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Safety or service? Effects of employee prosocial safety-rule-breaking on consumer satisfaction

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic makes restaurants implement new safety rules. However, because of consumers' and employees' resistance, employees may break these rules to improve the service experience. This paper examines how employees’ prosocial safety-rule-breakings (PSRB) affect consumer satisfaction. We propose that PSRB has two competing effects on consumers’ (including both requesters and bystanders) satisfaction via the mediating roles of service performance and perceived safety. We tested our proposed model in two experiments, adopting a 2 (Consumer role: Requesters vs. Bystanders) × 2 (PSRB level: Low vs. High) between-subject experimental design. Our findings suggest that PSRB has a strong negative relationship with bystanders’ service performance rating. PSRB harms both requesters’ and bystanders’ perceived safety. PSRB reduces consumer satisfaction, and the relationship is stronger for bystanders (vs. requesters). This study demonstrates the importance for hospitality organizations to ensure safety rule compliance during and after the pandemic.

1. Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the restaurant industry has had a hard-hit (e.g., Dube et al., 2021; Song et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2020). Even though restaurants are allowed to reopen, there are new operational restrictions (Kim et al., 2021). Restaurants have been making operation changes, including adding contactless takeout and individual dining tents (Associated Press, 2020), using single-use disposable menus, silverware sealed pouches, and contactless payment (Stephens, 2020), and adding social-distance floor markings (Stankiewicz, 2020). There are new safety guidelines, rules, and standard operating procedures to enhance sanitary measures and safety protocols. Examples of new safety rules include requiring servers to wear gloves and face masks (Kong et al., 2021); adding social distance between restaurant tables (Hall, 2020); reducing occupancy in dining areas (Stephens, 2020); and reducing dine-in hours (Stankiewicz, 2020).

Unfortunately, these new safety rules lack legitimacy (Berkowitz, 2020). Indeed, the CDC guideline only specifies “restaurants and bars can determine, in collaboration with state, local, territorial, or tribal health officials, whether and how to implement these considerations, making adjustments to meet the needs and circumstances of the local community” (CDC, 2021). State guidelines also vary significantly (Restaurant Law Center, 2020). While restaurants employees and patrons are learning which rules are essential to safety and operation efficiency, there is no consensus on whether it is feasible to implement these safety rules and strive for a financial balance (McSweeney and Lyons, 2020). Some consumers consider these safety rules an essential prerequisite for patronage restaurant choice, influencing their intention to dine out (Wang et al., 2021; Wei et al., 2021). Other consumers have high psychological reactance to these safety rules (Kang et al., 2021).

Because of the lack of familiarity and legitimacy of these new rules, consumers may request employees to violate safety rules to enhance their experience. With the industry-wide assumption of “consumers always right” (e.g., Choi et al., 2014; Lee and Ok, 2014), it is difficult to get compliance (Hu et al., 2021a). Before the pandemic, hospitality employees are always asked to improvise and think out of the box during service encounters (Lai et al., 2014; Secchi et al., 2019). Accordingly, Ghosh and Shum (2019) estimated that 60% of hospitality employees broke an organizational rule, policy, or standard operational procedure, and 54% of the rule-breakings have prosocial motives. Because the safety rules lack legitimacy (Berkowitz, 2020), employees are even more likely to break these new safety rules with a prosocial motive to help consumers. For simplicity, we titled prosocial safety-rule-breakings as PSRB. Examples of PSRB includes violation of no-dine-in rules by

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allowing consumers to sit and drink at the bar area while waiting for their food (BarredInDC, 2020), violation of mask-mandate by allowing consumers not to wear masks (BarredInDC, 2020), and violation of the curfew by allowing consumers to stayed in restaurants past closing time (Danna, 2020). Although PSRB may improve the service experience of the requesters (i.e., consumers requesting the rule-breakings), it breaks safety rules, which are designed to protect the health and safety of consumers and employees as well as to enhance the restaurant’s operational efficiency (CDC, 2020; Selvam, 2020). With COVID-19 making long-lasting impacts on consumer behaviors (Berry et al., 2020), it is crucial to know how to satisfy consumers in the post-COVID-19-era as restaurants reopen. Understanding how consumers react to PSRB can help restaurants and employees choose the right balance between the traditional norm of “service-first” and the new norm of “safety-first”.

Moreover, unlike other rules that are more personal (such as giving a monetary rebate and providing extra services, Ghosh and Shum, 2019), violation of these safety rules can easily be observed by other consumers (i.e., bystanders). Therefore, both requesters’ and bystanders’ safety and service experience can be affected (Tuzovic et al., 2021). When the employee breaks the safety rules for the requester, the requester gains higher transactional values and has an improved service experience. However, the bystander does not gain any additional service. Employee’s PSRB compromises bystanders’ safety and reduces bystanders’ values from the service encounter. In short, the interactional process between employees and consumers destroys the well-being and values of others. Such value co-destruction can be especially pronounced during the pandemic as consumers are increasingly concerned about their health. Indeed, a recent survey showed that people are anxious about returning to pre-COVID gatherings (O’Neill, 2021). Based on practice theory (Bourdieu, 2007; Giddens, 1979; Schatzki, 1997), this study aims to understand how PSRB affects both requesters’ and bystanders’ satisfaction via the mediating roles of perceived safety and service performance.

Considering the prosocial and rule-breaking nature of PSRB, we suggest that PSRB has two competing effects on requesters’ and bystanders’ satisfaction across two experiments. On the one hand, PSRB can enhance customer satisfaction by improving service performance – defined as the consumer’s assessment of employees’ ability to deliver high-quality service (Liao and Chuang, 2004). On the other hand, PSRB can hurt customer satisfaction by impairing perceived safety – defined as the perceived ability of the restaurant to protect consumers from potential injury or death. Additionally, we propose that requesters and bystanders use different practices to evaluate service. The safety-imparing effect of PSRB is stronger for bystanders (vs. requesters), and the service-enhancing effect of PSRB is stronger weaker for bystanders. In short, we propose that employee PSRB enhances requesters’ satisfaction at the cost of lowering bystanders’ satisfaction. Fig. 1 summarizes the theoretical model.

2. Literature review and hypotheses

2.1. Practice theory and co-destruction

Practice theory suggests that practices are acceptable usages of actions or words situated in specific places and times (Gherardi, 2012; Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 1997). Practice theory focuses on what actors do, how institutional structures manifest in everyday actions, and how actors use their embodied knowledge in dynamic acts of meaning-making to cope with everyday situations and generate new practices (Korica et al., 2017). Therefore, practice theory suggests that human interactions result in increased/decreased transactional values. Hospitality researchers have used practice theory to understand the sexual intimacy of male hotel workers and female foreign tourists in Turkey (Aslan, 2016); to facilitate a deeper understanding of professionalism among Swedish restaurant employees (Wellton et al., 2018); and to explore food production failures in Irish restaurant kitchens (Mac Con Iomaire et al., 2020).

Practices can simultaneously limit and enable interactions between employees and consumers (Echeverri & Skålén, 2011; Plé & Cáceres, 2010). Echeverri and Skålén (2011) argue that value is co-created when interacting parties’ practices are congruent. The gain of transactional values improves well-being and satisfaction for the employees and the consumers. On the other hand, value co-destruction occurs when the employees and consumers have incongruent practices, which results in one of them experiencing a decline of well-being, experiences frustration, or lost resources during interactions (Prior and Marcos-Cuevas, 2016). Co-destruction can be triggered by many factors, including the absence of information from both customer and service provider, insufficient level of trust between the customer and service provider, customer misbehaviors, providers’ and customer’s inability to change (Järvi et al., 2018).

Based on practice theory, this paper aims to investigate the effect of PSRB on customer satisfaction through the phenomenon of value co-creation and co-destruction. Practice theory suggests that multiple practices may co-exist in times of change (Korica et al., 2017). Specifically, the severity of the pandemic has gotten most people accustomed to certain practices regarding their safety, giving rise to the “safety-first” practice (Berry et al., 2020). Simultaneously, “service-first” is an enduring practice in the hospitality industry, as evidenced by the saying “customers are always right” (Lee and Ok, 2014). Employees’ customer-oriented mindset establishes PSRB as their frequent practice (Ghosh and Shum, 2019). Amid the pandemic, customers may request

Fig. 1. Theoretical model.
employees to break safety rules. Due to the fast-shifting nature of these rules coupled with employees’ professional conditioning, they may honor the request and engage in PSRB. For the requesters, it will be a congruence of practices between them and employees, resulting in value co-creation. However, it will be different for bystanders. These customers may practice diligently following the safety rules. There will be a significant incongruency of practices between them and the employees. Consequently, they may experience co-destruction, resulting in lowered satisfaction.

### 2.2. Prosocial Safety Rule-breaking to Help Consumers (PSRB)

COVID-19 pandemic has shaken the restaurant industry with new norms and practices (Bucak and Yiğit, 2021). Although it was challenging to get consumers to comply with rules and regulations before the pandemic (Fong et al., 2017; Reynolds and Harris, 2006), the changing safety rules in different parts of the country (CDC, 2020) further complicates rule compliance. As a result, employees and consumers do not understand or comply with these safety rules (Hu et al., 2021a; Kang et al., 2021). There is a high variance in consumers’ practices. Some consumers increasingly consider safety a vital practice (Tuzovic et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021). However, some consumers resist the new safety measures (e.g., Kang et al., 2021) and focus on their hospitality experience and the services they receive during the pandemic (Hu et al., 2021b). In short, consumers use multiple practices to evaluate the appropriateness of PSRB.

Moreover, practices persist over time (Gherardi, 2012). As a result, employees may not change their “service-first” practice during the pandemic. Indeed, hospitality employees are constantly being asked to improvise to address consumers’ requests during service encounters (Secchi et al., 2019). With a “consumer always right” mindset, employees are accustomed to accommodating consumers’ requests, even if such requests require them to violate organizational rules (Fong et al., 2017). Their consumer-oriented mindset urges them to break any minor rule in the consumer’s interest during normal times, and thus engaging in PSRB is a common practice (Ghosh and Shum, 2019). A recent report indicates that employees are more flexible and supportive of consumers’ dining preferences during the COVID-19 pandemic (Klein, 2020).

Therefore, hospitality employees may not change their practices. They engage in PSRB when consumers ask them to break COVID-19 related safety rules. Depending on the congruent of consumers’ practices (i.e., whether consumers values service vs. safety), PSRB can co-create values for some consumers while co-destruct values for other consumers.

### 2.3. The positive effect of PSRB on service performance

Consumers can evaluate employees’ PSRB based on its service-enhancing effects. Practice theory suggests a continuity of practices because practices are held together by routines (Gram-Hansen, 2011; Schatzki, 1997). For example, satisfying customers’ unique needs and performing a high level of service are common practices for hospitality organizations (Lai et al., 2014). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, it was a common practice for consumers to request employees to defy minor organizational rules to enhance the service encounter. Such interactions allow service personalization (Secchi et al., 2019), creating values for the consumers (Boukis and Yalkin, 2019), and allowing employees to build a friendship with consumers (Jung and Yoo, 2019). Indeed, requesters devalue employees’ warmth and competencies when employees enforce rules on them (Habel et al., 2017). Even with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, consumers continue to value service-related attributes (Hu et al., 2021b). Subsequently, when employees engage in PSRB and address consumers’ requests, consumers benefit from employees’ prosocial service behaviors and become more satisfied with the service organization (Brief and Motowidlo, 1986). Previous literature establishes that employees’ prosocial service behaviors positively affect consumers’ service evaluation (Bienstock et al., 2003; Bienstock and DeMoranville, 2006). Accordingly, requesters are more likely to evaluate employees as having a high level of service performance when they engage in PSRB.

However, PSRB only addresses the needs of the requester. Since these rule-breakings usually occur in a public setting, they are easily observable by other consumers (Curtis et al., 2013). For these bystanders, subjective evaluation of requesters’ behaviors is critical to forming a foundation for their service performance evaluations (Wu, 2007). Employee PSRB provides social proof of personalized service, which raises bystanders’ service expectations. However, those expectations are not met as the PSRB was not directed to them. When bystanders believe that requesters act socially inappropriately, it harms their quality perceptions of the service (Reynolds and Harris, 2006; Sengupta and Pillai, 2017). They perceive employees who do not enforce rules as incompetent (Habel et al., 2017). In short, PSRB lowers bystanders’ service performance evaluation.

### 2.4. The negative effect of PSRB on perceived safety

Another practice that can be used to evaluate restaurant service encounters is safety (Knight et al., 2007). The COVID-19 pandemic has further amplified these safety needs (e.g., Hu et al., 2021; Tuzovic et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021). However, COVID-19 related safety rules vary with time, with cities, and with states within the US, without a consistent pattern (Gelinas, 2020). It has left the common people, including diners, restaurant managers, and restaurant employees, confused (Gelinas, 2020). Because these new rules change consumers’ behavioral practices, it threatens their freedom (Akhtar et al., 2020; Kang et al., 2021). Misleading information on social media and mistrust in government further increase doubt and reduce compliance with safety rules (Clark et al., 2020; Faour-Klingbeil et al., 2021). For example, consumers are half-believe-half-doubt facemasks’ effectiveness in protecting them from the COVID-19 virus (Kong et al., 2021). Similarly, they are less willing to pay for restaurants that maintain a strict mask policy or restaurants with rules limiting dining time (Rossetti et al., 2021). Because requesters, who ask for the safety rules to be broken for them, question the effect of safety rules on their safety, employee PSRB can be unrelated to their safety perception.

Given health risks are high during a pandemic, restaurant consumers seek the well-being of themselves and others (Tuzovic et al., 2021). Other consumers (bystanders) may feel vulnerable to the focal consumer’s (requester’s) non-compliance. Fearful consumers engage in personal safety and preventive behaviors and pay attention to the restaurants’ safety and preventive measures (Sung et al., 2021). Even in normal times, bystanders rate employees who do not enforce rules for requesters as incompetent (Habel et al., 2017). Since consumers are concerned about safety precautions (Gursoy et al., 2021), bystanders can have an even stronger reaction to employees’ violation of safety rules during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, consumers can feel unpleasant, unsafe, disgusted, angry, and fear when other consumers do not wear facemasks (Kong et al., 2021). Violation of safety rules designed to ensure social distancing may result in crowding, impacting their perception of whether it is safe to dine in (Taylor Jr., 2020; Wang et al., 2021). Accordingly, witnessing employee PSRB can make bystanders feel that their health safety and others present in the restaurant premises are at risk. PSRB undermines their safety perception.

### H1. : Consumer role moderates the relationship between employee PSRB and service performance such that (a) the relationship is positive for requesters and (b) the relationship is negative for bystanders.

### H2. : Consumer role moderates the relationship between employee PSRB and perceived safety such that the negative relationship is stronger for bystanders than for requesters.
2.5. The net effect on satisfaction

Consumers are satisfied when their perception of service performance matches their expectations (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Employee service performance is defined as employees’ ability to serve and help customers (Liao and Chuang, 2004). Service performance standards dictate how customers should be treated and the best practices to be observed (Liao and Chuang, 2004). In the era of the COVID-19 pandemic, service and safety are the top attributes to evaluate service encounters (Hu et al., 2021b). Consumers expect that the employee can provide high-quality service while maintaining their safety. A higher perceived service performance suggests that consumers receive more value from the service encounter, increasing satisfaction (Oh, 1999; Ryu et al., 2012). Similarly, consumers expect their dining experience to be safe (Knight et al., 2007). A low perceived safety indicates that consumers’ health can be jeopardized during the service encounter, reducing the value of the service. Thus,

**H3**: (a) Service performance and (b) Perceived safety are positively related to customer satisfaction.

Value co-creation is a process through which the interactions between consumers and employees create values through the service encounter (Grönroos, 2012). In the service context, consumers play an active role in engaging in value-creating activities that customize their service experience (Xie et al., 2008). Consumers are more satisfied with the organization when they participate in the co-creation of their service experience (Grissmann and Stokburger-Sauer, 2012) and when employees engage in prosocial behaviors (Brief and Motowidlo, 1986). Consumers expect employees to make service exceptions when they ask employees for rule-breakings (Habel et al., 2017). By providing requesters the service they desire, PSRB improves service performance and creates additional value. Moreover, these consumers can have a high level of reactance and can be unsure about the effectiveness of safety rules (Kang et al., 2021; Kong et al., 2021). Thus, when employees fulfill their requests and engage in PSRB, it may not threaten their perceived safety. Together, the positive service-enhancing effect and the negative safety-threatening can cancel out each other. Although PSRB breaks the rules designed to keep employees and consumers safe, the requesters are not dissatisfied with the service encounter when employees engage in PSRB.

Previous literature suggests that value co-destruction happens when consumers misbehave in service settings (Kashif and Zarkada, 2015). Misdemeanors of other consumers adversely impact the bystanders, leading to value destruction (Reynolds and Harris, 2006; Plé and Caceres, 2010). Accordingly, bystanders expect employees to enforce safety rules (Habel et al., 2017). Therefore, when employees engage in PSRB to address the requesters’ needs, they raise bystanders’ service expectations without fulfilling those raised expectations. Since restaurants usually have limited resources (e.g., number of tables, workforce), some PSRB, such as allowing consumers to dine over their dining time limits, can come at the cost of bystanders’ perception of service performance. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has made consumers more concerned about safety rules (Wei et al., 2021). Other PSRB, such as violation of face mask rules (Kong et al., 2021) or social distancing rules (Wang et al., 2021), can increase the risk of spreading the COVID-19 virus and make bystanders uncomfortable. Thus, bystanders’ perceived safety is compromised when employees engage in PSRB. As a result, bystanders’ service-value and safety-value are co-destroyed by the interaction between employees and requesters, lowering their satisfaction.

**H4**: Consumer role moderates the negative indirect relationship between PSRB on customer satisfaction via (a) service performance and (b) perceived safety such that the indirect relationship is stronger for bystanders than for requesters.

3. Method overview

To avoid common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003), we collected two 2 (Consumer role: Requesters vs. Bystanders) by 2 (PSRB level: Low vs. High) between-subject experiments to test the hypotheses. In both studies, we randomly assigned participants to one of four conditions: (1) either a requester or a bystander, and (2) whether the employee in the scenario engaged or not engaged in PSRB. It allows us to manipulate the independent variables, avoid self-report of such variables, and ensure that the data source of independent variables is different from the measure of mediators and dependent variables (Podsakoff et al., 2003). After reading the scenario, participants rated service performance, perceived safety, and customer satisfaction.

The two studies differ in the safety rule implemented in the scenario. During the COVID-19 pandemic, restaurants have implemented safety rules, such as mask mandate and social distancing rules to ensure the safety of the employees and patrons. Study 1 focuses on one of these social-distancing rules and tests the effect of PSRB that breaks a maximum indoor capacity rule intended to keep employees’ and patrons’ safe. In addition to safety rules, restaurants have been adding new operational rules, such as maximum dine-in duration rules (Selvam, 2020). However, these rules are only indirectly related to safety. Instead, they are operational adjustments to ensure the successful implementation of safety rules while maintaining financial balance and operational efficiency. Study 2 focuses on these operational efficiency rules and investigates the effect of PSRB that breaks a dine-in time rule. The two rules cover different parts of the dine-in experience. While the indoor capacity rules affect consumers when they check-in to the tables, the dine-in time rules affect consumers in the middle of the service consumptions (i.e., when they are dining-in).

Both studies collect data using an online consumer panel recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). With psychometric properties similar to other data sources with large and diverse participant pools (Aguiinis et al., 2021; Buhrmester et al., 2018), MTurk is commonly used to conduct experiments related to consumers and employees. We further screened participants to ensure the relevancy and reliability of the sample. The screening criteria include: (1) an approval rate of 90% or higher in previous assignments, (2) in the United States, (3) above 18 years old, and (3) have dined in a casual dining restaurant at least once within the past three months. To ensure participants’ attentiveness, participants had to pass three attention checks questions. Data was collected during phase II of the COVID-19 pandemic (July 2020). There were around eight million cases of infection and approximately 450,000 deaths reported globally (USFDA, 2020). At this stage, the stay-at-home order was relaxed in many states. Although dine-ins were allowed in restaurants, restaurants are limited by social distancing rules and have reduced capacity. To minimize non-response bias, we increased participants’ willingness to participate in the experiments by (1) keeping the study short, (2) providing incentives for participation, (3) guaranteeing anonymous nature of participation, and (4) asking questions related to a scenario-experiment, instead of sensitive personal experiences.

4. Study 1

4.1. Sampling and designs

Study 1 examines the proposed hypotheses with a total of 429 consumers (49% male; the average age of 37.31; 77% have an education of college degree or above; 57% with a household income of $50,000 or above). Table 1 shows the sample characteristics. Participants were told to imagine themselves checking in at a local diner to dine in. They approached the server and read a sign stating that the restaurant was operating on reservation-only. The sign also stated walk-in patrons must wait outside of the restaurant. In the requester condition, they did not have a reservation and requested an exception to wait inside the restaurant for a table. In the bystander condition, they made the
reservation and overheard another consumer asking for an exception to the server’s response. In low PSRB conditions, the server enforced the rule and asked the consumers to wait in the car. In the high PSRB condition, the hostess broke the rules and allowed the consumers to wait in the restaurant.

After reading the scenario, participants indicated the level of PSRB the server exhibited with Dahling et al.’s (2012) scale (α = 0.91). Service performance was measured with Cho et al.’s (2016) scale (α = 0.84). Knight et al.’s (2007) scale was used to measure perceived safety (α = 0.95). Satisfaction was measured with Lin and Mattila’s (2010) scale (r = 0.94, see Appendix A for survey items). Finally, participants provided demographic information.

Although the use of experimental design minimizes common method bias concerns in the relationship between independent variables and mediators, the mediators (service performance and perceived safety) and dependent variable (satisfaction) were obtained from the same sources. We applied Harman’s One-factor Test to check the extent of common method bias in the relationship between mediators and dependent variables. Results showed that the one-factor common-method model (χ² [df = 121] = 1729.04) yields a worst fit than the three-factor model (χ² [df = 124] = 1071.79). Thus, we concluded that common method bias is not a threat to this model validity.

4.2. Results

4.2.1. Manipulation checks

Participants spent an average of 11.59 min on the experiment. A manipulation check shows that participants in the low PSRB condition rated the servers as engaging in a lower level of PSRB (M = 2.28) than those in the high PSRB conditions (M = 3.60), t(427) = 14.09, p < .01. All participants in the requester and bystander conditions were able to correctly identify their role as “a consumer who is making a request” and “a restaurant manager who observes consumers making a request” respectively.

4.2.2. Effects on service performance

ANOVA results support the interactive effect of PSRB and consumer role on service performance (F = 30.59, p < .01). Contrary to the prediction of H1a, requesters’ ratings of service performance in high PSRB conditions (M = 4.03) and low PSRB conditions are not significantly different (M = 3.92, t = 1.18, ns). However, bystanders’ ratings of service performance are higher when they are in low PSRB conditions (M = 4.03) than in high PSRB conditions (M = 3.31, t = –6.14, p < .01). Thus, H1b is supported.

4.2.3. Effects on perceived safety

ANOVA results show a significant PSRB – consumer role interactions on perceived safety (F = 8.01, p < .01). All participants have lower perceived safety when employees engage in PSRB (M low PSRB = 4.41; M high PSRB = 2.93). Supporting H2, the negative relationship is stronger for bystanders (M low PSRB = 4.51; M high PSRB = 2.74, t = 12.14, p < .01) than requesters (M low PSRB = 4.32; M high PSRB = 3.11, t = –9.02, p < .01).

4.2.4. Overall effects on customer satisfaction

We conducted moderated mediation analysis using the bootstrapping approach with Hayes’ PROCESS macro. It tests the interactive effect of PSRB condition (0 = low; 1 = high) and consumer role condition (0 = bystanders; 1 = requesters) on customer satisfaction via service performance and perceived safety, while controlling for age and gender. Table 2 shows that both service performance (B = 0.46, p < .001) and perceived safety (B = 0.52, p < .001) are related to customer satisfaction. Thus, Hypothesis 3 is supported.

Table 1 Sample characteristics.

| Characteristics          | Study 1     | Study 2     |
|--------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Age                      | 18–25       | 26–35       |
|                          | 70          | 16%         |
|                          | 379         | 63%         |
|                          | 36%         | 66%         |
|                          | 34%         | 64%         |
|                          | 37%         | 63%         |
|                          | 38%         | 62%         |
|                          | 39%         | 61%         |
|                          | 40%         | 61%         |
|                          | 41%         | 60%         |
|                          | 42%         | 59%         |
|                          | 43%         | 58%         |
|                          | 44%         | 57%         |
|                          | 45%         | 56%         |
|                          | 46%         | 55%         |
|                          | 47%         | 54%         |
|                          | 48%         | 53%         |
|                          | 49%         | 52%         |
|                          | 50%         | 51%         |
|                          | 51%         | 50%         |
|                          | 52%         | 49%         |
|                          | 53%         | 48%         |
|                          | 54%         | 47%         |
|                          | 55%         | 46%         |
|                          | 56%         | 45%         |
|                          | 57%         | 44%         |
|                          | 58%         | 43%         |
|                          | 59%         | 42%         |
|                          | 60%         | 41%         |
|                          | 61%         | 40%         |
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|                          | 66%         | 35%         |
|                          | 67%         | 34%         |
|                          | 68%         | 33%         |
|                          | 69%         | 32%         |
|                          | 70%         | 31%         |
|                          | 71%         | 30%         |
|                          | 72%         | 29%         |
|                          | 73%         | 28%         |
|                          | 74%         | 27%         |
|                          | 75%         | 26%         |
|                          | 76%         | 25%         |
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|                          | 79%         | 22%         |
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|                          | 86%         | 15%         |
|                          | 87%         | 14%         |
|                          | 88%         | 13%         |
|                          | 89%         | 12%         |
|                          | 90%         | 11%         |
|                          | 91%         | 10%         |
|                          | 92%         | 9%          |
|                          | 93%         | 8%          |
|                          | 94%         | 7%          |
|                          | 95%         | 6%          |
|                          | 96%         | 5%          |
|                          | 97%         | 4%          |
|                          | 98%         | 3%          |
|                          | 99%         | 2%          |
|                          | 100%        | 1%          |

4.2.5. Overall effects on customer satisfaction

We conducted moderated mediation analysis using the bootstrapping approach with Hayes’ PROCESS macro. It tests the interactive effect of PSRB condition (0 = low; 1 = high) and consumer role condition (0 = bystanders; 1 = requesters) on customer satisfaction via service performance and perceived safety, while controlling for age and gender. Table 2 shows that both service performance (B = 0.46, p < .001) and perceived safety (B = 0.52, p < .001) are related to customer satisfaction. Thus, Hypothesis 3 is supported.

Table 2 Study 1 moderated mediation analysis.

| Independent/ Dependent variables | Service performance | Perceived safety | Satisfaction |
|----------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------|--------------|
| Constant                         | 3.94 **             | 4.33 **         | 0.14         |
| Age                              | 0.00                | 0.00            | 0.00         |
| Gender                           | 0.02                | 0.11            | 0.00         |
| PSRB                             | -0.72 **            | -1.78 **        | 0.12         |
| Consumer role                    | -0.10               | -0.19           | 0.46 **      |
| Interaction                      | 0.83 **             | 0.57 **         | 0.73         |
| Perceived safety                 | 0.46 **             | 0.52 **         | 0.73         |
| R²                               | 0.13                | 0.36            | 0.23         |
| F                                | 13.03 **            | 47.31 **        | 232.31 **    |

N = 429, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.
5. Study 2

5.1. Method

A total of 422 consumers (52% male; the average age of 36.35; 78% having college degree or above; 64% with a household income of $50,000 or above) participated in Study 2. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions. They were told that a sign showed that the restaurant was restricting the turnaround time at each table to 90 minutes. In the requester condition, participants had just finished the main course and would like to order dessert. After the server informed them of the dine-in time rule, they asked the server for another 30 minutes dine-in time. In the bystander condition, participants were waiting for a table. They overheard another consumer requesting to be seated for another 30 minutes for dessert. In the low PSRB condition, the server enforced the rules and asked consumers to check out in 5 minutes. In the high PSRB condition, the server broke the rules and allowed consumers to sit for another 30 minutes.

Participants spent an average of 11.20 min on this experiment. They rated PSRB (α = 0.91), service performance (α = 0.88), perceived safety (α = 0.94), and customer satisfaction (α = 0.94) using the same measures as Study 1. Manipulation check indicates that PSRB conditions are related to the perceived level of PSRB (Mlow PSRB = 2.16, Mhigh PSRB = 3.51, t = 13.39, df = 420, p < .01). As in Study 1, we conducted the Harman’s One-factor Test. The one-factor common-method model (χ²(df = 1121) = 1953.47) yields a worst fit than the three-factor model (χ²(df = 1124) = 1126.05), indicating that common method bias is not a concern for this study.

5.2. Results

5.2.1. Effects on service performance

Although PSRB manipulated in Study 2 involves a rule indirectly related to safety, its results are similar to Study 1. PSRB and consumer role conditions interactively predicts service performance (F = 84.04, p < .01). For requesters, PSRB is not related to service performance (Mlow PSRB = 4.13, Mhigh PSRB = 4.06, t = 0.83, ns). For bystanders, PSRB is negatively related to service performance (Mlow PSRB = 4.17, Mhigh PSRB = 2.77, t = 11.46, p < .01). Thus, H1b, but not H1a, is supported.

5.2.2. Effects on perceived safety

ANOVA results also provide support to the interactive effect of PSRB and consumer roles on perceived safety (F = 8.79, p < .01). Although both requesters (Mlow PSRB = 4.41, Mhigh PSRB = 3.39, t = 7.92, p < .01) and bystanders (Mlow PSRB = 4.49, Mhigh PSRB = 2.93, t = 12.12, p < .01) perceive high levels of safety when PSRB is low (vs. high), the effect is stronger for bystanders (vs. requesters). Thus, H2 is supported.

5.2.3. Overall effects on customer satisfaction

Table 3 presents the results. Both service performance (B = 0.51, 95% CI = 0.44 to 0.59) and perceived safety (B = 0.44, 95% CI = 0.37 to 0.51) are positively related to satisfaction. H3 is supported. Moderated mediation analysis shows that consumer roles moderate the indirect relationship between PSRB and satisfaction via service performance (index = 0.69, 95% CI = 0.50 to 0.88) and via (index = 0.24, 95% CI = 0.09 to 0.42). Requesters’ negative indirect effect of PSRB on satisfaction (total indirect effect = −0.49, 95% CI = −0.70 to −0.29) is weaker than that of bystanders (total indirect effect = −1.31, 95% CI = −1.56, −1.05). This is because requesters’ indirect effect via service performance (−0.03, 95% CI = −0.10 to 0.05) and perceived safety (−0.46, 95% CI = −0.64 to −0.30) are weaker than bystanders’ indirect effect via service performance (−0.65, 95% CI = −0.85 to −0.46) and perceived safety (−0.66, 95% CI = −0.89 to −0.44). Overall, the results provide support to H4. As in Study 1, we conducted a supplementary SEM analysis and found that the results were comparable. The model fits the data well (χ²(df = 99) = 342.60, p < .01; RMSEA = 0.08, CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.94) and are available upon request.

6. Discussion

This study sheds some light on the role of prosocial safety rule breakings (PSRB) in influencing consumers’ rating of service performance, perceived safety, and customer satisfaction. Employee PSRB lowers bystanders’ (i.e., other consumers who observe the rule-breaking) service performance rating. Contrary to prediction, PSRB does not positively affect requesters’ (i.e., consumers who request the rules to be broken for them) service performance rating. One possible explanation is that the participants may disapprove of the safety-rule-breaking even when assigned to the requester’s role. Indeed, one of the participants emailed the researchers and justified her choice as follows: “The waitress provided me with what I asked in the study scenario, but I actually disapprove of her going against the rules. I wouldn’t promote her or rely on her if she cannot follow rules for everyone’s health. As I got to sit there longer, there were people waiting. It was inappropriate of her to take the request”. Moreover, service performance and perceived safety mediate the relationship between PSRB and customer satisfaction. In essence, this research suggests that PSRB can be a double-edge sword with unintended consequences: employees engaging in PSRB with an intent to create values for consumers may come with a cost of destroying value for both requesters and bystanders.

6.1. Research implications

This study makes three major theoretical contributions. First, this study extends the recent conversation related to reactance and compliance with safety rules during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Hu et al., 2021a; Kang et al., 2021; Tuzovic et al., 2021) by showing how consumers react to employee’s safety-rule breakings. Extending other studies on consumers’ reactions to hospitality organizations’ safety compliance (e.g., Tuzovic et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021), this study suggests that safety rule-breakings hurt satisfaction even if consumers request rules to be broken for them. Similar to Tuzovic et al. (2021), our study suggests that consumers evaluate their well-being collectively. Even though employees’ PSRB can be directed towards requesters, other consumers (i.e., bystanders) can also be negatively impacted. Since both requesters and bystanders found PSRB can harm their perceived safety, PSRB dissatisfies both types of consumers. These findings have important managerial implications for training in the post-pandemic era.

Second, this study adds to practice theory (Gherardi, 2012; Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 1997) and demonstrates that acceptable norms and practices change over time. Consistent with Hu et al. (2021b) text-mining analysis of hotels’ online reviews, we showed that service performance and perceived safety are equally impactful on customer satisfaction in restaurant settings. Our results suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic has given rise to multiple practices. While the old hospitality norms are service-first and suggest that employees should go out of their
ways to address consumers’ needs (Lashley, 1995), our study echoes recent studies on COVID-19 on consumers’ attitudes (e.g., Tuzovic et al., 2021; Rossetti et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021) – consumers use a “safety-first” practice to evaluate their hospitality experiences. Our results suggest employees need to adapt their mindset and cannot blindly address consumers’ needs.

This study adds to recent hospitality research on co-creation (e.g., Kallmuenzer et al., 2020; Roy et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2019). Instead of focusing on the positive effect of consumer participation in the creation of values (Xie et al., 2008), we take a more comprehensive approach and demonstrate that such participation in the (in form of requesting rules to be broken for them) can come at the cost of destroying values for other consumers. Co-destruction literature suggests that the absence of information of consumers and service providers and consumers’ misbehaviors can destroy values (Jarvi et al., 2018). Supporting these theoretical discussions in the co-destruction literature, our results provide empirical support that some consumers’ (i.e., requesters’) misbehaviors (in this case, requesting rules to be broken for them) not only fail to create values for these consumers but also reduce values for other consumers (i.e., bystanders). This is in line with Jarvi et al. (2018) discussion that value co-destruction can also be attributed to the existence of multiple practices and the absence of clear expectations. The coexistence of consumers with different practices (i.e., service vs. safety) creates a problem for service providers because bystanders may not share the same service expectations as requesters. The findings are comparable with research on jaw consumers’ behaviors in that other consumers expect employees to uphold rules, even if it means correcting the wrongdoers (Habel et al., 2017). As there are more bystanders than requesters in a service encounter, employees need to consider how their service behaviors impact all consumers.

Third, this study adds to the increasing number of studies discussing the effect of prosocial rule-breaking in hospitality and general management literature (Bryant et al., 2010; Dahling et al., 2012; Liu and Li, 2015; Martin et al., 2013; Morrison, 2006; Shum et al., 2019). Previous prosocial rule-breaking studies focus primarily on employee outcomes during a non-pandemic time. Our study shifts the research focus from employees to consumers and seeks to answer how consumers react to PSRB during a pandemic. Consistent with prior research findings on the negative effect of prosocial rule-breaking on employees’ and supervisor’s rating of service and task performance (e.g., Dahling et al., 2012; Shum et al., 2019), this study demonstrates that a noble motive does not compensate for the rule-breaking nature of prosocial rule-breakings.

This study shows that prosocial safety rule breakings can impair customer satisfaction by decreasing perceived safety. Even though the research was conducted during COVID-19, the study results could have implications in post-pandemic times. Safety has always been an essential factor in restaurants (Knight et al., 2007). COVID-19 has made service safety a paramount concern, transforming both service operations and service marketing (Berry et al., 2020). Indeed, perceived unsafety and distrust brought by fear and anxiety in the COVID-19 pandemic is expected to deter customers’ participation in value co-creation, further affecting their quality perceptions in the long term (Ahmed et al., 2020). Considering the personal loss along with physical complications coupled with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among people who were affected by the virus and their near ones (Cheung and Mohammed, 2019), the safety concerns and behaviors are expected to persist even when the pandemic is over (Berry et al., 2020).

Our results found that PSRB hurts bystanders’ performance ratings and does not improve requesters’ ratings. Therefore, hospitality employees should refrain from bending any safety rules. Instead, managers should keep employees updated on the current safety rules at federal, state, and local levels. Managers should keep a habit of keeping track of the safety rules by following different news portals and government websites. In addition, they must conduct briefings at the start of every shift to address any addition, change, or elimination of rules. To improve compliance, managers can also keep a list of the updated rules in the back area so that employees can refer to them as needed. To build a rule-compiling culture, organizations can encourage coworkers to share updated rules and help other employees.

Another finding of the study suggests that both requesters and bystanders found PSRB detrimental to their perceived safety. Therefore, employees should keep themselves updated with the current safety rules and educate consumers who refuse to follow them. Even though restaurant workers have reported a steep rise in harassment, abuse, and hostility from consumers during the pandemic (Kaufman, 2021; Saxena, 2021), they must firmly refuse when requesters make rule-breaking demands. Managers must back employees’ decision to say ‘NO’ to consumers when they request to make an exception for themselves. They should stand with the employees if consumers complain and ask to speak to the manager or supervisor. This way, not only bystanders can feel safe, but requesters can also realize the importance of these rules.

Lastly, employees should be trained and conditioned to divert from a “customer always right” mindset. The recent labor shortage in the hospitality industry has given a moment of introspection to both employees and upper management (Vasquez, 2021). Employees have expressed concern that consumers do not always understand the challenges frontline workers face and seek instantaneous indulgences (Vasquez, 2021). This, combined with employees’ health risks, has a major role in restaurant employees not wanting to return to the workforce in recent months (Jones, 2021). Industry leaders must take this as an opportunity to divert the industry approach from “customer is king” to “safety-first” by asserting that both consumers’ and employees’ health are their top priority. Moreover, organizations must incorporate a zero-tolerance policy for consumers mistreating their employees over non-adherence to safety rules by black-listing these uncivil consumers.

6.2. Limitations and future research

Serval limitations should be noted. First, we used two scenario experimental designs in this study. Participants may not be able to project themselves into imaginary situations, weakening their reactions. For example, the safety threat participants face in a scenario of rule-breaking may not be as emotional as one that happens in real life. Second, although we used two different scenarios focusing on two different types of rules-breakings, both scenarios are based on restaurant settings in the United States. Recent studies show cross-cultural differences in the sensitivity of safety measures (Wang et al., 2021). Some countries also have stricter policies on safety rule breakings. For example, consumers face fines and cannot dine in a restaurant when they break the safety rules in Hong Kong.

Additionally, our study data may suffer from another generalizability issue. The data was collected in July 2020, and COVID-vaccines were not available. As more people are vaccinated, and more states are fully reopened, the safety priority may have changed (cf. Hu et al., 2021b). Restaurants are also opting to reverse some rules that were implemented during the pandemic. Future research can test whether consumers’ reactions to PSRB changes over time. We also limited the studies’ participants to those who dined in a casual dining restaurant less than three months ago (i.e., between April 2020–July 2020). Therefore, it may be possible that the sample participants were more risk-taking in nature than the general population. Future research should replicate our findings in a field study to establish external validity of the findings and generalize the findings to other contexts.

Moreover, we manipulated bystanders as strangers to the requesters who happened to observe the rule-breakings. The relationship between bystanders and requesters can vary in real life. For example, in small local restaurants, consumers may know each other. Therefore, bystanders who know the requesters can be more empathetic, reducing the difference in consumer roles. Future work can control these bystander-requester relationships. Lastly, as service performance, perceived safety and customer satisfaction were measured in the same survey, our study may suffer from common method bias. We suggest that future
Researchers undertake a time-lagged survey to minimize the issue. Future work can also extend the current work in several ways. First, our study addresses rule-breaking that are initiated by consumers’ needs. However, some employees break the rules as a part of the service recovery process (Hewagama et al., 2019). Such rule-breaking can be considered as necessary for consumers. Future studies can compare the effect of PSRB on the customer when consumers initiated the rule-breaking versus initiated by the employees (as a part of the service recovery process). Second, we considered the effect of PSRB on different types of consumers’ satisfaction. For example, recent works show that managers can be more forgiving than consumers on safety-rule breakings (e.g., Kong et al., 2021). Future studies can examine the effect of PSRB on other stakeholders’ outcomes, such as managers’ rating of service performance, relationship with coworkers, and customers tipping intentions. Third, we did not manipulate the organizational culture of rule-breaking or coworkers’ engagement of PSRB. Previous studies show that coworker’s prosocial rule-breakings impact the level of employees’ rule-breaking and the acceptance of such behaviors (e.g., Shum et al., 2019). It is possible that consumers can be less dissatisfied when both employees and their coworkers are engaging in PSRB. Future works can control such acceptance and the organizational culture of rule-breaking. Finally, previous studies show that people differ in safety sensitivity (Wang et al., 2021). While some people are concerned about their safety during the COVID-19 pandemic, others can consider safety rules a threat to their freedom (Akhtar et al., 2020; Kang et al., 2021). Researchers can consider whether psychological reactance can moderate consumers’ reactions to PSRB.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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Appendix A. Survey items

**Manipulation check: Prosocial rule-breaking to help customers** (Dahling et al., 2012).

**Instruction:** Based on the scenario you read, please indicate the degree to which you agree with the following statements related to server -customer interaction on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree).

1. The server broke rules that stood in the way of good customer service.
2. The server gave good service to customers by ignoring organizational policies that interfere with their job.
3. The server broke organizational rules to provide better customer service.
4. The server bent organizational rules so that he/she could best assist customers.
5. The server assisted customers by breaking organizational rules that make good customer service difficult to provide.

**Service Performance**—(Cho, Bonn, Han, and Lee, 2016, Winsted, 1997).

Based on the scenario you read, please indicate the degree to which you agree with the following statements related to server’s service performance (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree):

1. The server was available when customers need service
2. The server had customers’ best interests at heart
3. The server understood customers’ specific needs
4. The server gave customers individual attention.

**Restaurant safety (adapted from Knight et al., 2007).**

1. How would you rate the performance of the server in making sure the restaurant is safe for customers? (1 = very poor... 5 = very good)
2. How capable do you think the server is in making sure the restaurant is safe for customers? (1 = very incapable ... 5 = very capable)
3. How committed do you think the server is in making sure the restaurant is safe for customers? (1 = not committed... 5 = very committed)

**Customer satisfaction** (Lin and Mattila, 2010).

**Instruction:** Based on the scenario you read, please indicate the degree to which you agree with the following statements related to customer satisfaction (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree):

1. I am happy with the experiences I have had in this restaurant.
2. I am satisfied with my experiences at this restaurant.
3. I truly enjoy coming to this restaurant.
4. I am elated with the experiences I have had in this restaurant.
5. Going to this restaurant has been delightful for me.

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