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I don’t want to be a rule enforcer during the COVID-19 pandemic: Frontline employees’ plight

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Occupational stressors
Emotional contagion
Customer rule enforcement

ABSTRACT

This research explores the pandemic-related experiences of frontline employees (FLEs) relative to customer rule-enforcement interactions within retail and service industries. Using a survey, incorporating closed-ended and CIT questions, we investigated, from the FLEs’ perspectives, the occupational stress of rule-enforcement, company expectations of FLEs regarding rule enforcement, and the emotional impact of customer interactions on FLEs. Results indicate that several customer misbehaviors, such as not following rules and being rude, produce significant occupational stress. Further, based on our CIT assessments, many of the FLEs’ recounted rule-enforcement incidents involved negative customer reactions, translating to heightened negativity for FLEs due to emotional contagion.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic represents an unprecedented disruption in how we experience, interact, and engage with the world. The mix of fear, frustration, exhaustion, and strain due to the pandemic impacts individuals and organizations daily. The resulting paradigm shift, relative to decisions around appropriate policy and behavior, has been particularly disruptive to the servicescape, as customers and frontline employees (FLEs) attempt to navigate the new and changing “normal,” adding additional layers of stress-inducing factors to industries already experiencing stress (Voorhees, Fombelle, and Bone, 2020). Although some pandemic related research has assessed the impact of occupational stressors on FLEs, particularly health care workers, little academic research addresses the nature of the stressors affecting FLEs relative to rule-enforcement issues. Sumner and Kinsella (2021) found that the uncooperative social behavior of customers during the pandemic hindered the collective effort and increased the stress on FLEs directly and indirectly. They reported that FLEs felt betrayed and frustrated by the community, which made them heroes, but failed to live up to the social obligations by following pandemic guidelines. We examine and define here occupational stressors as those factors, occurring during pandemic-related enforcement activities, that cause FLEs to feel tension, anxiety, and stress in the servicescape (Wong et al., 2021; Parker and DeCotiis, 1983). The focus of this study is on how the pandemic exacerbated these factors.

Interactions between FLEs and customers during the pandemic have been fraught with conflict relative to enforcement issues, such as mask-wearing and reduced capacity levels, often vividly reported in the news (Berry et al., 2020). Exacerbating these negative interactions is the emotional contagion felt between FLEs and customers (Liu et al., 2019). Emotional contagion theory posits that in social interactions one person’s emotions transmit or “get caught” by the other (Hatfield et al., 1994). That is, employees’ rule-enforcement attempts appear to produce negative customer reactions, which can get caught by FLEs, producing correspondingly negative FLE emotions. Interestingly, although emotional contagion has received considerable attention in the literature, the transmission of customers’ negative emotions to FLEs’ emotions has received almost no attention. This is true even though researchers acknowledge the influence (or confluence) of interactions between the parties (Zablah et al., 2017; Barnes et al., 2015).

Thus, the goals of this study include the following: First, we address Voorhees, Fombelle, and Bone’s (2020) call for further research on the impact of the pandemic on FLEs by examining memorable rule-enforcement interactions between the parties from the FLEs’
perspective, with customer misbehaviors viewed as occupational stressors. Secondly, we address the call of Barnes et al. (2015) for an examination of how customer negativity transmits to employees (i.e., negative emotional contagion), which is examined relative to customers’ rule misbehaviors and reactions to FLEs’ rule enforcement attempts. Thus, we attempt to address the gap of customer-to-employee emotional transmission, especially negative transmission, within the context of the pandemic. We examine these issues across four essential industries: retail, food and beverage, service, and caregiving.

2. Background

2.1. Emotional contagion

Emotional contagion theory postis that in social interactions emotions transmit (or are “caught”) from one person to another, producing affect movement from one party to another (Hatfield et al., 1994). While the employee-customer dyad interaction is mutual and reciprocal in nature, oddly, the literature is one-sided, focusing primarily on employee-to-customer emotions (Liu et al., 2019), and sometimes, on positive customer-to-employee emotions (Barnes et al., 2015).

While previous studies on emotional contagion occurred in standardized contexts, pre-pandemic, such as food services (Barger and Grandey, 2006) and banking (Pugh, 2001), the flow of emotions examined was from the employee to the customer with a focus on speed, efficiency, and reliability. In a pandemic environment, however, contact and interactions between FLEs and customers go beyond the established script, creating conditions for negative emotional contagion to occur. Here we consider the emotional movement from customers to employees, especially relative to the negative flow, in contrast to most previous research (Barger and Grandey, 2006).

During the pandemic, stress, anxiety, and other negative emotions have escalated. The lack of information, constant evolution and conflict among governmental and organizational policies, and the pandemic’s extended length have heightened the stress and frustration of both FLEs and customers (Berry et al., 2020). As a result, in the servicescape, interactions between the parties are sometimes volatile (often due to rule-enforcement, as well as other stress factors in the environment, caused by the pandemic) as the parties share the emotions of the encounter.

2.2. Customer misbehavior

In the servicescape, FLEs often encounter hostile or belligerent customers who do not honor company policies and rules, sometimes engaging in aggressive and abusive acts as FLEs attempt enforcement of the rules. Tragically, these acts have even turned deadly with FLEs murdered for enforcing pandemic-related rules (Lynch and Vera, 2021). Unfortunately, rule-breaking customers are not a new problem (e.g., Harris and Reynolds, 2003; Reynolds and Harris, 2006, 2009), with FLEs facing the brunt of customer misbehavior incidents.

In fact, the negative effects of customer misbehavior are of considerable concern, adding to greater employee stress (Walsh, 2011), more job dissatisfaction (Bailey and McCollough, 2000), higher turnover (Neuman and Baron, 1998), and lower morale (Harris and Reynolds, 2003). Employees can feel degraded and unappreciated by these misbehaviors (Graney et al., 2007; Harris and Reynolds, 2003; Sumner and Kinsella, 2021), which can ultimately affect companies’ bottom lines (Freestone and Mitchell, 2004).

Regrettably, the pandemic has exacerbated customer misbehaviors relative to FLEs’ attempts to enforce COVID-19 rules. Many customers are belligerent about the rules, feeling it is their right to not wear masks or to socially distance, while many FLEs are expected to enforce COVID-19 company policies with various approaches, from verbally reminding customers to refusing to serve them. Many customers, in response, become angry and yell at or even attack FLEs rather than comply. However, little research addresses or provides understanding of the toll customer mistreatment is having on FLEs’ emotional states, apart from some psychological research, which examines the impact of customer misbehavior on employee psychological well-being (Wang et al., 2013), incivility (Walker, Van Jaarsveld, and Skarlicki, 2014), and employee revenge (Bedi and Schat, 2017).

Thus, this study attempts to address the pandemic’s effect on FLEs, especially related to their occupational stressors, focusing on FLE-customer interactions relative to rule-enforcement attempts. We next describe our method, focusing on a survey of FLEs’ experiences working during the pandemic.

3. Methodology

While the topic of customer misbehaviors during the pandemic has received considerable attention in the popular press due to its severity and on-going nature, our theoretical understanding of the topic is limited. Thus, we first reviewed numerous popular press articles on the pandemic and its impact on employees and customers in retailing and service industries. We used this review in developing an interview guide and conducted six exploratory interviews with current FLEs to reveal issues surrounding customer interactions, pandemic rule-enforcement, and company expectations during the pandemic. These exploratory interviews were subsequently used in the development of our survey for FLEs.

The survey included closed-ended questions, rating scales, and open-ended questions. The open-ended questions served as our three critical incident questions (CIT) and focused on a recent “memorable” customer interaction experienced by the FLE involving customer rule-enforcement, with the FLE describing the incident, then reporting customers’ reactions to the requests, and finally their emotional reactions to these encounters, with responses subsequently categorized. The other questions focused on FLEs’ reports on their company’s rule-enforcement expectations, current occupational stressors, and other descriptors related to their work experience.

Respondents were recruited by marketing students at five universities in four U.S. states in return for class extra-credit, with data collected online in late fall 2020. Students recruited individuals currently working or who had worked in a frontline job (i.e., in-person contact with customers) during the pandemic. If the student worked in a frontline job during the pandemic, they could also complete the survey. A screening question at the beginning of the survey asked whether they had “direct in-person contact with customers during the pandemic” and individuals answering yes to this question continued with the survey. After removing respondents who did not describe a customer interaction in adequate detail, we obtained a final sample of 612 respondents across four industry categories: retail, food and beverage, services, and caregiving. Some respondents described more than one customer interaction during the pandemic for a final total of 630 interaction incidents. The descriptive information of the final sample appears in Table 1.

Utilizing CIT is appropriate due to the limited scholarly knowledge on the topic and the need to gather foundational information to understand this topic more fully (Bitner et al., 1990). Data were content analyzed and coded by multiple researchers following guidelines set forth by Gremier (2004), with an initial agreement rate ranging from 74% to 89%. Next the coded data points were reconciled by another researcher to reach a final 100% agreement rate. Thus, with this approach and a large sample, we present our findings both as percentages in our tables, as well as representative quotes throughout the paper.

4. Findings

Relative to our goals, we first report on the occupational stressors and organizational expectations on FLEs, addressing here the stress of customer misbehaviors on FLEs. Then we address our CIT findings, focusing on—nature of the rule violation, customers’ reactions to a
4.1. Occupational stressors

“There have been several instances where customers have ignored the signs on our doors and walked straight into the lobby demanding service. One lady came into the store expecting us to allow her and her kids to use our restrooms. We explained to her that we are not allowed to let any customers in our building under any circumstances. She proceeded to yell at us and declare it was ridiculous we couldn’t let people just simply use the bathroom. Ten minutes later. She returned to our doors with a bag of her son’s urine to give to our director. We were shocked at the response and tried our best to calm her down.” ~ Katherine, female, 21, food/beverage.

Our findings indicate that the responsibility of managing and policing customer misbehavior causes significant stress for FLEs. Our team first identified occupational stressors, defined earlier, from our policing customer misbehavior causes significant stress for FLEs. Our point scale (from causing no concern to great concern). Results by significant concern. The importance of these two stressors provides further

### Table 2: Stressors during the pandemic.

| Stressors                                                                 | Mean (Standard Deviation) | % choosing "Causes me great concern" |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. Bringing COVID-19 home to someone in family                          | 2.45 (0.7)                | 56.7%                                 |
| 2. Contracting COVID-19                                                  | 2.21 (0.8)                | 40.8%                                 |
| 3. Customers not following rules\(^a\)                                  | 2.11 (0.7)                | 32.2%                                 |
| 4. Customers who are rude, mean, or disrespectful\(^b\)                  | 2.08 (0.8)                | 34.5%                                 |
| 5. Company not covering pay if in quarantine                             | 2.01 (0.8)                | 36.0%                                 |
| 6. Inadequate pay                                                        | 1.95 (0.9)                | 31.5%                                 |
| 7. Inadequate sick leave benefits                                        | 1.91 (0.9)                | 30.6%                                 |
| 8. Dangerous work conditions (e.g., feeling inadequately protected from virus) | 1.84 (0.8)                | 25.2%                                 |
| 9. Not comfortable handling customers who say they cannot wear a mask    | 1.84 (0.8)                | 23.3%                                 |
| 10. Fellow employees not following the rules                             | 1.81 (0.8)                | 22.4%                                 |
| 11. Increased workload (cleaning, etc.)                                 | 1.80 (0.8)                | 21.2%                                 |
| 12. Customers arguing with other customers on rules                      | 1.79 (0.8)                | 20.6%                                 |
| 13. Not knowing how to handle customers’ violating rules                 | 1.76 (0.7)                | 18.2%                                 |
| 14. Thinking I might lose my job                                         | 1.73 (0.8)                | 22.1%                                 |
| 15. Inadequate training to handle problem customers                      | 1.72 (0.7)                | 17.8%                                 |
| 16. Behaviors/lack of support from fellow employees on rules             | 1.70 (0.8)                | 18.0%                                 |
| 17. Not comfortable enforcing rules (e.g., asking customers to wear mask)| 1.70 (0.8)                | 17.6%                                 |
| 18. Management not enforcing COVID-19 rules                              | 1.68 (0.8)                | 19.6%                                 |
| 19. Management not backing me                                           | 1.60 (0.8)                | 18.3%                                 |
| 20. Management not providing proper protection                           | 1.60 (0.8)                | 18.3%                                 |
| 21. Lack of clarity on job responsibilities                             | 1.57 (0.7)                | 13.7%                                 |
| 22. Feeling company COVID-19 rules are dumb                              | 1.39 (0.6)                | 9.0%                                  |

\(^a\) Level of concern caused by these factors on 3-point scale: Anchored by 1- Causes me no concern to 3- Causes me great concern.

\(^b\) Reflects customer misbehavior.

4.2. Company expectations of FLE rule-enforcement

“A lady and her daughter walked into my store, which is a small business (making it extremely hard to social distance). I walked up to the daughter and said, “ma’am do you have a mask you can wear?” She did not answer. I turned to the mother and asked the same question. The mother cut me off and said, “so you don’t want our business?” I replied with “if you don’t have a mask, unfortunately we do not”. She then coughed on me and stormed out.” ~ Jalen, male, 21, retail.

The focus on safety and rule compliance may clearly negate the potential positive encounter dynamics and negatively affect the compliance request, and FLEs’ reactions to customers’ reactions, thus capturing emotional contagion. All respondents are given pseudonyms throughout.
emotional wellbeing of customers and employees, with the potential for emotional contagion as the customers’ negativity becomes part of the employees’ experience.

Responding to our question on company policies during COVID-19, participants indicated several mandatory personal safety policies relative to their customer interactions, as indicated in Table 3. Mandatory masks were almost universally required of employees (93%), with sanitizing gel within reach (86.1%), with many companies requiring customers to wear masks (77.8%) and expecting employees to wash their hands regularly (74.8%), while social distancing and limited capacity were enforced in over 2/3 of the companies for which respondents worked. While customers were expected to wear masks in most organizations, the lower use of proper signage relative to these requirements (about ½) indicates that many FLEs needed to enforce rules, which were not clearly displayed.

While the pandemic impacts all stakeholders, the overwhelming brunt of safety concerns and ‘policing’ errant customers falls on FLEs, who often put themselves at risk to do so. However, with only half of respondents indicating that they had received organizational training on handling non-complying customers, they are unlikely to be adequately trained to handle these situations well. Thus, the lack of clarity relative to enforcement and lack of training limits the efficacy of the policies in place. Additionally, while 79% of our FLE respondents were expected to remind customers of the policy, only 29.2% said they would refuse to serve customers not abiding by the rules, making the rules hard to enforce but easy to break, often resulting in an uncomfortable encounter (see Table 3).

### Table 3

| Expectations of employee rule-enforcement. |
|-------------------------------------------|
| **COVID-19 Policy** Enforcement Expectations |
| Mandatory employee masks                    | 93.0% |
| Sanitizing gel within reach                 | 86.1% |
| Mandatory customer masks                    | 77.8% |
| Hand washing requirements                   | 74.8% |
| Limited capacity in location                | 71.6% |
| Social distancing enforced                  | 91.1% |
| Health screening before each shift          | 52.1% |
| Adequate signage regarding policies         | 50.8% |
| Employer-provided PPE                       | 48.9% |
| Employer requires employees to supply PPE   | 18.1% |
| Mandatory COVID-19 testing                 | 10.6% |
| Use of an app to monitor your health        | 7.2%  |
| Other                                       | 3.1%  |

### Policy Violation Frequencies

- Never/almost never: 14.5%
- Less than once/month to 1–2 times/month: 16.7%
- Once/week to several times/week: 39.2%
- Daily to multiple times/day: 29.6%

### Policy Violation Expectations

- Remind customer of policy: 79.0%
- Offer customer mask: 56.4%
- Involve manager: 31.0%
- Refuse to serve customer: 29.2%
- Don’t confront customer: 8.0%
- Not sure/no clear guidance: 6.7%
- Ignore violation: 5.2%
- Ask health questions (if won’t wear mask): 4.1%
- Other: 3.9%

### Received Training on Customer Violations

- Yes: 48.4%
- No: 51.6%

### 4.3. Memorable FLE-Customer rule-enforcement interactions

#### 4.3.1. Types of customer rule violations

“A customer knocked all of the stuff off our desk and threatened us and called us names because we made her family wear their masks and then argued with security and a police officer until he had to escort her out and banned them from both buildings.” ~ Zoe, female, 21 years, food/beverage.

The incidents of customer misbehavior involving intimidation and abuse are quite significant, with a sizable number of customers often disregarding or disrespecting the rules (with over 2/3 of violations occurring weekly to daily, see Table 3). Turning to our first CIT question (see our earlier discussion on coding procedures followed), we asked FLEs to discuss a “memorable” customer interaction involving COVID-19 rules or restrictions. Results appear in Table 4, categorized by the basic nature of the violation, in the first section, with 69.2% of reported incidents involving mask violations.

“‘At my place of work, you are required to wear a mask. One day a lady came in without a mask and my manager said, ‘Ma am do you have a mask you could put on? You are required to have one for us to serve you.’ The lady responded with no, so my manager offered her a mask, and the lady became very angry and began a verbal argument with my manager. After a while she was asked to leave and later left a bad review on Yelp because of the incident.’” ~ Jackson, male, 18 years, food/beverage.

However, mask violations are not the only memorable rule-violation incidents reported, with distancing and capacity limits violations also mentioned in 17.3% of the incidents. For example, Claire (female, 22 years, retail) noted:

“Even though wearing a mask is enforced, I’ve had hundreds of interactions with customers who come up right to my face to ask a question and I would back up from them for space to remain the social distance, but they would even come in closer again after me backing up.”

Also, Sasha (female, 22 years old, food/beverage) recalled when indoor dining was closed, saying: “An adult man was so angry that he couldn’t sit inside to eat his ice cream, he literally threw his ice cream at the 18-year-old girl I was working with. That has happened more than once.”

The third and most problematic type of rule-enforcement incident involved direct COVID-19 exposure violations. While this type of

### Table 4

CIT: Customer Violations and Memorable Interactions—I combined emotions here.

| Memorable Customer Interactions relative to COVID-19 Rules |
|----------------------------------------------------------|
| Mask violations                                           | 69.2% |
| Distancing and capacity limits violations                 | 17.3% |
| Possible exposure to COVID violations                     | 3.8%  |
| Normal interaction (i.e., no violation)                   | 9.7%  |

| Customer Reactions to Interactions                       |
|----------------------------------------------------------|
| Mild negative reaction                                   | 36.3% |
| Escalated negative reaction                              | 18.9% |
| Positive reaction                                        | 20.6% |
| None given                                               | 24.1% |

| FLE Emotional Responses                                 |
|----------------------------------------------------------|
| Negative                                                 |
| Angry/frustrated (e.g., exhausted, irritated, annoyed)   | 38.4% |
| Awkward (e.g., uncomfortable)                            | 15.4% |
| Fear (e.g., scared, fearful, terrified)                  | 7.3%  |
| Surprised (e.g., confused, bewildered)                   | 5.6%  |
| Ambivalent (e.g., indifferent, just following protocol)  | 19.8% |
| Positive (e.g., fine, no problem)                        | 9.0%  |
| None given                                               | 4.4%  |
violation was rare, it represents the dangerous environment FLEs face relative to problematic customers.

“I had a customer cough in their hands before reaching out to grab a lunch from me. I was wearing a mask and gloves, but it still worried me that people could be spreading coronavirus to me even while wearing protection .... ” ~ Lily, female, 20 years, service.

4.3.2. Customer reactions to rule-enforcement attempts

The second CIT question asked FLEs how customers reacted in this interaction. Table 4 (second section) reveals that customers reacted to rule requests negatively in over 1/3 of the “memorable” incidents. FLEs reported that customers appeared annoyed or frustrated in 36.3% of the reported cases, with an additional 18.9% of the cases producing escalated negative reactions, such as cursing, screaming, or engaging in violence. While several FLE responses did not specifically address customer reactions (24.1%), only 20.6% of the responses involved positive, compliant customer reactions.

As Derek (male, 27 years, food/beverage) noted: “I had a customer throw a drink at me for asking them to wear a mask,” while Sasha (female, 22 years, food/beverage) asked a customer to put on a mask and the customer responded by “pull(ing) a mask out of his pocket that he had cut the mouth and nose area out of. I told him his mask can’t have holes and asked if he had another one, he could put on. He then asked me what my f***ing problem is.”

These issues are clearly illuminated by an incident reported by Toya (female, 21 years old, food/beverage): “There was a lady who refused to wear a mask while waiting and being seated. She practically yelled at us that COVID-19 was a hoax.” Michael (male, no age given, food/beverage) describes his work environment thusly: “some customers don’t wear the mask and argue that they are free to live and they are Americans and they don’t believe in the virus, etc.” Additionally, Miranda (female, 31, food/beverage) reported this incident:

“On a busy day a man came in and sat himself at a table without a mask on, when the server arrived they ask him if he had a mask and told him he needed one to dine. He immediately started yelling about how that was an infringement on his rights. Another table chimed in and also requested that he wear a mask because they had cancer, he proceeded to yell at the other customer also.”

4.3.3. Employee emotional outcomes

“To be honest, at first we all thought it was funny how ridiculous people were acting. However, after months of dealing with it, it’s not so funny anymore. It gets really exhausting going to work and having strangers yell at you all day about rules and mandates that are out of your control.” ~ Sasha, female, 22 years, food/beverage.

Thus, FLEs must co-exist with several stressful issues: problem customers, who often blatantly disobey rules; customers who frequently turn angry or violent when confronted about their violations, along with ambiguities and inconsistencies of the rules and policies; concerns as to their health and that of their families; and, often, threats to their very existence and employment. Thus, we turn to our third CIT question, in which FLEs are asked about their reactions to the customer responses, with 2/3 of the memorable customer interactions, involving negative emotions on the part of the FLEs, 38.4% of the interactions leaving them angry, exhausted, or frustrated, 15.4% awkward or uncomfortable, 3.7% surprised, and 6% fearful. Only 9.0% indicated positive feelings (i.e., finding the customer compliant or understanding as to their requests and sometimes empathetic to the situation), with another 19.8% claiming ambivalent feelings (such as not feeling much of anything or feeling ambivalent). See Table 4 (third section). Jessica (female, 34 years, retail) sums up these negative feelings after a negative customer mask enforcement interaction:

“Infuriated … this sort of attempt to intimidate someone with the threat of litigation over a store attempting to follow a public health mandate is so disheartening. Sadly, I’m sure he [gets] away with it most places.”

FLEs do not understand why customers will not follow what they perceive as simple requests with minimal inconvenience to the customer and providing greater safety for all:

“Annoyed. Maybe it’s personal belief, I don’t understand why people have such a hard time with masks. It is frustrating when employees are doing what we can to allow customers to shop, but they won’t even wear a mask for 30 min. We wear them for hours on end just fine, but customers want to give us an attitude when we are just doing our jobs.” ~ Nicki, female, 21 years, retail.

Additionally, the emotional distress experienced by FLEs due to feeling uncomfortable or awkward or even fearful in these encounters is relayed below:

“It definitely made me uncomfortable to the point where I did not want to work anymore events that required face-to-face customer contact.” ~ Grace, female, 23 years, service.

“There was a man who bought his ticket for a tour. When you buy a ticket, you automatically sign a waiver that says you will keep your mask on no matter what. Man refuses to wear mask, starts yelling at everyone who tells him to put him on. He eventually goes on tour. Coworker had to escort him out of the attraction because he kept refusing to wear a mask and started to threaten other families and guides who asked him to wear it. He proceeded to call my coworker racial slurs while being escorted off the property. Threatened to come back with guns. I felt very uncomfortable and scared. I was very worried he was going to follow through with his gun threat, but he thankfully didn’t come back.” ~ Kaitlyn, female, 20 years, service.

To assess the emotional impact that customers have on FLEs and to address our understanding of the emotional contagion from customer to FLE, we conducted a cross tabulation of FLEs reported customer reactions to the interactions versus their own reported emotions after the incidents. The results in Table 5 indicate that escalated customer reactions were associated with escalated negative FLE emotions ($\chi^2 = 99.104, p < 0.001$); that is, emotional contagion in action. Interestingly, even mild negative customer reactions resulted in a large share of FLE’s escalated negative emotions, while positive emotional contagion incidents were also present—with customers’ positive reactions largely producing neutral or positive employee reactions.

| Employee Responses          | Escalated negative | Mild negative | Positive |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|---------------|----------|
| Escalated negative (anger, fear) | 84 (74.3%) | 123 (55.9%) | 29 (23.4%) |
| Mild negative (awkward, surprised) | 18 (15.9%) | 53 (24.1%) | 20 (16.1%) |
| Neutral/Positive (ambivalent, positive) | 11 (9.7%) | 44 (20.0%) | 75 (60.5%) |

Note: Only respondents giving both a customer reaction and an employee emotional response included. N = 457.
5. Implications

5.1. Theoretical implications

In this study, first we addressed occupational stressors broadly and company expectations relative to rule-enforcement. Then we focused on one important stressor, memorable rule-enforcement interactions between FLEs and customers, across four industry categories. Via rule-enforcement interactions, we examined how customers’ negative resistance to rule adherence directly resulted in FLEs’ negative emotions, addressing the gap in emotional contagion theory around customer-to-employee negative emotional transmission. Our results reveal that FLEs experience significant occupational stress due to customer misbehaviors. Further, customers’ frequent negative reactions to FLEs’ rule-enforcement attempts often produce negative emotions in FLEs due to emotional contagion.

Clearly, this pandemic has increased FLE responsibilities, often emphasizing rule-enforcement over customer satisfaction. FLEs’ new responsibilities of rule-enforcement suggest a need to examine this issue’s effect on FLEs’ well-being and emotional states (Vorhees et al., 2020). Our study notes that significant occupational stressors are occurring to our critical workers due to safety and occupational concerns, as well as from the increasing volatility in employee-customer interactions. Exacerbating the rise in stress is the lack of consistent messaging across all levels of authority and the minimal safety-nets or other benefits provided to these FLEs. While this high level of occupational stress among FLEs is not surprising, it is surprising how few additional resources are available to FLEs in dealing with these issues. With FLEs as the first line of defense in dealing with customer misbehaviors, such as rule breaking and resulting negativity during enforcement attempts, more resources should be dedicated to training and rewarding FLEs for engaging in appropriate behaviors and for the enhanced responsibilities they face.

Rule-enforcement interactions clearly heighten negative service-scape experiences for both parties. Drawing from emotional contagion theory, our results indicate that negative reactions and emotions, particularly due to customer misbehavior, detrimentally affect FLEs. This confirms that 1. employee and customer emotions converge and 2. the dyadic nature of emotional contagion occurs as the negative, sometimes hostile, emotions of customers overwhelm employees, resulting in the mirroring of these negative emotions. Our study finds that customer misbehavior, enforcement of rules based on that behavior, and customers’ resultant negativity can flow directly to FLEs, thereby, addressing the gap in the literature around negative customer-to-employee emotional contagion.

5.2. Managerial implications

The pandemic has resulted in a rising number of problem customers willing to violate company rules, often producing a view of the FLE as the “enemy”. It is not always clear how to handle rule violations diplomatically, with minimal disruption to the customer, company, and employee. Further, enforcement confrontations are exacerbated by FLEs’ minimal training and/or management’s inconsistency in messaging and enforcement expectations. Organizations must continuously address these issues and recognize the critical value and roles of their often over-stressed FLEs.

While this study specifically focused on rule-enforcement interactions relative to the COVID-19 pandemic, the issues arising from customer misbehavior and their stressful impact on employees is not new nor is it going away. Political polarization, tribalism, customer power, the lack of adequate resources for employees, and inconsistent messaging across all levels of governmental and corporate governance and policies have severely impacted a critical group in our fragile servicescape infrastructure: FLEs. The low pay and lack of adequate benefits of many FLEs is a well-known problem, with the pandemic exacerbating and highlighting these problems, along with FLEs’ concerns for their own safety and that of their loved ones. Thus, organizations must strive to 1. Continually examine their environment, 2. Create and communicate consistent policies and enforcement mechanisms to FLEs, and 3. Give FLEs the support and resources necessary to navigate these often uncomfortable, and sometimes dangerous situations, which their valuable front-facing employees are likely to face for the foreseeable future.

6. Limitations and Future research

As with all exploratory research, our study has several limitations. For example, relying on the recall of “memorable events” always skews data in favor of the more memorable events, which may also be the more negative ones, making it necessary to capture the events in other ways, perhaps by observation. Secondly, this study examined only the immediate impact of these events on FLEs, with no examination of long-term consequences or outcomes of these situations on issues such as FLE well-being, job satisfaction, and tenure potential, leaving the door open for further exploration.

Thirdly, while this research looks at these rule-enforcement issues broadly across four industry categories, further within and across group examinations are needed. For example, are different types of employees (e.g., by industry or individual differences) better able to handle these additional roles and responsibilities than other employees? How do the effects of customer orientation or organizational identification play into FLEs’ behaviors relative to rule-enforcement interactions? Additionally, more organizational-level research is warranted to determine the most appropriate hiring, training, retention, and compensation strategies needed to diffuse the potential conflicts around rule-enforcement issues.

Finally, we encourage future research on these issues and hope this paper furthers those efforts. While the pandemic’s impact on the servicescape will change as situations “normalize,” the long-term consequences of customers’ increasing power status and FLE’s ongoing concerns relative to customer misbehaviors, such as their lack of rule adherence, should be considered. Companies must be prepared to adjust the servicescape and work situations for the future awaiting them and help FLEs perform to their highest potential.

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