



Drivers of Consumer Misbehavior: A Case Study Approach in Pakistani Apparel Retail

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Abstract: Consumer misbehavior represents a pervasive and disruptive issue in retail environments, significantly impacting both employees and organizational operations. This study explores the underlying factors driving consumer misbehavior toward employees in apparel retail settings, focusing on a case study approach conducted in Islamabad and Rawalpindi, Pakistan. Using in-depth interviews with frontline employees and managers from three major shopping malls, the research identifies key themes influencing consumer misbehavior, including impatience during checkout, product-related issues, the pandemic's impact, and the chaos of sales events. Findings reveal that delays and long wait times at the cash counter frequently trigger aggressive behavior, while challenges related to health policies during the pandemic and customer frustration with product quality and availability further exacerbate misbehavior. The study also highlights the role of customer characteristics, such as personal stress and entitlement, in driving disruptive actions. The results provide actionable insights for managing consumer interactions and improving employee responses to misbehavior. Future research should expand the sample beyond the studied cities and consider quantitative approaches to enhance the generalizability and applicability of the proposed conceptual framework.

Key words: Consumer Misbehavior, Apparel Industry, Retail Employees, Checkout Delays, Sales Events

1. Introduction

Consumer misbehavior is a widespread and harmful phenomenon in which customers engage in inappropriate actions against employees (Amarnani, Bordia, & Restubog, 2018). Various researchers have referred to this behavior using different terms, including aberrant consumer behavior (Fullerton & Punj, 1993), dysfunctional behaviors (Harris, 2010), consumer transgressions (Fullerton, Taylor, & Gosh, 1997), counterproductive work behaviors, and deviant behavior (Raymen & Smith, 2015; Amine & Gicquel, 2011). Berry and Seiders (2008) argue that the commonly held belief that "the customer is always right" is flawed, as customers often engage in unfair behavior, revealing the darker side of marketing. Service sectors such as restaurants, banks, airlines, theme parks, and hotels require frequent customer-employee interactions, often in the presence of other customers sharing the same service space (Grove, Fisk, & John, 2004). In a retail environment, the service encounter is the point where customers and employees interact, and these interactions can be either positive or negative (Keefe, Russell-Bennett, & Tombs, 2008).

Understanding consumer behavior has long been a focus for marketing researchers, retailers, and manufacturers (Choudhary, 2014). Significant studies have examined various factors such as personality, environmental, motivational, and situational influences (Akbari, Abdolvand, & Ghaffari, 2016); Machiavellianism, consumer

alienation, aggressiveness, sensation-seeking, and self-esteem (Amelia & Ronald, 2017); social dimensions and spatio-temporal aspects (Daunt & Greer, 2015); contextual factors like servicescape and situation-specific variables, along with individual factors like personality and demographics (Daunt & Harris, 2012); perceived employee service, customer repatronage intent, past misbehavior, and the severity of misbehavior (Daunt & Harris, 2014); official classification, perceived risk, norms, intent, perceived outcomes, perceived fairness, past experiences as a victim, and moral identity (Dootson, Johnston, Beatson, & Lings, 2016); attitudes towards unethical consumer behavior and shoplifting (Egan & Taylor, 2010); customer misbehavior and its impact on frontline employees, as well as management strategies and tactics (Harris & Daunt, 2013); and various justifications for misbehavior, such as denial of victim, denial of injury, claims of normalcy and relative acceptability, appeal to higher loyalties, and denial of responsibility (Harris & Dumas, 2009).

Consumer misbehavior has the potential to disrupt the market, creating a chaotic environment for both retailers and consumers and threatening the values of retail society (Fullerton & Punj, 1993). The literature has often downplayed the harmful aspects of consumer misbehavior (Moschis & Cox, 1989), even though such incidents can negatively affect the psychological states of other consumers, diminishing their overall experience (Fullerton & Punj, 1993). When customers experience anger or frustration, they may engage in harmful behaviors towards companies, including spreading negative word of mouth, exiting the relationship, or even seeking revenge (McColl-Kennedy, Patterson, Smith, & Brady, 2009). Discussions around the growing importance of experience-based marketing activities have increased, with consumers showing a preference for experiential marketing. However, according to Daunt and Greer (2017), despite increased research into the darker side of marketing over the past decade, significant gaps remain. While service experience is a critical area of study for service researchers, the scope of research in this area is still limited (Voorhees et al., 2017). It is widely acknowledged that consumer misbehavior is a pervasive and potentially damaging phenomenon that can negatively impact the customer experience. While it is crucial to control such behavior, there is debate about the extent of control that should be exercised (Fullerton & Punj, 1997). For example, increasing security measures to reduce shoplifting may negatively impact the overall shopping experience for customers (Egan & Taylor, 2010). Therefore, it is essential for researchers to understand the factors that motivate consumers to misbehave, as this understanding can help retailers mitigate the impact and enhance the customer experience. The research question of this study is: What factors motivate consumers to misbehave towards retail employees?

2. Literature Review

Various concepts have been used to describe behaviors that disrupt organizational norms and harm business operations, including counterproductive behavior, organizational misbehavior, antisocial organizational behavior, organizational deviance, and dysfunctional behavior, among others (Everton, Jolton, & Mastrangelo, 2007). Common examples of such misbehavior include vandalism, financial frauds like insurance frauds and credit card abuse, shoplifting, and physical or verbal abuse (Fullerton & Punj, 1997). Fowler (2007) identified four distinct categories of consumer misbehavior based on cultural and institutional norms: anomic, aberrant, abiding, and carnivalesque behaviors. These misbehaviors can be perpetrated by individuals or groups and can inflict significant physical, psychological, and financial damage on businesses, employees, and other consumers (Fullerton & Punj, 1993). According to Albers-Miller (1999), consumer misbehavior can occur in two main situations: when an individual is alone and not under direct social pressure, or when they are in a group and subject to immediate social influence. McColl-Kennedy et al. (2009) suggest that managers should be aware of consumer rage emotions to recognize early signs of anger, develop interventions to manage and mitigate the impact on employees and implement strategies to prevent future incidents of consumer rage.

Fullerton and Punj (1997) define consumer misbehavior as actions by consumers that violate widely accepted social norms in consumption situations, thereby disrupting the expected order of exchanges. In the literature, this phenomenon has been referred to by various terms, such as aberrant consumer behavior (Fullerton & Punj, 1993), dysfunctional behaviors (Harris, 2010), consumer transgressions (Fullerton, Taylor, & Gosh, 1997), customer mistreatment (Amarnani et al., 2018), and deviant behavior (Raymen & Smith, 2015; Amine & Gicquel, 2011).

3. Method

Case study research explores an issue or phenomenon within its real-life context. Yin (2009) suggests using this approach when the research questions start with "how" or "why," the behavior of subjects cannot be manipulated, the context is crucial to the study, and the boundaries between phenomenon and context are unclear. A single case

study is ideal for examining a critical or unique case, allowing for theory development from one case. This research focuses on customer misbehavior in apparel retail settings, using a single-case embedded unit of analysis design, where the case is the apparel retail industry, and the units of analysis are frontline employees and managers in Islamabad and Rawalpindi.

Data was collected through interviews with employees and managers in three major shopping malls in these cities: The Centaurus Mall, The Giga Mall, and Safa Gold Mall. These malls were chosen for their accessibility and concentration of apparel shops. Purposive sampling was used to select shops that had experienced customer misbehavior, and 16 interviews were conducted eight per group.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to capture all spoken words and nonverbal cues. Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step method, was performed using MAXQDA software to analyze the transcriptions. This method emphasizes understanding the social, cultural, and structural contexts that shape individual experiences, allowing researchers to uncover the socially constructed meanings within the data.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) structured approach, starting with a deep familiarization with the data. Initial codes were generated to capture key concepts, followed by identifying and refining overarching themes. These themes were reviewed for accuracy and relevance, and then clearly defined and named. Finally, the findings were synthesized into a cohesive report. The data was categorized into themes. The most coded themes are represented in the word cloud below:



Figure 1: Coding Word Cloud

4.1 Factors Influencing Consumer Misbehavior

The second stream of themes that came to be is related to the stimulators of consumer misbehavior. The research question of the study was to explore the reasons why the customers misbehave with the employees. Hence the first set of themes is under the heading of reasons. The retail employees, both managers and frontliners have described several common reasons as per their perceptions to be the stimulators for the misbehavior. Such as the one stated

below:

"Yeah, such cases happen the most because we are unable to do so. Rest if there is a delay of 1-2 minutes in getting the desired size. My staff goes to get a size, and if they are late for 1-2 minutes, the customer gets aggressive and says, "Where has your employee gone? Why aren't they getting the size?" So, we get the most cases of these things. "

[RM 4]

In this RM4 talked about a delay in getting the desired size of clothing for a customer by an employee. A mere delay in the process can make the customer get angry about the situation. The statement also suggested that the customer got angry and started misbehaving while talking in an aggressive manner. These reasons have been divided into five main themes which are discussed below:

4.2 Cash Counter Hastiness

In retailing and transactions, money plays a vital role. The next theme that emerged from the data is related to money. According to the employees, the most frequent incidents are related to the cash counter. As RM3 explained:

"There are problems that occur at the cash counter. I don't know why they don't wait at the cash counters, regardless of how patient they are in their normal routines. But when they come to the cash counters, they don't wait and misbehave. "

[RM 3]

In this scenario, RM3 hints towards the impatient behavior of the customers during the time of checking out. The customers took their time while scrolling and scanning the store to look at the products but when it comes to getting the bill done, they lose it and misbehave.

A similar issue has been highlighted by RM1 as he described:

"For example, well, mostly it happens with the guard and at the billing counter during the bill. Because the customers do not have an issue scrolling the shop for 2-3 hours, but as soon as they get to the counter, they want it to be done within seconds. It cannot be done as there are long queues at the counter. In that scenario, the customers leave the product or throw it on the floor. A total of 30-40% of customers does this. 60-70% come, purchase, and go. This happens because of the delay in billing. "

[RM1]

RM1 explained the issue of customer impatience and misbehavior toward the guards of the store and the cashier at the billing counter. He also emphasizes how the customers are willing to spend 2-3 hours browsing in the store, but they become impatient and demand quick service when they reach the billing counter. This eventually can result in customer misbehavior in the form of throwing products on the floor, which is observed in 30-40% of customers. The root cause of this misbehavior can be identified as the delay in billing and long queues at the counter. Research has found that long wait times and delays in service can have a significant impact on customer misbehavior (Nawaz and Osman 2020). Hence, customers who experience long wait times are more likely to express negative emotions and engage in misbehaviors. Along with long queues and impatience the factor of a huge crowd played a part as well.

4.3 Pandemic as a Predecessor

The data also illustrated a variety of purchasing misbehaviors related to the COVID-19 pandemic. As the data was collected after the lockdown situation there were factors related to COVID-19 that needed to be explored to understand the phenomenon of consumer misbehavior. As RFL4 explained in a one-liner:

"There are some customers that misbehave when we ask them to wear masks as it is advised by our company."

[RFL4]

RFL4 suggested that some customers exhibited disruptive behavior when they were asked to wear masks, as was mandated by the company. It shows that people may have various levels of risk perception and may prioritize their individual freedoms over company policies. RM3 also defined the issue as:

"But there were times when there was a crowd of people, and we would ask them to wear their masks. We used to tell every customer that they needed to wear their masks, but some customers at that time also were misbehaving by not listening to us. You know we cannot fight with anyone. So, the incidents of

misbehaving were apparent at that time too. "

[Retail\RM 3]

In this statement, RM3 described a situation where their store encountered challenges in enforcing mask-wearing policies during crowded periods. Despite telling every customer that wearing masks is required, some customers refused to comply and even demonstrated misbehavior. He also emphasized the factor of being helpless to say anything to the customers, as the fear of getting yelled at was apparent. This problem did not affect the employees only but also impacted the other customers as they were worried due to such behaviors.

4.4 Customer Characteristics

The next theme that emerged from the data is related to the characteristics of the customers. It included the codes of personality, ignorant customers, literacy levels, and the need for protocol. According to the employees, customers have some underlying traits that make them more prone to misbehave. In this theme, employees have emphasized the mindset of the customers. As RFL6 explained:

"Yes, exactly. Sometimes, we note that the customer comes in disturbed from the house, which is why he/she is snatching the clothes, shouting at us, and getting angry at us without any mistake from our side. So, we think that they have some issues going on. We feel easy ourselves and start making them calm too. But they do not get relaxed. If some customer is tough on us, then it is on us to take a step back and push another employee in the front, and he will be able to manage the situation. From our side, this is the best we can do. "

[RFL6]

According to RFL6 sometimes some customers come to the store dealing with personal issues or stress situations from their homes. That causes them to misbehave through cloth snatching, shouting, and getting angry at the employees. At that time, the employees try to manage inconvenient situations with empathy and understanding. But when they do not calm, they send some other employee to deal with certain situations where they themselves think they are insufficient. By doing so, they try to mitigate the situation and try to relax the already stressed customer. Focusing on the more hidden aspects of their traits, RM5 narrated:

"These are some things, but I think our society is also going in the direction where we have lost patience and endurance. We say we don't want to wait for two minutes, we say a thing, and it should be there immediately. Or their upbringing is this way, so they start to expect the same environment from outside. This is why these things happen."

[RM5]

Here RM5 talked about the shift in the thinking and values of society. According to him, a combination of societal changes and cultural values contribute to the decline in patience and tolerance, as well as an increase in assertive behaviors in some individuals. He also discussed their upbringing as a factor for such behaviors.

RM6 talked about the concept of narcissism in the following extract:

"Some customers are of a psycho nature. We get super-rich customers, but they do not show it off and purchase stuff by being humble. But some people have this habit of showing off to those who likes to show off their wealth. The concept of "I" is very worst in Pakistan. They don't listen to others and feel like whatever they have said is the final thing. "

[RM6]

In his observation of some customers, RM6 talked about those who have the qualities of being narcissists by thinking that they are right in saying or doing whatever they deem fit. He talked about the concept of "I" which is common and worst in Pakistan. The perception of power can influence how people choose to express themselves in interpersonal interactions. It can be argued that individuals with the concept of 'I' feel more powerful and are more likely to be aggressive and assertive, whereas those who feel less powerful are more likely to be submissive and accommodating.

4.5 The Calamity of Claims

The next theme was generated after combining the codes related to size difference, product quality, and damaged products/goods. It is related to product issues. Firstly, are the ones related to the damaged goods/products. The problem with the product is an issue on the part of the company and can create issues for the employees. As RFL1 described:

"Our top priority is to deal with the customer professionally and guide them in their issue to be resolved. If

there is an article that is being returned for damage, then it is on us, and the company would not own it because when the stock is delivered to the outlet, all the articles are inspected, and the damaged articles are returned to the supplier. Still, if any article is found damaged afterward, then the supplier is not held liable. So, it is our duty to rectify if the damage was caused by the customer or not because afterward, the company will ask us. Then the customer gets infuriated and questions the credibility of the brand because of the allegations made against them. Hence, a problem is then created."

[RFL1]

RFL1 explained that the damaged products are the responsibility of the store employees. Because the company sends the products to the store and the store must check them for any issues or faults. So, it is the store's responsibility to own the damaged products. According to RFL1, it is the duty of employees to resolve any issues related to the products effectively and it is important to manage such situations with care and professionalism to avoid any misunderstandings or negative impact on the brand's reputation. However, they cannot make any decision without being 100% sure about the party who is at fault. It can be caused due to a mistake on the customer's side. But the customers do not understand this and get angry.

Another issue that relates to both the sales event and sizes is the products being sold out. RFL6 defined such issues as:

"We have so much tension during sales. The sizes get sold out at the beginning of it. The customer who comes in first takes it. Things cannot reach the store in a blink. It takes time for them to reach. The products reach the store the next day. On normal days, if there is no size available in our store, then we refer them to some other store, but during sales, we cannot do it. But still, still, if our regular customer is asking or another customer is demanding that I need this thing, then we request our employee to get the required product and give it to them."

[RFL6]

RFL6 shared his worry about the products being sold out during the sale events. The selling of certain products and sizes can create frustration for customers who are hoping to purchase them. The store follows the first come first policy during sales and it is up to the customers to come to the store on time and grab whatever they want. Usually, we refer the customers to other branches if a particular size or product is not available, but it is not possible to do so during sales as no one can ensure the availability of the sizes.

The next set of complaints is related to the quality of the product. For any brand to work efficiently and create a place in the market it is important to maintain excellent quality. When the quality is not maintained or compromised in a way it can create issues for the employees and customers. As RFL3 explained in the following:

"Secondly, they get hyper the most, in my experience; when your product quality is bad, then no customer will listen to you. No matter in which way you try to satisfy them, never. When the customer comes to you with a complaint, they do not listen to a word from you. They come hyper from their house. Suppose your product quality isn't good."

[RFL3]

According to RFL3, most of the customers get hyper when the product's quality is not up to the mark. If the quality is bad then it can lead to dissatisfaction, and customers may become angry and find it difficult to satisfy. It gets frustrating for the employees also because they try to offer solutions or explanations, but the customer is not receptive to them. The customers come with the mindset of not settling for any solution and it damages the reputation of the business and leads to misbehavior.

4.6 Sales Event

The next theme is related to the sales event which is an occasion where the products and goods are sold at a reduced or discounted price by the retailers. Many customers have been seen misbehaving during these events because of assorted reasons. RM8 explained that most of the cases happen during the sales event and recalled the common ones as:

"Sometimes, it happens due to discounts. Our brand, according to Pakistan, is particularly good. So, because of this, our purchases are good on normal days. So, we offer 10-20 % maximum discounts during sales. They complain about the rate of the discounts. They say the discounts should be higher. But the company has its own policies; it must see things from its side. The rents are too high, so they must look at all the factors. Does everyone think that if they are selling a product at 10 rupees, then why would they want to sell it for 8 rupees? They will want to sell it at the original price. So only this thing happens. Other

than this, nothing else happens. "

[RM8]

RM8 explained that sometimes customers expect higher discounts during sales, but the company has its own policies and considerations to consider. The rent of the store is high, and the company must balance its costs and profits. Even though their brand is highly regarded in Pakistan, they offer only 10-20% maximum discounts during sales. Customers complained about the rate of the discounts, but they are bound to look at things from the company's perspective. It is not realistic for a company to sell a product for less than its original price for an extended period. But the customers do not understand this and demand an extra discount from the employees. Which sometimes can create ugly situations and customers misbehave.

Another common issue that causes the customers to misbehave during the sales event is huge crowds. Customers have been fighting over products and throwing the employees from here to there during sales events (Burke & agencies, 2014). As RM6 explained:

"In sales. In sales, there is a huge crowd. My shop is small in comparison to others. I will invite you to visit us during that time then you can see for yourself that this tiny shop is filled with customers. One customer shout from one corner, and the other shouts from another corner, asking for varied sizes. So, due to crowds during sales, disturbance gets created. As usual, normally, the routine is smooth. When a customer comes in, we try to give him/her full attention. We even show them the sealed, unstitched products too. We open all the pieces in the 3-piece suits in front of them, and then they purchase them. Mostly it happens during sales."

[RM6]

The issue discussed here by RM6 is the chaos and disturbance caused by the huge crowds during sales in a small shop. He explained that during normal days, they give individual attention to each customer and even show them sealed, unstitched products, but during sales, it is challenging to maintain the same level of service due to the high volume of customers. Additionally, customers demand varied sizes and products simultaneously, causing disturbance and chaos in the store. Thus, it causes them to misbehave when they do not receive attention.

Based on the factors of consumer misbehavior identified by employees in apparel retail brands, the following conceptual framework was developed:

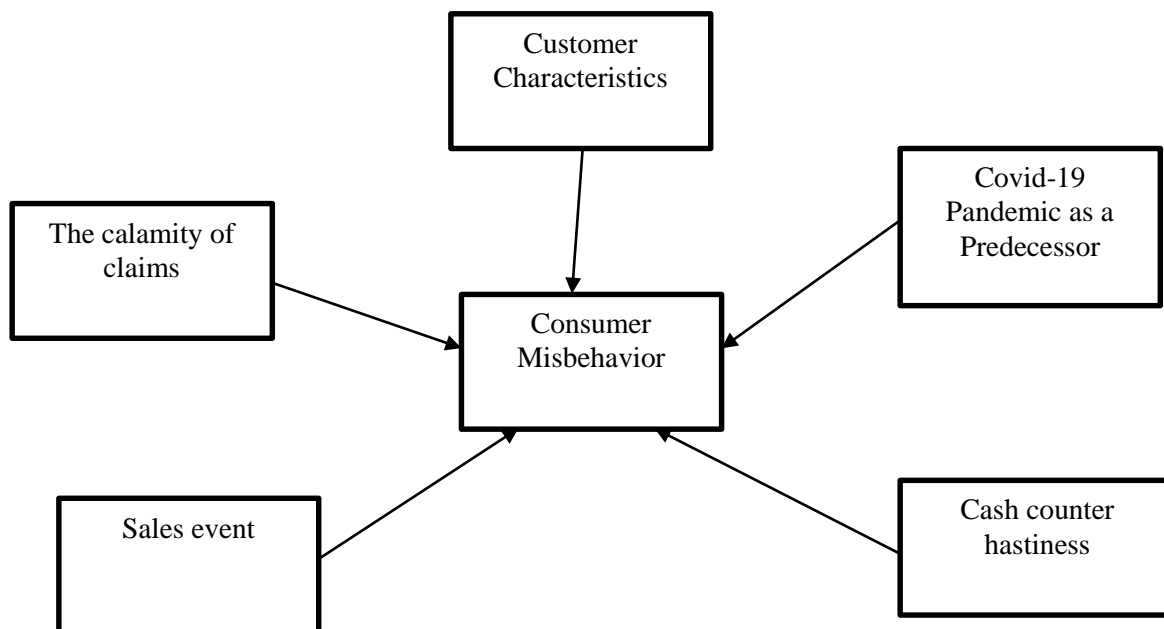


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework for Factors Influencing Consumer Misbehavior Towards Employees

5. Conclusion

The study employed in-depth interviews with frontline employees and managers to investigate the factors that drive consumer misbehavior toward retail employees. It identifies several critical themes: Customer Characteristics, The Calamity of Claims, the COVID-19 Pandemic as a Predecessor, Sales Events, and Cash Counter Hastiness. Impatience during the checkout process emerged as a recurring issue, with customers exhibiting aggressive behavior when faced with delays or long wait times at the cash counter, despite their earlier patience while shopping. The COVID-19 pandemic introduced additional challenges, such as enforcing health policies and managing increased customer stress, which led to negative reactions to pandemic-related protocols and a rise in misbehavior. Customer Characteristics highlight personal traits like impatience, stress, and entitlement as key factors driving aggressive interactions, exacerbated by shifts in societal values and personal stressors. Product-related issues, such as defects and size discrepancies, were also significant triggers, as customers' frustration with unsatisfactory product quality often resulted in aggressive behavior towards employees. Lastly, the chaos of sales events, characterized by high customer volume and intense demand for discounts, frequently led to long queues and unmet expectations, fueling customer dissatisfaction and aggressive behavior.

5.1 Practical Contribution

The study's findings provide valuable insights for employees and managers to better handle consumer misbehavior. By understanding the root causes behind such behavior, employees can tailor their responses to meet individual consumer needs more effectively. This knowledge has broad implications, offering significant contributions to understanding the complexities of consumer misbehavior and revealing the underlying factors driving such actions.

5.2 Limitations and Future Recommendations

This study has some limitations that should be considered in future research. Firstly, the sample size was limited to two cities in Pakistan, which may not fully represent the broader context. Although the case study approach is methodologically sound, the generalizability of the findings could be improved. Future research might use the proposed conceptual framework and apply quantitative methods to extend its applicability.

Acknowledgment.

We would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to our families and friends for their unwavering support and encouragement throughout this research journey. It would not have been possible without their generous contributions and moral support. Thank you for standing by us and making this achievement possible.

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