



## Article

# Engaging in emotional labour when facing customer mistreatment in hospitality

Simillidou, Aspasia, Christofi, Michael, Glyptis, Loukas, Papatheodorou, Andreas and Vrontis, Demetris

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*Simillidou, Aspasia, Christofi, Michael, Glyptis, Loukas ORCID: 0000-0003-1734-4873, Papatheodorou, Andreas and Vrontis, Demetris (2020) Engaging in emotional labour when facing customer mistreatment in hospitality. Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management, 45 . pp. 429-443. ISSN 1447-6770*

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2020.10.001>

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## **Engaging in Emotional Labour when facing Customer Mistreatment in Hospitality**

### **Abstract**

Emotional labour (EL) is a self-controlling process during which employees monitor and regulate their moods and expressions when interacting with customers. Such self-monitoring takes place through employees engaging with either deep acting (DA) or surface acting (SA) EL strategies. Although empirical evidence indicates that employees are capable of deploying both strategies, it acknowledges a predominant use of surface acting (SA) when employees are dealing with aggressive customers, something which in turn creates resource-depleting effects. Nevertheless, there is lack of a holistic understanding of the conditions under which employees engage in either strategy. Also, research is inconclusive on the negative effects of SA; how these can be overcome; whether the means for overcoming these effects associate with the deployment of DA; and what the effects of DA are in conditions of customer mistreatment. Motivated by the above knowledge gap, we drew on contagious emotions, affective events and emotional labour and emotional intelligence theories to conduct 70 in-depth, semi-structured interviews within the hotel industry. While findings confirm extant research on the conditions that lead to the deployment of SA and its effects to employee welfare and performance, they contribute that the means used to overcome the negative effects of SA, stimulate the development of conditions that lead the way to the deployment of DA. The study also contributes positive organisational and employee effects from applying DA in aggressive customer contexts, which reinforce the very conditions that enable it.

**Keywords:** Surface acting; deep acting; contagious emotions; affective events; emotional intelligence, emotional labour

## **Introduction**

Customer service is one of the most important elements in achieving customer satisfaction and repeat business with the ultimate goal of developing a sustainable competitive advantage (Dietz et al., 2004; Salanova et al., 2005; McCance et al., 2013; Christofi et al., 2013; Christofi et al., 2014, Stabler et al., 2010). To achieve customer satisfaction and loyalty, service employees are often required to apply organisationally-imposed display rules and guidelines regulating emotional conduct towards customers (Diefendorff & Richard, 2003; McCance et al., 2013). To adhere to these display rules and guidelines, employees engage in emotional labour (EL), which is defined as the process of employees managing their emotions to comply with organisational expectations during their interactions with customers (Hochschild, 1983). The main premise of EL is that employees must adhere to display rules that instruct which emotions should be expressed during work (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987; Gabriel & Diefendorff, 2015). Research on EL has mainly focused on two strategies for regulating employee emotions, namely surface acting (SA), which involves faking required emotions and suppressing felt emotions; and deep acting (DA), which involves exerting effort to feel and express required emotions (Gabriel & Diefendorff, 2015) to provide for quality service that safeguards the customer experience.

Relatedly, customer service representatives are exposed to various work-related stressors. One important stressor that is applicable to service employees only, is customer mistreatment. Customer mistreatment refers to the low-quality treatment that customers give towards employees, and which takes several forms, ranging from making ambiguous demands to being verbally aggressive (Baranik et al., 2017). In many service occupations (including the hospitality industry, which offers the empirical context of this study), employees are asked to display positive emotions and to suppress negative emotions, even in cases of customer mistreatment. This organisation-imposed practice has been collectively referred to as

“integrative display rules” (Gabriel & Diefendorff, 2015). If employees feel emotions that differ from display rules, it has been theorised that they will actively regulate their emotions to ensure appropriate displays (Grandey, 2000; Gabriel & Diefendorff, 2015). In this context, interactions with difficult customers who behave in an unfair and verbally hostile manner heighten EL requirements for service employees (McCance et al., 2013).

Research on EL in relation to customer mistreatment has been so far incomplete (Goussinsky, 2015; Hu et al., 2017) and there are several calls for further research thereto (Baranik et al., 2017; Karatepe, 2015). That is, research so far has focused mainly on a taken for granted premise that employees should resort to exhibiting inauthentic emotions, or else engage in SA, so as to abide by organisational rules when interacting with aggressive customers, without articulating the scope of DA to act as a more effective alternative (Hoffmann, 2016; Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018). Moreover, extant research has identified several negative effects of EL on employees<sup>1</sup>, but has neither explored how to alleviate them, nor how the presence of these effects may differentiate between SA and DA strategies (McCance et al., 2013). Neither does extant literature provide any empirical evidence of how to engage employees more in DA rather than SA (Baranik et al., 2017; Goussinsky, 2015), even though several researchers argue that the use of DA when interacting with aggressive customers may lead to better outcomes<sup>2</sup> for both customers and employees (Baranik et al., 2017; Goussinsky, 2015; Huang & Dai 2010; Hur et al., 2015; Karatepe, 2010; Karatepe & Nkendon, 2014; Taegoo et al., 2012; Wing et al., 2018). However, even that body of research has failed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact that DA has in alleviating the negative effects of SA as part of interactions with aggressive customers. Based on the

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. a decreased sense of well-being, emotional dissonance, an increase in psycho-physiological stress, emotional exhaustion, burnout, depersonalisation, an increase in absenteeism, a decrease in job satisfaction, work-life conflict.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. an increase in motivation, service performance, and employee engagement, as well as a decrease in employees’ emotional dissonance, absenteeism, emotional exhaustion, stress, and burnout. Also, customers enjoy a more genuine service experience.

above, current research has failed to provide a holistic understanding of (a) the conditions under which employees engage in SA and DA in the hospitality industry; (b) the effects on employees that arise from SA, and how these can be overcome; (c) whether the means to overcome the negative effects of SA can simultaneously stimulate engagement with DA; and, (d) what are the effects when employees engage in DA during interactions with aggressive customers. Thus, further research is required in these sparsely researched areas in order for both academia and practice to develop a coherent understanding of how EL strategies can help effectively manage customer mistreatment to boost service satisfaction and repeat business. It is, therefore, towards addressing the aforementioned research gaps that this paper is aimed at.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. We first review the findings of the literature and provide the theoretical basis of our study. Next, we argue for and rationalise upon the qualitative methodology that led our empirical research and analysis of findings. This is followed by the presentation of findings and their subsequent discussion. As part of the discussion we present the contributions of this research and its implications for practice. Last, we offer some concluding remarks, including an acknowledgement of the limitation impinging of our research and suggesting avenues for future enquiry.

## **Literature review and theoretical development**

### ***Handling aggressive customers: A role for Emotional Labour***

The rate at which employees face aggressive customers, of any type, is very high according to existing literature (Harris & Reynolds, 2003; Goussinsky, 2011; Grandey, 2000). As with many service industries, the hospitality industry and those employees offering customer service therein, are experiencing aggression (Daskin, 2016) from verbally, emotionally, and physically aggressive customers (Harris & Reynolds, 2003). Anger-provoking events have intensified the need for service providers to regulate their emotions (Goussinsky, 2011) and this is even more

compelling, as they now face increasingly demanding and angry customers than before (Grandey, 2000). For example, Harris and Reynolds (2003) found that almost 82% of service providers working in the hospitality industry have been subjected to customer mistreatment during the time of their research. It is also stated thereto that aggressive behaviour is very usual among customers in the hospitality industry, which is mainly due to the increased demands that these consumers have from spending money for leisure.

It was an increased rate of aggressive events occurring towards service providers that spurred a growing body of research that studied how employees can provide good service in the aggressive event context, while at the same time abiding by organisational rules and expectations of acceptable service conduct (Bechtoldt et al., 2011; Johnson et al., 2018). It should be noted here that the main antithesis that employees face when interacting with challenging customers is that on the one hand they need to follow prescribed organisational rules on acceptable service behaviour, while on the other self-restrain their grown negative feelings in order to perform as required (Johnson et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2013). Extant research shows that employees attempt to manage such antithesis by deploying EL. Goussinsky (2011) states that even though employees need to engage in EL as part of their duties when interacting with customers, doing so while facing aggression has been very challenging. To this end, evidence so far shows that for various reasons, employees capable of mobilising EL when interacting with aggressive customers, engage in SA rather than DA, which though has negative consequences for both the employee and the customers (Harris & Reynolds, 2003; Huang & Dai, 2010; Goussinsky, 2011; Grandey et al., 2015; Meirovich et al., 2013). In what follows, we turn our attention to literature on the contagion of emotions in our attempt to rationalise the challenges involved in deploying EL in aggressive contexts.

### ***Contagious emotions and Emotional Labour***

It has been argued in the literature that emotions are contagious (Barsade, 2002; Bechtoldt, 2011; Huang & Dai, 2010). For example, when service employees are interacting with happy or easy-to-handle customers, they face no difficulties in displaying the desired positive emotions that organisations require them to exhibit. On the contrary, when service employees encounter aggressiveness, they develop negative feelings which prevent them from displaying the necessary positive emotions, something which in turn affects the customer interaction outcome (Karatepe, 2015; Vandewaa *et al.*, 2016). The above phenomenon has been argued to apply to any industry, including the hospitality industry (Vandewaa 2016).

According to Barsade (2002) and Bechtoldt *et al.* (2011), when customer service employees encounter aggressiveness, they find it very challenging to change their emotional state and embrace positive feelings that would benefit quality of service. This is mainly because emotions are contagious, meaning that they are easily transferred across persons through interaction (i.e. face-to-face or through other means). Moreover, Bakker *et al.* (2005), in investigating contagious emotions among nurses, found that negative emotions are easier to transfer than positive ones. Hence, it is easier for employees to adopt negative emotions and pass them on to their colleagues. Such research indicates, therefore, that people share more easily negative emotions, and as such spread the negative consequences that arise from these emotions.

Relatedly, extant literature in EL shows that service providers more likely engage in SA when interacting with aggressive customers (Deepthi, 2015; Goussinsky, 2015; Grandey, 2000). This is because as employees get ‘infected’ by the negative feelings of their customers, they reflexively fake their adopted negative feelings to handle them, something which is seen as an unconscious, and thereby less mentally painstaking, way out of a difficult situation. The contagion, therefore, by service employees of the negative feelings of their customers, makes

it difficult for them to engage in DA when handling customer complaints and anger (Goussinsky, 2015; Huang & Dai, 2010). In what follows, we review literature in affective events theory so as to shed light on the reasons behind employees' leaning towards SA when faced with customer mistreatment.

### *Affective events theory*

Affective events theory posits that all events in the workplace directly affect employees in terms of their emotional reactions, feelings, and therefore, behaviours (Rupp & Spencer 2006; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). In this respect, Grandey et al., (2010) concluded that any undesirable interaction with customers spawns negative feelings, and therefore, negative behaviours. However, as organisations do not accept employees expressing those negative feelings during interactions with customers, service employees tend to suppress them. Further, Calabrese (2000) concluded that during any negative interaction in the workplace involving, for example, anger or sarcasm makes employees hide their true feelings and exhibit those behaviours that will be acceptable by the organisation. Based on Huang and Dai (2010), the more negative feelings employees have during interactions with angry customers, the more they will engage in EL through SA. Similarly, Goussinsky (2015) argued that it is easier for employees to simply hide their true emotions and, thus, show fake emotions towards their angry customers. An important common thesis, therefore, of the above studies is that customers' mood-state directly affects employees, the way they engage in EL, and their resort to SA when confronted with negative events. As such, this literature rationalises employee resort to SA in such circumstances but does not explore the potential of DA to act as a perhaps more effective alternative EL strategy. In the following subsection, we turn our attention to literature that examines buffers against the negative effects of SA and the scope for DA to act as an effective alternative EL strategy.



## **Buffers to SA effects**

The resource-depleting effects of SA are well established in the literature (Grandey & Melloy, 2017). However, we know less about the pervasiveness of these depleting effects and what employees can do at work to replenish their resources.

Extant literature supports that employees that have a feeling of belonging in their workplace find it easier to overcome the effects of SA (Grandey & Melloy, 2017; Xanthopoulou et al., 2018). Having a sense of belonging is an important variable in buffering against negative effects, as the need to belong to one's workplace positively relates to the generation and display of positive emotions, whereas it negatively relates to generating and displaying negative emotions (Yagil & Medler-Liraz, 2017). Satisfying this need of employees for belonging is important for organisations as it could act as a buffering measure against SA effects (Yagil & Medler-Liraz, 2017). As such, service employees with a strong psychological need for belonging to their workplace, may find it more difficult to interact with aggressive customers, as these interactions negate the positive emotions that this need for belonging generates. In particular, such employees are required to handle the, contradictory to their need for belonging, negative emotions that arise from customer mistreatment, and are more likely to engage thereby in SA so as to adhere to organisational expectations. On the other hand, employees who can handle the contradiction between the positive emotions that arise from their need for belonging in the workplace and the negative ones that emanate from their interaction with aggressive customers, are more capable of engaging with DA. These studies call for further research on how to engage employees more in DA and what would be the positive outcomes thereto, while taking into consideration the positive effects that the need for

belonging to the workplace on individual and organisational levels pose (Yagil & Medler-Liraz, 2017). To achieve a sense of belonging, literature identifies that employees need to perceive that the organisation they work for cares about them, values their opinion, and shares their feelings (Moon et al., 2013). Employees who believe their organisation supports them also have a strong sense of belonging (Yagil & Medler-Liraz, 2018) and are more able to cope with the negative consequences of SA (Moon et al., 2013). In line with these findings, other researchers suggest that employees will also engage more in DA when they perceive the organisation supporting and caring for them (Kumar-Mishra, 2014; Moon et al., 2013).

Furthermore, person-job fit as well as person-organisation fit are factors identified in the literature as relevant to the phenomenon of SA in handling customer mistreatment. Both factors are thought to be important in overcoming the negative effects of SA as well as in empowering employees to engage in DA (Wing et al., 2018). In this respect, Bratton and Watson (2018) argue that it is necessary to evaluate the recruitment process and identify the characteristics of people that would better suit the job description and the organisation. That way, they argue, the negative effects from EL can be minimised. Other studies revealed that EL is found to have partially mediated the interactive effects of person-job fit and person-organisation fit on service interaction quality and customer satisfaction (Grandey et al., 2017; Wing et al., 2018). These findings have multiple theoretical and practical implications that call for further research.

The negative consequences of EL have been researched by studies that draw on conservation of resources theory as well. These studies have particularly evaluated the extensively depleting effects of SA, and whether social interactions with co-workers (i.e. giving and receiving help) can mitigate the negative consequences of EL (Brotheridge & Lee, 2003; Marilyn et al., 2017). Results indicate that within-person daily SA positively predicted end-of-day emotional exhaustion, and that the effect of emotional exhaustion spilled over to work

engagement the following day (Marilyn et al., 2017). This research also showed that giving help buffered the depletion process while receiving help did not. Helping others could affect one's sense of self-esteem, as well as the importance of resource congruence in improving the efficacy of buffering against the effects of SA (Grandey et al., 2017). The theoretical and practical significance of how giving help at work buffers the negative effects of SA EL is a new factor and warrants further research (Wong et al., 2017).

Training is another buffer identified in the literature as curbing the effects of EL, and of SA in particular. Organisations, and specifically leaders, play an important role in helping employees cope with the stressors and consequences they face at work (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002). This help can take the form of initial as well as continuous training in, among others, developing capable and resilient customer service staff, which interact with clients daily (Goussinsky, 2012; Grandey et al., 2004; Wang & Groth, 2014). According to Wang and Goth (2014), employees should also be trained to engage in DA when interacting with aggressive customers. Literature has shown that using DA instead of SA will lead to more positive outcomes for employee performance and work experience (Hochschild, 1983; Blau et al., 2010; Peng et al., 2010). Although there are various techniques to train employees on using DA, existing literature is not conclusive on whether resort to DA is possible when interacting with aggressive customers, and how it could be achieved (Goussinsky, 2015; Karatepe & Nkendon, 2014). Further empirical research, therefore, should be conducted to find out how training will help employees engage more in DA when interacting with aggressive customers.

Besides, training is a very helpful tool for people in management positions, considering how important they are in forming employees' attitudes and perceptions (Edelman & Van Knippenberg, 2017). Current literature discusses how managers engage in SA when interacting with their employees as well as when dealing with difficult customer situations (Huyghebaert et al., 2018). Training managers to engage in DA has been proven to be highly beneficial for

their role (Edelman & van Knippenberg, 2017; Huyghebaert et al., 2018), and it is argued that it could also be beneficial for their staff. This is because the latter will be motivated to engage in DA, since their leaders do so as well. However, extant research has not yet provided conclusive evidence on this matter, and as such it should be investigated further.

Moreover, 'behavioural disengagement' has also been discussed in the current literature. This happens when an employee avoids a stressful situation by turning their attention to something else, rather than providing a service to an angry customer, leaving the stressful place, or taking a break from it (Kuba & Scheibe, 2017). However, coping with customer mistreatment and its consequences in this way is not effective most of the times (Goussinsky, 2012). Although research has shown that this may be a possible strategy, it has indicated that this is mainly an emotion-focused strategy, which cannot be used effectively and for prolonged periods of time in the organisational context (Semmer, 2003).

Venting negative emotions is another emotion-focused strategy that was suggested initially, but recent research questions the efficacy of this strategy as well. Venting indicates openly expressing one's emotions, such as anger, frustration or stress, with words or combined with body language so that others know how one feels, and also in order for that person to feel relieved from those emotions (Carver et al., 1989; Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010). Research shows that venting negative emotions is not in compliance with the organisational rules that each employee should display, and which do not allow for the disclosure of negative emotions to customers (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010; Goussinsky, 2012; Grandey et al., 2004). This research argues that venting could lead to the customer becoming more angry and frustrated, causing thereby even more stress to employees in both the short-term, while handling the situation, but also in the long-term.

The role of job autonomy as a buffer to the negative effects of SA has also been studied. Job autonomy is the extent to which an employee's job provides him/her with freedom of

choice, a high degree of independence as well as discretion in the way they perform and execute their job (Goussinsky, 2015). Job autonomy goes along with self-monitoring and drive, another aspect that has been taken into consideration when dealing with aggressive customers and EL. It has been argued that people that are high in self-monitoring are affected less by EL, and specifically SA consequences (Huang & Dai, 2010). However, there is no conclusive research so far to the best of our knowledge that examines how job autonomy related with an employee's potential to engage with DA.

Further, existing literature has identified that both group support at work and family support may be helpful in buffering against the negative effects of SA when handling customers' aggressive behaviour. This research argues that SA effects, especially during aggressive situations, may be severe without others' support (Deery et al., 2002; Goussinsky, 2011; Kinman, 2009; Kinman & Jones, 2001). Employees need to feel that they have others around to share their dissatisfaction concerning any negative interactions with customers (Appelbaum & Roy-Girard, 2007). Relatedly, minimising stress has been identified as another good buffer against the negative effects of SA during aggressive behaviour (Grandey et al., 2005). Minimising stress, though, is not something that can be achieved easily. One must consider the causes of stress and try to tackle them. However, some organisations may be focussing on overcoming stress as an outcome, ignoring its causes (Moss & Cooper, 2016). Research on the role of stress minimisation in overcoming SA and its negative effects in aggressive contexts argues that once organisations effectively manage the situations that cause stress to their employees, they will be able to create a high performing environment that would lead to a number of positive results (Robertson & Cooper, 2015). Extant research has not provided, however, conclusive evidence as to whether the presence of group support at work and the family can enable employees engage in DA in customer mistreatment circumstances.

In the following subsection we review literature that examines how employees can engage with DA during negative customer interactions.

### **Deploying DA in interactions with aggressive customers**

According to extant research, there is a positive relationship between DA and employee performance at the service recovery stage, which involves any interaction with a dissatisfied, complaining or angry customer (Hoffman, 2016). During such interactions, employees attempt to rectify the effect of the service offered by restoring customer satisfaction concerning the service interaction, and more generally, the organisation as a whole (Taegoo et al., 2012). Several studies examined what would customers need to be happy again after a perceived poor service (Goussinsky, 2015; Grandey, 2003; Karatepe & Nkendon, 2014; Lee, 2016; Pugh, 2001; Taegoo et al., 2012), and all arrived at the same conclusion, namely that customers need to see employees that are happy to serve, ready to listen, and show that they understand and care (Goussinsky, 2015). Further, most of these studies agree that customers do not only need to witness that behaviour on behalf of employees, but they also need to feel that the emotions supporting that behaviour are real.

This literature indicates that there is a need to enhance the use of DA and avoid SA during employee interactions with aggressive customers, especially in the hospitality industry. Customers would be more satisfied to see employees expressing authentically caring emotions when the former are unhappy about the service they have received; thus, they would be happier if employees performed DA. However, existing literature has demonstrated that employees mostly engage in SA during their interactions with aggressive customers (Barsade, 2002; Deephi, 2015; Goussinsky, 2015; Grandey, 2007; Harris & Reynolds, 2006; Hoffmann, 2016; Huang & Dai, 2010). Since customers need employees to display genuinely focused and dedicated emotions, it has been argued that they can tell whether employees' emotions are fake,

something which in turn would make them remain unhappy and dissatisfied, if they confirmed pretended emotions (Grandey, 2003; Groth et al., 2009; Karatepe, 2010, Lee, 2016).

This literature indicates that DA is important in service recovery procedures when an employee is dealing with an angry, dissatisfied customer (Goussinsky, 2015; Lee, 2016). Such literature argues that increased use of DA will have positive consequences in service recovery, and overall employee performance. In fact, it is argued that the negative effects that occur when SA is deployed, will be reduced or overcome with an increased use of DA. As such, employees will benefit from reduced stress and emotional exhaustion, a decrease in burnout, less employee dissatisfaction and absenteeism, as well as less feelings of depersonalisation and conflicts between their role as an employee and a family member (Taegoo et al., 2012). In this respect, recent studies investigate how the effects of SA can be effectively eliminated (Baranik et al., 2017; Kuba & Scheibe, 2017; Wing et al., 2018; Wong et al., 2017). The question raised by these scholars is whether the ways to overcome the negative consequences of SA could simultaneously work towards stimulating resort to DA, and what would be the effects from doing so in interactions with aggressive customers. This latter question has yet to be explored and our research is geared at addressing it (Goussinsky, 2015; Lee, 2016; Xanthopoulou et al., 2018).

In light of the extant literature outlined in this section, more research is required on providing a holistic understanding of (a) the conditions under which employees engage in SA and DA in the hospitality industry; (b) the effects on employees that arise from SA, and how these can be overcome; (c) whether the means to overcome the negative effects of SA can simultaneously stimulate engagement with DA; and, (d) what are the effects when employees engage in DA during interactions with aggressive customers. In the next section, we discuss the methodological underpinnings of our research as well as the methods and approach deployed to collect and analyse our research data.

## **Methodology**

The gaps that this study aims to address highlight both the exploratory nature of the phenomenon under investigation, the limited research, and therefore understanding, on this topic (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Huang & Dai, 2010; Wang & Groth, 2014). The exploratory nature of the research is underpinned, therefore, by the need to understand the processes involved in, and the consequences arising from, the enactment of SA and DA (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Creswell, 1998). Such research in turn, methodologically calls for a qualitative approach that is conducive to offering in-depth understandings to non-previously or limited researched phenomena (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Mason, 2002; Saunders et al., 2012). Further to the above, other research on the topic of this study has also deployed a qualitative research approach (e.g., Fan et al., 2019; Christou, 2018; Farmaki et al., 2017).

A qualitative survey was employed to pursue the research. This research methodology is conducive to exploring phenomena that require an in-depth understanding of perspectives, motivations, and reasoning at the individual's level (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Saunders et al., 2012). The survey was conducted in the popular tourist destination of eastern Cyprus. This geographical context is ideal for exploring the research topic in the hospitality industry, as it hosts the majority of the hospitality players operating on the island. Cyprus provides a well-established tourism product, supported by appropriate hospitality infrastructure, such as diverse theme and amusement parks, museums, food and beverage outlets, and hotels of various standards (Christou, 2018).

## **Sampling and Data Collection**



Purposive sampling contributes to generating information-rich findings that are both relevant for drawing theoretical generalizations and applicable to informing day-to-day practice (DeFeo, 2013; Khan, 2014; Patton, 2002; Suri, 2011). As such, and in line with the qualitative survey approach, purposive sampling was used to identify knowledgeable and experienced respondents capable of offering in-depth insights to address the research gaps (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Patton, 2002). Respondent identification was pursued in accordance with criteria set for participation in the survey and which aimed at targeting informants experienced in situations of customer mistreatment in hotels most likely implementing robust policies regulating the display of employee emotions in such contexts (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Fan et al., 2019, Tuckett, 2004). Selection criteria, therefore, targeted informants who were employees of five-star hotels, and who had at least five years of experience in positions of high and direct interaction with customers (i.e. receptionists, barmen/barwomen, waiters, etc.).

The reliability of our sampling criteria for the purposes of this research was confirmed, not only from the fact that these were also deployed in similar studies (e.g. Karatepe et al., 2009; Wang & Groth, 2014), but also from pilot testing our interview questions to an initial sample of seven respondents, each working at different five-star hotels. Pilot testing in this case was conducted in order to examine the depth of responses that our selected informants offered, with a view to assessing the adequacy of our sampling criteria to meet the needs of the research. Each of the authors were then asked to independently review the quality of responses obtained so as to add further rigour in the effort to set appropriate sampling criteria. The inclusion of respondents in our initial sample who worked at different five-star hotels in Cyprus, ensured receiving responses that would not be biased from the micro-dynamics of customer mistreatment impinging on a specific hotel. This approach is in line with Karatepe (2009) and Lu et al., (2013), who suggested that selecting participants from different hotels but at the same

quality ranking (e.g. five-star hotels), would provide more trustworthy and valid research outcomes. As soon as we confirmed the appropriateness of our sampling criteria, we applied snowball sampling, where already identified respondents were asked to invite people from their social network, who met the aforementioned criteria too. However, no more than five participants were taken from the same hotel and the recruitment of informants to be included in the sample stopped when information saturation was reached (Christou, 2018; Fan et al., 2019; Tsaur et al., 2019; Saunders et al., 2012).

Our purposive sampling strategy was heterogeneous in nature (Patton, 2002), allowing the researchers to embrace informants capable of offering maximum variation of perspectives, including both typical and extreme cases (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton 2002). To this end, therefore, while we made sure that all respondents met some minimum criteria, i.e. worked at five-star hotels and had a minimum of five years of work experience, we remained open in opting for respondents who: occupied different professional positions that could result in different experiences of exposure to customer mistreatment; varying length of professional experience (beyond five years); and who were both male and female. This heterogeneous sampling approach allowed ample scope for capturing the uniqueness and richness of respondents' perspectives on EL in customer mistreatment (Patton, 2002).

The final sample size of 70 respondents was obtained in about three months and a total of 70 interviews were conducted (see Table 1 for details about the informants). We argue that the large number of participants and their length of experience in the field, were necessary to reach reliable conclusions concerning such personal and sensitive matter as EL in customer mistreatment is.

‘Insert Table 1 about here’

Informal, in-depth semi-structured interviews were employed as the appropriate data collection tool, as this method has been proven to make people feel comfortable, offering the scope from

emergent themes to arise (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Each interview proceeded from a list of general ‘grand tour’ questions (Christou, 2018) (see Table 2 for interview protocol). This interview protocol guided the interview process and at the same time provided the flexibility to request additional information in response to what the researchers saw as significant responses (Bryman, 2004). Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes, and the actual place in which interviews took place was mutually agreed with each of the selected respondents. All interviews were recorded (with each participant’s consent) and were transcribed. Interviews were conducted in English and no remuneration or any other ‘gift’ in exchange of respondents’ time was agreed other than sharing with them the anonymous results of the research.

‘Insert Table 2 about here’

## **Data Analysis**

An abductive reasoning was used to analyse the data (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000; Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Suddaby, 2006). An abductive logic recognises that theoretical understandings previously acquired as part of the research process should loosely guide data analysis (Dubois & Gadde, 2002), allowing though at the same time ample scope for any data-emergent, non-theory fitting, insights to inform the analysis (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000; Dubois & Gadde, 2002). To analyse the data abductively, thematic content analysis was applied to the 70 transcripts and interview notes<sup>3</sup>, involving three major rounds of coding, which were operationalised through the use of Microsoft Excel. Thematic content analysis aims at identifying the underlying meanings of the narrative, by reading the data, delving deeper into their underlying issues, and organising the findings around common themes. The *first round of*

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<sup>3</sup> We deployed thematic content analysis as a tool to abductively analysis our data in line with other state-of-the-art research in this field (e.g. Tsaur et al., 2019; Christou, 2018).

*coding* involved applying conceptual codes, fully reflecting terms used by the respondents (Gioia et al., 2013), to the textual data from the transcripts and interview notes, until saturation was reached (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This process led to the generation of a large volume of first-order concepts (Gioia et al., 2013). A *second round of coding* involved an exhaustive process of identifying similarities, patterns and differences among the first-order concepts with a view to narrowing them down to a distilled and, thus, more manageable number (Gioia et al., 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The second-order themes that emerged out of this process, therefore, represented constellations of the large number of first-order concepts, and were coded using respondents' used terminology (Gioia et al., 2013). Eventually, a *third round of coding* referred to a back-and-forth process between first-order concepts, second-order themes and the theoretical underpinnings of the research (Gioia et al., 2013) on EL, contagious emotions and affective events. This exercise involved blocks of verbatim text re-organised and re-examined with a view to identifying which of their assigned concepts and themes could be interpreted in the light of existing theories and which could not (Gioia et al., 2013). This last round of coding was informed by a concomitant consideration of data and existing theory (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007), and led to the constellation of second-order themes to a fewer, aggregate, thematic categories. (Christou, 2018; Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Gioia et al., 2013). The outcome of this analysis is presented in the following section and is summarised in a conceptual framework thereto (Farmaki et al., 2020; Christou et al., 2019; Christou, 2018).

Finally, to ensure the trustworthiness and procedural rigor of the research, naturalistic inquiry approach principles were followed (see also, Fan et al., 2019; Christou, 2018). In this respect, transferability, credibility, confirmability and dependability were assessed. Transferability of the research was considered by providing a detailed description of the qualitative research process, including the interview protocol and informants' demographic and

work information. This approach enables future researchers to conduct an empirical transfer of the current findings in other contexts or in the same context at a different point in time (Fan et al., 2019). To ensure credibility, triangulation and peer debriefing techniques were used. First, based on the data triangulation premise (Fan et al., 2019), informants were recruited from various channels and sources (purposive and snowball sampling techniques). The interviews were conducted at multiple times (over three months) and places, with participants from different cities across Cyprus. Further to data triangulation, investigator triangulation was also applied. All researchers conducted intra-team communication at a regular basis, including the data analysis process, to ensure the credibility and accuracy of the results. Theory triangulation was also deployed by considering multiple theories and perspectives during data analysis (Jack & Raturi, 2006). As two of the authors were simultaneously and separately conducting the coding process, the dependency of the coding results was examined by the coders' iterative and interactive discussion, while the remaining authors acted as critical 'friends' reviewing for consistency and completeness. Regarding confirmability, an audit trail, including interview recordings, transcripts, and minutes of research design discussion, was safely kept to verify the overall research process and results.

Finally, for ethical considerations, the informants were given assurances that their names and comments would remain confidential. In the following section, we proceed with the presentation and discussion of our findings.

## **Findings**

### **SA as the main way to engage in emotional labour in customer mistreatment**

Our findings confirm extant literature (Goussinsky, 2015; Grandey et al., 2007) in that employees engage in SA when they interact with aggressive customers. According to the theory

of contagious emotions, employees get naturally infected with feelings of discomfort (and anger) when interacting with aggressive customers (Huang & Dai, 2010). Scholars concluded that in interactions with aggressive customers, employees tend to engage in SA, as display rules deem it unacceptable to exhibit such negative feelings in interactions with customers. Sensibly, however, it is suppressing and challenging for employees to deal with aggressive customers when the organisation does not allow them to demonstrate their true feelings. The respondents agreed that they perceive a customer as aggressive when s/he either complains in an unacceptable manner or raises their voice. As part of such experiences, our findings demonstrate the employees reporting feelings of discomfort when dealing with such customers, as organisational rules require them to suppress their negative feelings and treat customer in a positive way, as if unaffected by their behaviour.

*I would say that an aggressive customer for me is the one that behaves in an unacceptable manner. I mean, I have been told that I cannot shout at any point in front of the customer. I need to stay positive. So if it is unacceptable on my behalf [to misbehave], then I cannot tolerate this from the customer. We are all human beings and we have rights as well as obligations, whether we are a customer or a service provider. Unfortunately, I need to stay calm and therefore I hide my feelings and mainly display fake ones.*

(Respondent R3)

Respondents were further triggered to describe how they handle their emotions when they interact with aggressive customers. Some respondents needed clarifications as to what 'handling' emotions means, and the interviewer gave a couple of examples to facilitate understanding. Most respondents agreed that when aggressive customers make them feel annoyed, angry or irritated, they suppress those feelings and smile sympathetically.

*As I have said, I get upset but I hide it to put on my service smile. I pretend. I become an actor. What else can I do?*

(Respondent R18)

*I don't think anyone could say anything different. All the time I have been working in the industry this is what I do. I just hide my stress and frustration.*

### **The negative effects of SA when interacting with aggressive customers**

Our findings came to confirm previous research on the effects of SA when interacting with aggressive customers.

#### ***Stress, symptoms of burnout and reduced well-being***

All participants reported that stress is the primary effect they experience when they have to hide their emotions in efforts to deal effectively with an aggressive customer. They reported that this source of stress has a significantly higher contribution to a deteriorating well-being, than the ‘routine’ stress that people may be feeling at work. Respondents said their stress affected their ability to perform to a great extent at both home and at work.

*Well, stress is the number one symptom. If you ask anybody who is doing the same job as I do they will say the same thing. I have so much stress not only at the time of interaction, as it continues for the rest of the day sometimes. I am shaking, feeling that I am not well in general. If I may say so, I take at least two painkillers per day due to headache, which [I believe] is stress-related.*

(Respondent R5)

*Stress!!! What else can I say about this? I cry a lot of times when I get in my car to go home to release all this stress that those situations are causing me.*

(Respondent R28)

A number of respondents reported experiencing symptoms of burnout as a result of excessive stress at work.

*Unfortunately, it is not only stress though. It is beyond that. I get severe headaches, every day [...] most of the days I cannot even play with my children. I just lay on the couch and I don't want to talk to anybody. The*

*neurologist I have visited said my headaches are being called tension headaches. Caused from stress.*

(Respondent R1)

The findings confirm extant literature that burnout is a negative effect from employees engaging in SA in general, and when they resort to SA in aggressive customer situations, in particular (Dewe et al., 2010). It is important to note here that respondents who were more prolific about such symptoms have been those working in the industry for more than ten years, having thus accumulated an extensive stock of experiences from interactions with aggressive customers.

*It was easier when I first started work. I was more able to cope with challenging customers. Now, I am not. I go home and I cannot tolerate anything, nobody can talk to me sometimes. I feel sick, cannot even help my children with their homework. It gets worst as years go by. I even thought of changing a job after all those years.*

(Respondent R28, 22 years of work experience)

### ***Increase in smoking and alcohol consumption***

When asked how their personal habits were affected from experiences with aggressive customers, the majority of respondents reported that they started smoking, increased the number of cigarettes they smoke or that they consume more alcohol after work. Eight of them reported that they drank during work to cope with the demanding nature of their job, while ten respondents said that they started smoking within a year of working in the industry. These respondents were either non-smokers before or were occasional smokers, who smoked only when they were out with friends.

*I started smoking when I started working. Before that, I did not even know what smoking is all about. This is how this situation has affected me at a personal level. I know that aggressive customers among other situations, such as aggressive managers are among the most important factors that have caused this.*

(Respondent R20)



These respondents agreed that they had to pretend their emotions especially when dealing with aggressive customers, and they admitted smoking was a bad habit but something that at least helped them cope with the stress.

*I smoke three packets of cigarettes per day! This is how I am being affected!  
Three packets! I know it is a bad habit but I cannot do anything about it. It helps me cope with all the customer stress.*

(Respondent R8)

### ***'Shielding' the family from work pressures with SA at home***

The respondents also reported an increased tendency to hide their negative emotions when with their family. Most of them argued that over the years they have inevitably been handling difficult situations at work, and that this experience led them to expend efforts not to transfer at home any negative feelings accrued thereto. They reported that even though there are cases they could be feeling negatively about an interaction with an aggressive customer, they have developed the habit of faking their emotions at work to such extent that they transpose this habit when at home too in efforts to protect their family. Yet, they report that SA at home does not seem to have the intended consequences on their and their family's life at home. In addition, the importance of family support plays a very clear and important role.

*"Obviously family and friends are important but I want them to allow me to keep a distance between work and personal life. I want them to be supportive, understand when I am not in the mood and not forcing me in any way."*

(Respondent 70)

*“I just need understanding and patience. I need them to help me forget about work not reminding it to me. I don’t like work problems to interfere to my family life. Therefore they simply need to show understanding if I am not feeling well.”*

*(Respondent 18)*

*“I don’t want the problems at work to be discussed at home. I don’t think this is of any help. I just need my family to understand, show patience when I am angry. If I want to talk to them at some point, I will. I just don’t need them to ask me questions or get me into discussion. This will at least reduce stress at home.”*

*(Respondent 58)*

*Personally, I hide my negative emotions at home since I don’t want to harm my relationship with my husband and kids. But this causes more stress to me and this does not go unnoticed, unfortunately.*

*(Respondent R2)*

*I am working in the industry for ten years. All those years I have tried to keep my family out of the everyday problems I face, such as angry customers, which is a regular thing, especially now that customers are more demanding. Therefore, I find myself acting at home as well, putting on a smile in front of my wife so that I don’t disturb my family life. This caused even more stress, though, most of the times. My family life is being affected negatively since hiding my feelings makes me dissatisfied and this is something that shows too.*

*(Respondent R62)*

### ***Negative perception of colleagues, the managers and the job in general***

Having to engage in SA when dealing with aggressive customers, also surfaced responses that identified negative perceptions of jobs, colleagues, and managers. Blaming the organisation, the management, or other colleagues for having to deal with aggressive and complaining customers has been a recurring theme that arose in the interviews.

*My relationships with my colleagues and managers are negatively affected. I am so stressed out that I cannot smile to them and feel positive. Also, the*

*managers are not helping us, so I tend to feel negatively (about them), and it shows.*

*(Respondent R70)*

*All of us tend to feel more negatively about each other. All those negative emotions come out of the negativity that we face from our customers. And the fact that we are faking...*

*(Respondent R46)*

### ***Increase in absenteeism and sick-leave requests***

Responses also surfaced a need to take sick-leave more often due to having to engage with SA. In this respect, respondents argued that resorting to SA in interactions with aggressive customers often made them feel they could not resist but also to resort to SA to claim sick-leave as well. They argued that while they do request sick-leave when feeling unwell, they also, at times, do so in order to get some rest and distance themselves from their demanding customer service role.

*I take more sick-leave due to this issue. I sometimes lie. I tell them that I am sick even though I just want to stay at home and get away at least for a day.”*

*(Respondent R50)*

*I take more days off because I am being affected negatively and I want to get away from this just for a while. I call in sick without being physically sick sometimes. I am mentally sick, though.”*

*(Respondent R13)*

### ***Making more mistakes and decrease in job performance***

Our findings also surfaced an acknowledgement that employees who suppress their emotions and are unable to manage them effectively during stressful situations with aggressive customers, tend to make more mistakes.

*I tend to make mistakes and my performance is being decreased as well. I mean I am a waiter for more than ten years now and whenever I face such situations, I*

*make mistakes. Right before the interview, for example, I had to deal with a very aggressive customer. I could have handled him better but I got confused and I said that we cannot give him what he wanted. Yet, this was wrong. Because I was stressed, I forgot that we can now offer this product on the all-inclusive package. Now that I am thinking about it, I made him angrier simply because I got confused and had black-out with all his aggressiveness.”*

*(Respondent R16)*

### ***Spill over of negative attitudes towards customers in general***

Interestingly, our research also surfaced that because respondents acknowledged they had to suppress their negative feelings when serving aggressive customers, they developed similar attitudes towards their customers *in general*.

*In general, it [faking emotions] changes the way we perceive customers. Yes, I admit that I am sometimes negative towards customers in general. This has happened after all those years of facing negativity and not being able to handle it openly.*

*(Respondent R52)*

The analysis revealed a pattern of responses arguing that customers tend to over-react in various situations, with service staff developing a habit of exhibiting negative attitudes towards them. Respondents argued that it is a common disposition in the hospitality industry that customers often complain because they want to get something in return or get something free of charge, exacerbating thereby the negative feelings of employees towards them.

*I tend to feel negatively about customers in general. I know, and we almost all know in the industry, that they may be shouting to get something free in return. This is how it is, really. We all know it after all, and management knows this as well.*

*(Respondent R69)*

Yet, as argued before, there is research claiming that engaging more in DA when interacting with aggressive customers, would lead to better service performance and a decrease in both the

physiological, and the psychological negative effects of SA (Goussinsky, 2015; Huang & Dai 2010; Hur et al., 2015; Karatepe, 2010; Karatepe & Nkendon, 2014; Taegoo et al., 2012). However, and as noted in the rationale supporting this research, this claim has not been empirically explored in terms of how resort to DA can be achieved in aggressive customer contexts and whether it can emerge as an outcome of changing the conditions that cultivate a SA approach in customer mistreatment. Our findings as presented hereafter attempt to close this gap.

### **Inducing DA in aggressive customer interactions**

#### *Developing a genuinely caring attitude towards customers*

Our findings show that when employees are capable of understanding the reasons behind their customers' anger or anxiety, they are in a better position to handle these feelings without being infected by them. This in turn makes them capable of displaying genuinely caring and positive, i.e. DA, emotions towards complaining or aggressive customers, than pretending to be caring while suppressing negative emotions generated out of a superficial engagement with the customer. In addition, our findings demonstrate that employees who maintain closer customer relationships act more genuinely towards appreciating and acting on their customers' feelings and concerns. It should be noted that engaging in DA to handle negative customer emotions involves employees developing their empathetic skills, which is something important in order for them to be able to restore the customer service experience. This raises the relevance of emotional intelligence in developing skills that enable DA. According to the respondents, developing empathy to enable DA engagement is more likely to be achieved when they experience a positive work environment; enjoy job autonomy and drive; work as a team; their

managers support them with constructive to negating negative emotions display rules, offer positive feedback, and conducive to DA leadership; are offered tailored training; and enjoy family support. To them, better conditions at work will equip them with all the necessary psychological and emotional skill-set that shall enable them engage in DA, something which will in turn reflect positively to the customers as well.

*I would be able to offer more genuinely caring emotions to customers, if I felt positive myself both towards customers and my job in general. Give me more teamwork, some positive feedback and let me receive some help from my managers. I would then be more able but also more willing to treat my customers' complaints with both really positive and genuine emotions.*

(Respondent R23)

### ***Positive internal organisational conditions***

The findings reveal that a positive work environment is an important factor, contributing to a mutual understanding among employees and management, creating thereby a safe and secure place to work, which can help them develop positive emotions that can strengthen their capacity to engage in DA in customer mistreatment contexts. To our respondents, a constructive, supporting and empowering environment, makes them feel motivated to unleash the maximum of their capacity, deploying all the positive emotions they carry over from their accumulated and collective experience at the organisation as anticontagion buffers towards aggressive customers.

*You are asking me what would help me offer more genuinely caring and positive emotions. That means not acting as I do all the time. Well, the internal culture should have been more positive. The things that we discussed about before, that is. Managers that are helpful, give us more positive feedback, an increase in teamwork, better targeted display rules. All these would help me handle in a genuinely positive and understanding way difficult customers. Being more positive. Simple to me, but difficult for the managers to get it maybe.*

(Respondent R12)

### ***Better leadership from managers***

Previous findings indicate that trying to understand why customers behave negatively would lead to positive outcomes in customer service. To this end, the respondents of our study argued that a manager's leadership skills are also important. Our findings reveal that a manager should have the ability to listen to their employees, understand and help them to develop their interpersonal and emotional intelligence skills, something which in turn would help them to better understand the customers' needs and act genuinely to them. The respondents also argued that managers exhibiting these leadership skills, should also be capable of demonstrating DA towards their employees, customers and other stakeholders. Their argument is that a good manager-leader demonstrating engagement with DA would inspire employees to embrace this behavioural approach as well in their interaction with customers be these aggressive or not. Therefore, our findings lead us to argue that managers improving their leadership skills based on principles of honesty, empathy and a willingness to share the challenging customers experiences, would create a work environment where employees are more willing to engage in DA, especially when interacting with aggressive customers.

*I could offer more genuine emotions if I had a leader in front of me who has managed to do the same with the customers. You know the people who have the power need to help us in any way possible. To simply lead the way towards those positive emotions. This would be helpful.*

(Respondent R44)

*We need to follow an example, maybe. The example of our managers and how they behave. My manager seems to be acting in front of the customers, especially when they act aggressively. There are times when the customer leaves and my manager talks very negatively to me about that customer and his/her attitude. There are also various occasions that they talk down to us. I tend to follow their examples, really. They are the leaders, right?*

(Respondent R18)

### ***Training towards a DA emotional approach***

Our study also revealed that the respondents would find it beneficial if they were trained to understand customers better and be able to act more genuinely (DA) during their interactions with them. Training on its own does not seem to be enough to be able to engage in DA, however. The abovementioned components, such as a more positive organisational culture and managers with leadership skills are necessary for training to be successful.

*I said it before, training that is concerned with managing negative feelings would be helpful. But believe me, if you bring the most professional person in the world to teach me the most advanced techniques, it won't work if you don't have a positive working environment and leaders! Leaders that care and show the way. Provide that, and then they can train us! Not the other way around.*

(Respondent R62)

Some respondents also mentioned that even though there were some attempts from the management team to provide training, they believed that the organisational environment was not conducive, and the managers were not leading in way, to make any training attempts have a bearing in changing their EL strategy towards aggressive customers.

*Ok, and training as well [is important...] to learn the techniques that will enable me to offer more natural and genuine emotions. They have offered various types of trainings at the hotels I have been working for before. But I said it a lot of times during this interview. If management team does not lead the way and the organisational culture is not helping you then you do nothing with training only. I will still act in front of the customer, get stressed after that and all the negativity will be created again. So train me at the right time with the right conditions being in place.*

(Respondent R28)

In terms of training itself, some respondents also argued that they attended training sessions on customer service, without much success, as such sessions were often not tailor-made to their needs and to the industry practices.



*I believe we need to be trained on how to display more naturally caring emotions in hospitality and what ways to use to help us understand our customers' feelings more.*

(Respondent R62)

*Training would be beneficial under certain conditions. If the culture is not positive and if we don't get the right leadership approach then... sorry... training will be a waste of time.*

(Respondent R37)

The analysis of the findings are discussed in the next section, which culminates with the contributions of the study, its limitations, and suggestions for further research.

## **Discussion**

This research generated findings addressing gaps from an inconclusive and fragmented literature in the deployment of EL strategies, their enabling conditions, and their effects in circumstances of customer mistreatment in the hospitality industry. More specifically this research aimed at offering a holistic understanding of (a) the conditions under which employees engage in SA and DA in the hospitality industry; (b) the effects on employees that arise from SA, and how these can be overcome; (c) whether the means to overcome the negative effects of SA can simultaneously stimulate engagement with DA; and, (d) what are the effects when employees engage in DA during interactions with aggressive customers. At Figure 1, we illustrate our conceptual framework articulating how organisations in the hospitality industry can develop an understanding of the relationships involved among specific organisational conditions, the EL strategies these propagate, and the effects that emerge out of those strategies for employees, customers and organisations in customer mistreatment contexts. In detail, our findings confirm the literature on organisational conditions instigating the deployment of SA EL strategies in handling negative feelings from aggressive customers. As such, the findings identify, in line with extant literature, the following conditions: Lack of management

leadership, support and provision of feedback to service employees; lack of paradigmatic management engagement with aggressive customers; lack of teamwork to share the challenge of handling aggressive customers; the provision of occasional and non-specialised to hospitality (i.e. across the board) training; lack of work autonomy and drive coupled with workplace alienation; and lack of family support. Besides, our findings confirm extant literature in that service employees are more likely to engage with SA when they are exposed to management's dispositions on customer service that underpin 'wrapping-up' a case with a challenging customer. Such dispositions approach negatively and suspiciously complaining and aggressive customers, as they are based on a perception that the latter deploy aggression in order to earn anything over-and-above the expected service provision. Further, the findings extend the literature on SA EL by identifying professional conduct principles that underlie rules of display, which endorse a superficial, apersonal, and effectively pretended approach to handling complaining and aggressive customers. Such rules control service employee behaviour by offering a sterile 'to do and not to do' list on how to close a case raised by a complaining and aggressive customer until the next case calls for a resolution. Our findings highlight that display rules that ignore the emotional implications to employees' customer service conduct, do not guide them in paying attention to understanding the reasons behind customers' negative emotions, and reinforce that way SA EL.

'Insert Figure 1 about here'

The research further provides a holistic picture of fragmented literature on the various negative SA effects that implicate employees, the organisation, and eventually the customers. These are: Stress, a reduced sense of well-being, and symptoms of burnout (the latter for employees

working for more than ten years in the industry); smoking and alcohol consumption; transposing SA at home with negative effects in family life; negative perception of colleagues, managers, and the workplace; absenteeism and increase in sick-leave; making more mistakes and decrease in job performance; as well as a negative attitude towards customers in general. Other than a sense of burnout, all other SA effects were evidenced among respondents from all age groups.

The findings confirmed previous studies that under the aforementioned conditions, resort to SA by service employees takes place routinely and reflexively, leading the way to the also aforementioned SA effects. The routine and reflexive resort to SA can be explained by virtue of both the theory of contagious emotions and of affective events. That is, the more prevalent the conditions instigating the suppressed, superficial and pretended handling of negative customer emotions are, the more likely it is that service employees will be infected and affected by these emotions, reinforcing in this way through their 'automated', reflexive conduct the very conditions that give rise to their SA EL.

Most importantly, our findings reveal comprehensive ways to control and overcome the negative effects of SA EL per se, extending literature on means to handle the negative consequences from customer aggressiveness in general. As per Figure 1, the production, reproduction and reinforcement of conditions instigating SA, will eventually give rise to critical affective events that question the efficacy of those conditions, progressively nullify them, and spur the need for change (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). These events are conceptualised in our model as recurring and accumulating incidents of poor employee performance and customer satisfaction that mobilise change in the dispositions and other organisational conditions that concern handling effectively situations of customer aggressiveness. Such change in our framework points towards conditions that arise from efforts to overcome the effects of SA EL, while simultaneously instigating DA EL in customer mistreatment situations. These conditions

confirm literature on DA enablers and refer to: Management embracing dispositions that approach handling customer aggressiveness on the grounds of employees getting under the skin of the customer's feelings to identify the reasons behind their negativity; the provision of positive feedback and empowerment by management to service employees (Blanchard et al., 1999; Jean & Yom, 2014; Seibert et al., 2004); management's genuine engagement with aggressive customers that conforms to the aforementioned dispositions, setting thereby the example for service employees; presence of teamwork in handling difficult customers; provision of tailored training to reinforce DA EL in handling customer mistreatment; an organisational culture allowing for job autonomy, drive and identification with the workplace; and, employees' family support. Besides, findings extend literature in DA by identifying rules of display that are capable of inducing DA EL when guiding employees to focus on empathising with their customer's negative emotions, as a way of helping them to identify the reasons behind their negativity, and offer targeted and genuinely caring services. Our findings show that when these conditions are present, they enable service employees to develop skills that allow them to consciously engage with DA. These skills refer to empowerment in employees' developing positive and genuine feelings (Blanchard et al., 1999; Jean & Yom, 2014; Lucas et al., 2008; Seibert et al., 2004) in customer mistreatment contexts, as well as demonstrating empathy to aggressive customers. These emotional intelligence skills (Austin et al, 2007; Ioannidou & Konstantikaki, 2008; Jean & Yom, 2014; Lucas et al., 2008; Skinner & Spurgeon, 2005) help us conceptualise DA EL as an anticontagion buffer to customer aggressiveness and negativity, enabling thereby employees offering effective customer service. Our research in turn showed that engagement with DA spawns positive effects in handling customer mistreatment, which in turn have a reinforcing impact on the very conditions that enabled them in the first place. Our study identified the following effects: Employees demonstrating positive thinking and a genuinely caring attitude towards aggressive customers;

employees' sense of belonging to the organisation and the presence of team spirit empowers them to handle challenging customers; management's active empowerment of employees on empathising with their aggressive customers' feelings to appreciate their underlying motives; managers' readiness to lead the way in demonstrating conscious care and service restoration in situations of customer aggressiveness.

In what follows, we offer the contributions of our research.

### ***Theoretical contributions***

Our study contributes in a number of ways. First, it offers a comprehensive framework in the under-researched area of handling aggressive customers in the hospitality literature. Until now, research was focusing more on handling aggressive colleagues and supervisors and less on handling customers' behaviours. The current study has added to the existing knowledge on how to handle aggressive customers by placing emphasis on emotions, which impact on individual well-being and performance. Theory has revealed ways to handle angry and upset customers but has not effectively dealt with employees' emotions and how those affect the whole interaction. Specifically, our framework provides valuable insights on the conditions under which employees engage in SA and DA EL strategies in customer mistreatment situations, while articulating how shifting from SA to DA can be effected. Sparse research has been incomplete in this subject, and has not focused on the role of EL in aggressive customer contexts per se; rather, it focused more generally on how to overcome the negative consequences arising from customer aggressiveness. In contrast, this study contributes insights both of employees routinely and reflexively engaging in SA in such contexts, and of the conditions that can enhance employee performance and customer satisfaction through DA EL in a uniquely demanding industry as that of hospitality is (Karatepe, 2011). Second, our study contributes to the theory of EL a holistic understanding of the conditions and effects implicated

in both SA and DA. To our knowledge, this is the first study that brings the pieces of a fragmented puzzle together to produce a framework on the conditions instigating SA, its effects, and how these can give rise to critical affective events to change these conditions and in turn enable the instigation of DA. Third, we contribute a perspective of DA to the literature of contagious emotions where it is conceptualised as an anticontagion buffer to the negative feelings of aggressive customers. Our findings show that DA can help employees shield themselves from those feelings, while enabling them at the same time to think positively and attempt empathetically to appreciate their customers' feelings, and their underlying reasons. The latter are seen as pre-requisites for employees offering a value-adding customer service. Fourth, we contribute to affective events theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) a perspective of events that are critical, due to their recurring and cumulative nature, in affecting prevalent emotions, dispositions and behaviours. Such critical affective events are capable of spurring changes that centre on restructuring the very conditions implicating employee conduct, employee performance, as well as employee and customer satisfaction. Fifth, we contribute to the literature of marketing, and more specifically to that of customer service, a holistic framework on appreciating the role that EL can play in handling challenging customers. As it has been discussed in the literature review, customers are able to understand whether employees exhibit genuinely positive and caring emotions during their service experience, and tend to feedback more positively towards organisations whose employees are performing that way (Boyd, 2002). As such, our developed framework adds to the current theory in terms of how to enhance customer experience in challenging customer contexts.

Finally, our study contributes novel insights in the literature of management control. More specifically, at the core of management control theory is that employees do not always perform according to the organisation's expectations because of motivational problems (Merchant, 1985; Merchant & Van der Stede, 2012; Ouchi, 1979). These problems reside in

that individuals are self-driven and thus that there is often an incongruence between individual and organisation objectives (Merchant, 1985; Merchant & Van der Stede, 2012). Theory on management control has attempted to address motivational problems (Latham, 2004; Merchant & Van der Stede, 2012) in employees' performance through the design of appropriate management control systems (Malmi & Brown, 2008) comprising behaviour controls, such as display rules and guidelines in our study, coupled with appropriate incentive and reward schemes (Condly et al., 2003; Malmi & Brown, 2008). Behaviour controls guide employees' behaviour and actions towards the achievement of a particular objective, while incentive and rewards schemes are introduced to address motivational problems such as effort aversion in objective attainment (Condly et al., 2003; Malmi & Brown, 2008; Merchant, 1985; Ouchi, 1979). Our study contributes insights in that behaviour controls and incentive and reward schemes need to embrace measures to guide behaviour and incentivise performance, which are centred on developing positive emotions about the organisation and workplace. This is in order to develop intrinsically dedicated to the organisation employees capable of handling challenging situations such as customer mistreatment. So far, the literature on management control has been prolific in identifying behaviour controls that are exhaustive in terms of the detail of the guidelines they offer and incentive and reward schemes that comprise both monetary and non-monetary awards (Condly et al., 2003; Malmi & Brown, 2008; Merchant & Van der Stede, 2012). However, a recognition of the importance of linking these control and performance arrangements with the cultivation of appropriate emotions to employees is notable by its absence.

### ***Practical implications***

This study also contributes to practice in a number of ways. First, the results of the research show that employees need training on how to engage in DA that includes aspects of emotional

intelligence, such as understanding other people's emotions and dealing with them effectively. Training employees on how to develop DA skills, could include trained imagination. Trained imagination, refers to a method where when one actively invokes thoughts, images and memories to be able to induce the associated emotion to guide their behaviour. For example, an employee thinking of positive interactions with colleagues or examples of management's support, as well of incentive measures and feedback that made them feel happy and proud for their workplace, will induce positive emotions to guide their conduct (Hoschild, 1983). Therefore, this research contributes to this aspect by guiding managers in the hospitality industry to conduct a proper training analysis that would boost employees' customer mistreatment skills. Relatedly, training should be designed to help employees handle their own emotions and the emotions of others more effectively by building appropriate positive anticontagion emotional buffers.

Second, this study has provided an in-depth account of employees' perspectives on handling customer mistreatment in the hospitality industry. As such, it could provide managers with valuable insights on the conditions that employees identified as encouraging SA EL, the effects that arise thereto and how employees perceive that DA could be enabled to overcome the negative effects of SA. Effectively, our findings support a bottom-up management approach in refining and improving conditions conducive to the provision of value-adding customer service through DA. Relatedly, managers should pay due attention to introducing organisational conditions, and among others, display rules and incentive schemes that are enriched with empowerment and empathetic provisions to enable a positive and genuinely caring customer service conduct in customer mistreatment. In other words, display rules and incentive schemes should not merely be aiming at a box-ticking closure of an aggressive customer case, but also to the demonstration of genuinely positive and caring behaviour by service employees, which will in turn reflect favourably on those customers' experience.



## **Concluding remarks**

Drawing on EL, contagious events, affective events and emotional intelligence theories, this research provided a holistic framework identifying the conditions and effects of SA and DA EL in customer mistreatment situations in the hospitality industry, as well as the stimuli involved in changing these conditions to enable DA. While resort to SA was identified as the predominant EL strategy that the participants of the research engaged with, deployment of DA was approached by way of them identifying the negative effects that arise from SA EL and ways through which such effects could be overcome. In turn, the respondents argued that the steps required to overcome the negative effects of SA are those that refer to reconfiguring its enabling conditions so that the latter can then induce a DA EL conduct by service employees. Effectively, our study offers a customer service employees' perspective on how to overcome the negative effects that arise when they operate under specific conditions that guide them towards a SA EL strategy. Our research concludes that engagement with a DA EL strategy enables service employees to deploy positive emotions about their workplace and job, acting thereby as an anticontagion buffer against the negative emotions and behaviour exhibited by aggressive customers. It turns for DA EL to infuse positive emotions to service employees, it relies on them developing emotional intelligence skills such as empowerment and empathy, which are seen to be encouraged when certain conditions are in place such as: rules of display that pay attention to the generation of genuinely positive feelings at work place; management's dispositions that to restore customer satisfaction it is important to get 'under the skin' of aggressive customers' emotions; management's paradigmatic leadership, positive feedback, engagement and empowerment when it comes to handling aggressive customers; a sense of

teamwork in such customer context; tailored training to DA techniques; job autonomy and drive, as well as workplace identification; and family support.

This research is not without its limitations, however, which at the same time though, point towards direction for further research. For example, the purposive sampling strategy deployed in this research identified respondents working in five-star hotels only. While this measure ensured parity and some consistency in terms of the organisational context within which most of the conditions of our framework surfaced, adding thereby rigour to our findings, recent literature posits that research findings may be different if samples include three-star, four-star or five-star hotels as well (Karatepe, 2011; Lu et al., 2013). While the findings indicate that it is important to examine five-star hotels due to customers' high demands and expectations (Karatepe, 2011; Lu et al., 2013), it would be interesting to see how the results of this study would differentiate (if at all) should the sample comprised only three or four-star hotels or indeed stratifications of three, four and five-star hotels. Besides, our selection criteria involved identifying respondents with at least five years of work experience resulting in participants with vast differences in their work experience. Our study was not able to capture in full any subtleties arising from this variation in terms of the effect of their work experience on their capacity to deploy EL strategies in handling aggressive customers. Future research could explore the effect of work experience on EL strategies mobilised in aggressive customer contexts and the capacity of employees to deploy DA, in particular. Furthermore, our sample comprised a balance of male and female respondents but did not delve into any potential differences arising in employees' perspectives on EL arising from gender. Perhaps, future research could shed light on the role of demographics and especially gender in handling aggressive customers through EL strategies, and DA in particular. Finally, future research should benefit from the cross-fertilization of multi-theory perspectives, including both

quantitative and qualitative research methodologies, contributing thereby towards the advancement of this domain from an emergent to a paradigmatic status.

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