All factor loadings have a p-value < .001.

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