

ABSTRACT

In the modern world, demographic shifts and globalization have led to a higher incidence of interactions among diverse people. Service interaction is at the heart of the service experience and is influenced by employees and customers. Frontline staff must be aware of how easy it is for interaction to be unpleasant due to misinterpretations caused by social differences, which can lead to negative consequences, such as customer incivility. This paper proposes a conceptual framework to uncover possible ways to diminish perceptions of customer incivility during service encounters. Based on social identity theory and the interpersonal process model of intimacy, we argue that the social distance employees perceive from customers will influence their adoption of two distinct behavioral strategies – self-disclosure and customer-oriented facades of conformity – aimed at establishing a relationship with customers. These strategies are further proposed to activate different patterns of employee-customer relationships – integrated into the overarching construct of *relational gradient* – that are, in turn, supposed to diminish employee perceptions of customer incivility. We also identify temporal relational orientation as a boundary condition that moderates the effects of perceived social distance on perceived customer incivility.

Keywords: relational gradient; customer incivility; self-disclosure; facades of conformity; social distance; FLE.

Unveiling Customer Incivility In Socially Distant Service Encounters: A Relational Gradient Perspective

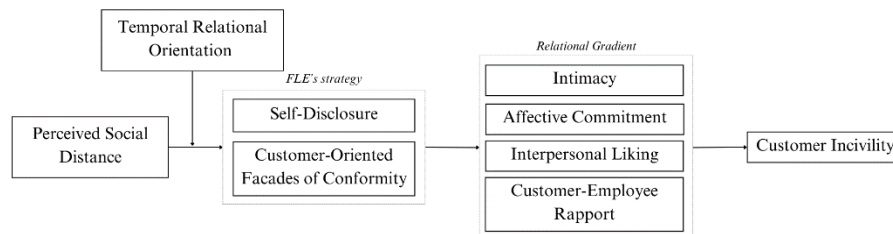
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In today's workplace, demographic shifts and globalization have changed the rules of interpersonal interactions. These continuous changes increase the incidence of interactions among different or socially distant people. Perceived social distance (PSD) is defined as the degree of perceived separation between people based on salient features (Shemla et al., 2016), such as demographic factors, cultural background, and cognitive aspects. Given the relational nature of the service industry, PSD in service encounters can substantially impact customers, employees, and organizations. Indeed, diversity has been defined as a double-edged sword, given its potential to act as an informational resource but also as a source of interpersonal conflict (van Knippenberg et al., 2013). Given the importance of positive exchange relationships between service employees and customers for business success, the frontline staff should be aware of how easy it is for small gestures, habits, and verbal and non-verbal communication events to be misinterpreted by individuals. Service interaction is at the core of the service experience and is influenced by both employees and customers (Groth et al., 2019). A possible

consequence of the failure in the service encounter is customer incivility (CI), defined as low-intensity discourteous, deviant behavior with an ambiguous intent to harm an employee, violating courtesy and mutual respect (Sliter et al., 2010). Even though CI is acknowledged as a growing issue in the service industry, the literature has mainly devoted attention to the consequences of these episodes. We identified three major gaps in the literature. First, a dearth of research focuses on diversity issues in the service encounter (Groth et al., 2019). The topic has been mainly addressed in marketing, focusing on customer-related outcomes. Therefore, many aspects of this theme have been missed from an organizational perspective, limiting our understanding of service employees' role in these encounters. Second, while a vast body of knowledge has been accumulated on diversity dynamics within teams and organizations focusing on objective differences, very limited attention has been devoted to understanding the role of FLEs' perceived diversity in service encounters (Shemla et al., 2016). Finally, few researchers have attempted to study CI as an outcome variable (e.g., Lee et al., 2022). The literature has essentially focused on the consequences of incivility. A clearer understanding of how to minimize its perception is thus warranted to feed current theorizing from an organizational perspective and derive practical implications aimed at reducing its adverse effects on FLEs.

The present paper aims to develop a theoretical model that attempts to explain differential perceptions of CI in diverse service encounters by addressing the following questions: (1) what drives customer incivility? (2) is the perception of social distance an enhancer vs. inhibitor of customer incivility? 3) why and under what conditions might social distance perceptions lead to different levels of customer incivility? Figure 1 shows a graphical representation of the model.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model



To link CI and diverse encounters into a comprehensive theoretical framework, we build on two theoretical lenses: social identity theory and the interpersonal process model of intimacy. Social identity theory posits that people categorize others as members of different groups and discriminate against each other based on their membership in these groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). According to social identity theory, increased perceptions of dissimilarity among individuals who identify with different groups can lead to trouble during interactions due to prejudices. These prejudices are in-group and out-group biases; we use these two notions to explain why employees perceiving themselves as socially distant from their customers might face difficulties during the encounters, ultimately shaping the perceptions of CI.

The interpersonal process model of intimacy (Reis & Shaver, 1988) suggests that the establishment of an intimate relationship between two persons depends on the motivations of the two parties, the self-disclosure of the initiator, and the responsiveness of the person receiving the information. It is only possible to establish an intimate relationship when both parties believe that the behavior and response of the other are appropriate. Nonetheless, given the different interactions that employees may have with customers, one cannot expect to establish intimacy on every occasion. Indeed, this requires an interaction that lasts over time. Therefore, we integrate the interactive process of intimacy with other levels of relationships identified in the literature on relationship marketing strategies, which we encapsulate in a construct called the *relational gradient*. The first level of the relational gradient is *customer-employee rapport*, a combination of pleasant interactions and personal connections based on mutual trust and attentiveness (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000). Then, *interpersonal liking* is defined as a reciprocal emotional connection that goes beyond the acceptance of business competencies (Papen et al., 2019). *Affective commitment* is the emotional attachment toward a person such that the committed individual understands and sympathizes with the partner and identifies with them (Evanschitzky et al., 2006). Finally, *intimacy* is defined as feelings of closeness and mutual understanding of partners' inmost lives (Huaman-Ramirez et al., 2022). One way to reduce group biases is to create a superordinate group among interactants based on commonalities (Gaertner et al., 1993). Commonalities reduce dissimilarities among people and facilitate enjoyable interactions by creating rapport. Therefore, combining social identity theory and the interpersonal process model of intimacy allows us first to explain the mechanism that pushes individuals to enact certain behaviors during service encounters and then the process that modifies relationship levels such that CI increases vs. decreases.

In our conceptual framework, we argue that PSD can exert differential effects on the use of two alternative strategies to develop a relationship with customers: self-disclosure and customer-oriented facades of conformity. Self-disclosure involves verbally transmitting personal information to let others know oneself (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977). Customer-oriented facades of conformity involve false representations that employees create to appear as if they were embracing others' (i.e., customers') values (Hewlin, 2003). Both strategies aim to reduce the dissimilarity associated with PSD and result in different types of customer-employee relationships, which are equally essential to reduce CI: self-disclosure leads to deeper bonds (i.e., intimacy and affective commitment), while customer-oriented facades of conformity generate more superficial relationships (i.e., rapport and interpersonal liking). Moreover, self-disclosure is less likely to happen when the perceived distance is high (Collins & Miller, 1994), while facades of conformity are more likely to happen in case of dissimilarity perceptions, as they are a coping mechanism used to face the insecurities arising in diverse interactions (Hewlin et al., 2016). Thus, we propose that PSD can exert a dual effect on CI. On the one hand, PSD can lead to higher CI by decreasing self-disclosure, which hinders intimacy and affective commitment between customers and employees. On the other hand, it can lead to lower CI by activating customer-oriented facades of conformity, which generate rapport and interpersonal liking. We additionally introduce FLEs' temporal relational orientation (TRO), namely, how FLEs frame the horizon of their

relationship with customers, as a moderator of the effects of PSD on CI. FLEs with a high TRO and, thus, a long-term perspective toward customer relationships, may be more motivated to self-disclose because they understand that sharing personal information can help deepen relationships over time. In contrast, when TRO is low, FLEs might be more motivated to engage in customer-oriented facades of conformity, given that the type of relationships achieved with this strategy are easier to establish in the short run.

This paper contributes to different streams of literature. First, we contribute to the literature on service encounters and customer incivility by identifying the behavioral strategies used by FLEs to approach customers and delineating how these factors can potentially lead to a change in perception of an uncivil act. This perspective helps bridge research streams that have been treated separately. Indeed, it is well-known that incivility negatively affects FLE performance and well-being (Sommovigo et al., 2019). Similarly, the organizational behavior literature has recognized that interpersonal interactions can be a burden for FLEs, leading to adverse effects that can spill over onto the private domain. As such, our framework provides an opportunity for future research to look at the intersection of service encounters and customer incivility. As a second contribution, our work emphasizes the role of PSD and relationships in these encounters. We posit that these perceptions can eventually lead to different levels of perceived customer incivility by activating distinct FLEs' behavioral strategies and corresponding employee-customer relationships. Importantly, by differentiating the types of employee-customer relationship levels through the relational gradient, our model allows us to explain how PSD makes FLEs perceive their customers as more or less uncivil. Finally, this paper contributes to the literature on customer incivility by approaching it as an outcome and, more importantly, by enlightening this issue from the novel perspective of the relational gradient. Our conceptual model thus aims to provide new theoretical insights by adopting a preventive approach to customer incivility that might inspire novel empirical research.

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