

PRIMARY RESEARCH

Managing indifferent customers: A phenomenological study of the experiences of customer service representatives

Shine Emenido ^{1*}, Glorilyn Montejo ², China Bryce Lobrio ³, Jeric Potane ⁴

^{1,2,3,4} Department of Education, Pablo Lorenzo National High School, Davao City, Philippines

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Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to describe customer service representatives' struggles when dealing with indifferent customers and their strategies to manage them effectively. Specifically, this study seeks to fill the gap in providing strategies for managing indifferent customer interactions, contributing to the existing body of literature. The participants of this study were customer service representatives from different companies in different industries who reside in Mandug, Davao City, Philippines. These customer service representatives were purposively selected, particularly those employees, managers, or supervisors with experience and interaction with indifferent customers. Specifically, there were ten customer service representatives; seven participated in the in-depth interview, and three participated in the focus group discussion. Colaizzi's analysis method was employed to analyze the data, and two emergent themes were interpreted from the gathered data. These are customer aggression and strategic customer service. Moreover, results showed that customer service representatives experienced verbal abuse, and their interactions with indifferent customers affected their emotional well-being, including their motivation, leading to job withdrawal. Furthermore, findings showed strategies for managing indifferent customers through acknowledgment, empathy, and resolution, maintaining professionalism, and practicing active listening and effective communication. Additionally, this study may help customers realize that they need to be corrected at all times and should deal with customer service representatives with respect. Also, this study may benefit employees, managers, supervisors, and business owners in effectively handling customers to avoid getting angry. Similarly, this research may help businesspeople understand the experiences of their employees and develop effective training programs and support systems to improve employees' well-being. In conclusion, this research emphasizes the importance of customer service representatives in skillfully managing indifferent customers, as their behavior influences a company's image and financial performance.

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INTRODUCTION

In the business industry, customer service is the most vital component, especially in companies that seek to provide customers with services. Customer service is crucial in the service context as it is the basis of a company's profit on how customer service representatives manage their customers, resulting in customer loyalty. However, even when a customer service representative shows excellent customer service skills, the reality is that one cannot avoid encounter-

ing indifferent customers (Groth, Wu, Nguyen, & Johnson, 2019).

Many researchers talk about how employees or customer service representatives displayed negative behavior, such as in Finland; Sthapit (2019) examined Airbnb employees' negative behavior and the inadequate customer service of the company. Despite Airbnb's promise of providing a home-like and unique experience anywhere in the world, many guests felt otherwise. However, some customers also

*corresponding author: Shine Emenido

†email: emenidoshine@gmail.com

showed that they were satisfied; for instance, the previous research showed that Airbnb has high customer satisfaction levels based on user reviews. According to the study, the value of Airbnb is not solely determined by the services it offers but also by courteous hosts and timely customer service. Thus, the problem is the customer's perception. Practical communication skills and prompt service can enhance the customer's experience. To improve customer satisfaction, Airbnb should clearly define hosts' responsibilities, invest in resources, and focus on service recovery efforts. Furthermore, research has also shown that customers have control over the customer service representatives. In Canada, [Mills and Owens \(2023\)](#) found that Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) workers are being abused by customers, exposing cis and heteronormativity within the low-paying service industry and revealing how customers have control over the labor process. Homophobic customers who abuse customer service representatives are an example of indifferent customers as they are hard to handle with their closed minds. As a result, some workers concealed their identities to avoid conflict with customers. Moreover, more research delves into some illegal acts by customers toward an establishment's customer service representatives. For instance, in the United States of America (USA), [Apoorva, Chaudhuri, Chatterjee, and Vrontis \(2022\)](#) highlighted instances of sexual harassment against employees at McDonald's in the USA, with cases of retaliation against those who come forward with complaints. In the United Kingdom, [Korczynski and Evans \(2013\)](#), asserted that customer incivility significantly affects customer service representatives as it inflicts substantial harm. Numerous studies have reported the experiences of distress, suffering, and affliction that customer service representatives feel whenever customers are conducting their work in an impolite manner. As a case in point, four call centers observed that their call center agents frequently experienced interaction with uncivil customers, significantly impacting their emotional stability. According to an employee, "abusive customers are very hard not to take personally. Once or twice, I have been in tears. I am shocked at how aggressive people are over the phone. Similarly, in the Philippines, some customers have also inflicted mixtures of pain against medical representatives. In the study of [Cabillo and Daño \(2020\)](#), it was revealed that healthcare professionals such as doctors and nurses experience physical, verbal, and emotional abuse by customer-patients arising from frustration and exhaustion because of a sick loved one. Patients and their significant others usually inflict these abuses.

Similarly, in Davao City, Philippines, customers tend to be more demanding and expect a higher level of service than customers in other cities. If satisfied with the service, they make a scene or bring attention to social media, ruining the company's reputation. It has become an ancient belief that customers are always right. People always think that way but tend to forget that customer representatives are human, too. Even in the field of research, more studies focus on customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction, customers' experiences, and customers' attitudes toward customer service representatives. However, more attention should be focused on customer service representatives' feelings. Although there is much research regarding customer service, most literature focuses only on customers' experience and how companies lack good customer service ([Patti, van Des-sel, & Hartley, 2020](#); [Hague & Hague, 2023](#)). However, only a few works of literature focus on customer service representatives or employees' experiences with indifferent customers. The existing literature needs to focus on strategies for managing indifferent customers. It is for these reasons that the researchers conducted this phenomenological study. Specifically, this study seeks to fill the gap in describing the struggles experienced by customer service representatives and providing strategies on how customer service representatives manage indifferent customer interactions, contributing to the existing body of literature. For contextual implications, with the struggles encountered by the customer service representatives, this study may help customers realize that they are not right at all times and should deal with customer service representatives with respect.

Furthermore, this study provides valuable insights into strategies that customer service representatives can use in dealing with challenging situations. Moreover, for practical implications, the findings of this study may give business people a better understanding of the experiences of their employees and develop effective training programs and support systems to improve customer service and employees' well-being, thereby improving employees' morale and job satisfaction, leading to enhanced productivity through positive word-of-mouth recommendations of well-served customers. Lastly, this study may contribute new knowledge about customer service representatives for theoretical significance. It may challenge existing theories or provide new perspectives that can advance the customer-servicing theoretical framework. In the same vein, future researchers may find this study relevant and use it as their reference, or through this study, they may find the gap that they want to fill in.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to describe the struggles encountered by customer service representatives when interacting with indifferent customers.

Research Questions

- What struggles do customer service representatives encounter when interacting with indifferent customers?
- What strategies do customer service representatives utilize when interacting with indifferent customers?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The mantra “customer is always right” is a phrase that has become ubiquitous in the world of business and customer service, but this widely known mantra is being abused by customers who use it to demand special treatment and make unreasonable requests from front-line service representatives; such type of customers also resort to mistreating employees, creating a hostile work environment that can have detrimental effects on morale and productivity (Apoorva et al., 2022; Jafari-Sadeghi, Mahdiraji, Devalle, & Pellicelli, 2022).

The position and power of customers are often taken advantage of to get what they want, even if it means behaving inappropriately or unprofessionally. This behavior can negatively impact the organization’s reputation and the dignity of its employees (Harris & Daunt, 2013; Rashid, Jehan, & Kanval, 2023).

As Chatterjee, Nguyen, Ghosh, Bhattacharjee, and Chaudhuri (2020) point out, deliberate acts of customer misbehavior are a daily reality for many businesses, and dealing with indifferent customers is an ongoing challenge for companies and organizations across various sectors. Moreover, these customers are recognized for exhibiting bad behavior during customer-employee interactions, causing significant distress and inconvenience to front-line staff; such behavior is sometimes characterized by uncooperative and rude conduct, creating an atmosphere of tension and hostility in the workplace (Apoorva et al., 2022). The front-line staff responsible for handling this situation are customer service representatives. According to Milliman, Gatling, and Kim (2018), and Apoorva et al. (2022) Customer Service Representatives (CSRs) are the foundation in delivering quality customer service. These customer service representatives represent a priceless asset for companies that aim for a competitive advantage (Apoorva et al., 2022). Front-line service employees play a crucial role as the “face of the organization” when interacting with customers, and they of-

ten encounter obnoxious reactions from customers due to unmet service expectations or service failures. These obnoxious reactions can manifest in various ways, such as behavioral and non-behavioral (e.g., negative word of mouth) (Groth et al., 2019).

Bamfo, Dogbe, and Mingle (2018), customer service representatives frequently experience verbal aggression or abuse from customers, including yelling, threats, or rudeness, especially when customers become frustrated. Verbal abuse can manifest as demeaning, derogatory, or condescending remarks, often used to vent frustration. It can also involve impolite language intended to humiliate, disrespect, or yell at employees. Cabillo and Daño (2020) state that impolite language, such as humiliating employees, disrespecting them, or yelling at employees, is the concept of verbal abuse that some customers use to service employees. According to the study of Booyens, Hadjisolomou, Nickson, Cunningham, and Baum (2022), verbal abuse is a common form of misbehavior encountered by service employees.

According to the study of S. Dursun and Aytac (2014), aggressive behavior of customers can manifest in psychological forms such as rudeness, verbal abuse, hostile behavior (e.g., shouting, swearing), and threats. According to Akkawanitcha, Patterson, Buranapin, and Kantabutra (2015), encounters with aggressive customers have detrimental effects on customer service representatives, including stress, burnout, negative impacts on psychological well-being, feelings of dehumanization, decreased job performance, and higher intentions to leave their job.

Furthermore, customer service representatives who experience being verbally abused by customers significantly intensify job stress, and this contributes to their emotional fatigue (J. Kim, Kim, Lacey, & Suh, 2018). Szczygiel and Bazińska (2021), customer service representatives exposed to stressful working conditions are emotionally exhausted. In addition, customer aggression negatively impacts the emotional and psychological well-being, self-esteem, and overall mental health of CSRs, leading to increased negative emotions, anxiety, depression, and stress (Akkawanitcha et al., 2015).

The result of the study of Apoorva et al. (2022) revealed that a staggering 60% of airline and railroad customer service representatives experienced physical violence from customers, including being slapped, kicked, pushed, punched, or touched inappropriately. In addition, the study conducted by Harris and Daunt (2013) ascertained that close to 82% of customer service representatives in establishments such as diners, pubs, and motels have personally experienced perhaps witnessed aggressive conduct by customers.

Moreover, about 52% of these employees report that such behavior adversely affects their professional lives.

Customer rudeness has a demonstrably negative impact on employee morale, causing a decline in job satisfaction and a corresponding increase in job stress, which affects productivity and performance, leading to customer disloyalty and lost profits for the business (G. Kim, Ro, Hutchinson, & Kwun, 2014). Furthermore, Shin, Hur, and Hwang (2022) found that customer incivility, unhealthy work environments, and emotional exhaustion can lead to employee withdrawal, hindering their job performance and satisfaction. According to Li and Zhou (2013), experiences of customer service representatives, such as discontent and emotional exhaustion, may lead to organizational and industry turnover. The findings of the study conducted by Gustiawan, Noermijati, Aisjah, and Indrawati (2023) found that when employees perceive a high level of rudeness from customers, it tends to reduce their commitment and connection to their job or organization.

Harris and Daunt (2013) found that when customers misbehave, it affects customer service representatives such as employees and managers. The research has identified three notable impacts of customer misbehavior toward customer-contact employees: physical, attitudinal, and cognitive, which are related to four primary struggles faced by the management. These four primary struggles are handling conflicts, recruitment, retention, comforting and inspiring, and time spent dealing with the issue. Furthermore, the analysis shows that customer misbehavior of the customers are what managers try to reduce in six primary ways. These include selective recruitment, modifications to training and induction protocols, offering improved awards, designing work teams, increasing comfort, and making changes to the service scape.

The lifeblood of any company is the customer service representatives, and retaining committed, experienced, and competent employees is crucial for managerial success. Effective service contributes significantly to a company's success. Motha, Nalini, Amudha, Alamelu, and Nagaraj (2017) emphasize the importance of customer service representatives utilizing their cognitive and emotional intelligence to interact productively with customers. Additionally, successful customer service representatives possess self-awareness of their emotions and how they impact customer interactions. Confidence enables them to manage conflict effectively and build strong relationships with customers.

As the rise of customer misbehavior continues in the service industry, the importance of thorough investigation of the various forms and underlying reasons for such behavior

is crucial, and a study that focuses on understanding the different factors that incite customer misbehavior is critical to developing effective strategies for preventing and managing such incidents. Therefore, it is paramount for companies to prioritize strategies that prevent and address customer misbehavior while actively supporting their customer service representatives by fostering a culture of respect, implementing clear communication guidelines, and providing adequate training and resources to manage challenging customer interactions effectively. Improved quality of customer service brings satisfaction to customers, who in turn become loyal customers, resulting in an increased level of performance by the company (Juanamasta et al., 2019).

To effectively manage complaints, it is critical to encourage customers to voice their concerns and establish efficient procedures to address their issues. By implementing a comprehensive complaint management system, businesses can utilize customer feedback to identify and rectify underlying problems, resulting in improved performance and increased customer satisfaction, loyalty, and commitment. A successful recovery plan involves three main stages: encouraging complaints, resolving them, and providing feedback to the customer.

Anderson (2013) proposes tactics for sales professionals to manage indifferent customers effectively. Instead of labeling them "indifferent," understanding their behavior as a defense mechanism is crucial. What incites indifferent customers is wasting time on employees needing more knowledge and trustworthiness. Responding rather than reacting and using techniques like slowing the conversation, asking questions, and using a low tone can help take control of the situation. Listening attentively, offering alternatives, and acknowledging the customer's expertise can be more effective. Sales skills and psychology, compliments, humility, and avoiding trivial arguments can help close a sale. Following up with indifferent customers can establish trust and put sales professionals in a better position. Consistently following sales steps can save time when closing deals with challenging customers.

Min, Jung, and Ryu (2021) state that active listening enhances understanding, enabling better fulfilling others' needs and gaining respect through assistance. In addition, customer service representatives must maintain calmness and professionalism while dealing with indifferent customers (Akkawanittha et al., 2015). Moreover, Manusov, Stofleth, Harvey, and Crowley (2020) state that a service employee's listening ability is a crucial communication tool for handling dissatisfied customers. When employees listen attentively and offer apologies, customers perceive that

their issues are genuinely addressed, leading to improved engagement, trust, and overall satisfaction.

Furthermore, the study of [Min et al. \(2021\)](#) revealed that actively listening improves one's understanding of others' thoughts, emotions, and viewpoints, enabling one better to meet one's needs and those of others. Rushing or offering insufficient solutions often results from a lack of complete comprehension. By accurately grasping the message, we can more effectively address the other person's requirements, ultimately increasing our value and earning respect through our assistance to others.

Moreover, while it is widely understood that effective conflict resolution requires communication, engaging in negative communication patterns can intensify frustration and escalate conflicts. Effective communication requires the speaker and listener to alternate roles in expressing feelings and thoughts, for it transmits information accurately and clearly while minimizing unnecessary or redundant communication ([Brower & Darrington, 2012](#)).

In addition, [Nan \(2011\)](#) suggests that acknowledging the customer's concerns prevents conflicts arising from disregarding their voice, while empathy plays a crucial role in calming and understanding their perspective. Empathy, termed "vicarious introspection," involves genuinely comprehending the situation from the customer's viewpoint, distinct from sympathy. Once the customer has expressed their frustration and regained composure, the customer service representative can proceed to communicate and provide a resolution.

Furthermore, [Frank and Otterbring \(2023\)](#) state that human acknowledgment significantly increases customers' loyalty. Moreover, service employees' sincerity and empathy can influence customers' reactions to service failures ([Apoorva et al., 2022](#)). Additionally, service reliability and problem solutions must be constantly monitored because those factors impact customer satisfaction and must be enhanced ([Andrade, Moazeni, & Ramirez-Marquez, 2020](#); [Bamfo et al., 2018](#)).

Professionalism in the workplace encompasses the capacity to comprehend and fulfill duties and obligations, foster interpersonal relationships, and prioritize work-related concerns without being swayed by emotions. Work professionalism is critical for success in professional endeavors and managing customer interactions. Moreover, customer service representatives must remain calm, courteous, efficient, and professional when interacting with indifferent customers ([Akkawanitcha et al., 2015](#)). Furthermore, the prevailing professional belief in the legal field mandates that lawyers conduct themselves professionally when inter-

acting with clients. This entails employing logical and rational thinking and communication while setting aside personal emotions and feelings from their work ([Kadowaki, 2015](#)).

THEORETICAL LENS

This study was based on the standpoint of emotional labor theory by [Hochschild \(1983\)](#). The theory of emotional labor describes controlling one's emotions and those of others to bring about a desired result. This process can involve both surface acting and deep acting. Surface acting is the management of external emotional displays, such as facial expressions and the tone of voice, which do not change an individual's inner state of emotion. On the other hand, deep acting requires managing the internal emotional state to fit the job requirements. Emotional Labor Theory was utilized to determine how customer service representatives manage their emotions when dealing with indifferent customers. For instance, customer service representatives will implement surface acting by using scripted responses to indifferent customers to appear polite and professional, even when frustrated or upset. Alternatively, they engaged in deep acting by managing their emotions and connecting to the indifferent customer more personally through compassion and active listening. In addition, the emotional labor theory provided the researchers with a proper framework to understand the experiences of customer service representatives in managing indifferent customers. Using this theory, the researchers gained necessary insight into the emotional labor strategies that customer service representatives are engaged in, how these strategies affect their well-being, and what organizational policies and practices support or discourage them from managing emotions.

Furthermore, the Colaizzi analysis method from 1973 was used in this study. This analysis method is commonly used in phenomenological investigations. Colaizzi's method consists of seven steps: writing out and translating dialogues, taking out the essential statements, interpreting meaning from important statements, grouping interpreted meanings into themes, writing a comprehensive explanation of the phenomenon, then structuring the fundamentals, and verifying the thorough explanation with all participants.

METHODOLOGY

The research design used in this study is qualitative phenomenology, which applies Colaizzi's analysis method. Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach that identifies a specific group's experiences. According to [Creswell \(2013\)](#), the primary aim of this method is to outline the

essence of the phenomenon being studied. The primary purpose of this approach is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and strategies used by customer service representatives when dealing with indifferent customers.

The participants of this research were customer service representatives of different companies and industries who reside in Mandug, Davao City, Philippines. Specifically, there were ten participants: seven for in-depth interviews and three for focus group discussion. Customer Service Representatives were purposively selected using the following criteria: customer service representatives may be employees, managers, or supervisors with two (2) to twenty-eight (28) years of experience in interacting with indifferent customers.

This study used an in-depth interview and focus group discussion guide questions for customer service representatives as primary sources. The research adviser checked the guide questions and presented them to three field experts to determine their content validity. Respondents must be protected from harm resulting from breaches of privacy and confidentiality, and respect for their dignity must be a priority. This study did not include the participants' names, although anonymous quotations were used with their permission. In this study, the researchers sent a permission letter to the chief executive officer and manager of the business or company where the customer service employee is employed. Before conducting the in-depth interview and focus group discussion, informed consent was provided to the participants. The researchers explained to the participants that their confidential responses would not be shared. Furthermore, the ethical considerations require the guide questions for the in-depth interview and focus group discussion to be included in the appendices. In addition, the researchers and their co-author (research adviser) signed a memorandum of agreement to determine authorship responsibilities.

Colaizzi (1978) method of analysis was used in analyzing the data following its seven steps, which include writing out and translating dialogues, taking out the essential statements, interpreting meaning from important statements, grouping interpreted meanings into themes, writing a comprehensive explanation of the phenomenon, then structuring the fundamentals, and verifying the thorough explanation with all the participants. After analyzing the data, a discussion followed. Peer debriefing was conducted to ensure the validity of the findings of this study. The researchers asked three experts in qualitative studies to countercheck their analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Before the interview was conducted, the researchers sought first the approval of the Barangay Captain. After the approval, the researchers contacted the qualified participants with the help of colleagues, friends, and recommendations. Then, the researchers sought consent from the participants. The purpose was clearly explained to them, and they were given an option to participate or not. Also, being in a sensitive cultural environment, the researchers considered and observed the rights to confidentiality, privacy, and dignity of the participants who participated in this study. Focus group discussion took place via the application Messenger, while the in-depth interview was conducted in the participants' respective homes. The participants' names were coded as shown in the table below to ensure the participants' protection and preservation of their identity and privacy.

The participants of this study were customer service representatives employed in a company that managed or interacted with an indifferent customer. Most of the customer service representatives have been in the service for customers for two (2) to twenty-eighth (28) years. Seven participated in the in-depth interview, while three customer service representatives participated in the focus group discussions.

TABLE 1. Profile of the participants

Assumed Name	Years in Customer Service	Occupation	Study Group
Participant A	9	Call center agent	IDI
Participant B	5	Call center agent	IDI
Participant C	3	Pharmacist	IDI
Participant D	7	Call center agent	IDI
Participant E	28	Cargo duty officer	IDI
Participant F	3	Call center agent	IDI
Participant G	2	Rider	IDI
Participant H	7	Call Center agent	FGD

Cont.....

Assumed Name	Years in Customer Service	Occupation	Study Group
Participant I	5	Call Center Agent	FGD
Participant J	7	Call Center Agent	FGD

Using Colaizzi's method of data analysis, out of 69 statements made by the participants, 44 were identified as necessary, with 10 interpreted meanings derived from the critical statements. Then, two emergent themes were identified, namely, customer aggression and strategic customer service. Also, six cluster themes, namely: endures ver-

bal abuse, interactions affect emotional well-being, affects motivation leading to job withdrawal, manages indifferent customers through acknowledgment, empathy, and resolution, maintains professionalism in managing customers, and practices active listening and effective communication.

TABLE 2. Examples of important statements and interpreted meaning

Important Statements	Interpreted Meaning
"Sometimes, if their needs are not hastily addressed, they would be indifferent and then show profanity."	Extreme frustration leads indifferent customers to use profane language to express their emotions.
"I think stress because interacting with indifferent customers can be stressful for long exposure, and such a situation can lead to chronic stress, which can negatively impact physical and mental health and burnout... continuously dealing with an indifferent customer can lead to burnout, which can cause a sense of emotion, exhaustion, detachment, and lack of motivation or energy."	Dealing with indifferent customers can lead to chronic stress and burnout, impacting emotional well-being and motivation.
"When it comes to managing indifferent customers, we have AER. A is for acknowledgment; you must acknowledge the customer's emotion or concern. Let the customer vent out first. E is for empathy, which is the first thing we emphasize. Put yourself in the customer's shoes to make them feel better and understood, not just using empty words. The third is resolution. After empathizing, of course, the customer's emotions will calm down. Please provide the information right away because they are now listening. You need to provide the resolution and what needs to be done, and set expectations for them so their issue can be resolved."	In managing indifferent customers, the AER approach is employed: Acknowledge their emotions, empathize genuinely, and provide prompt resolution for effective issue resolution.

Table 2 above shows examples of the critical statements extracted from the interview and their meanings interpreted.

TABLE 3. Examples of cluster themes with their associated interpreted Meanings

Interpreted Meaning	Cluster Themes
Extreme frustration leads indifferent customers to use profane language to express their emotions.	Endures verbal abuse.
Dealing with indifferent customers can lead to chronic stress and burnout, impacting emotional well-being and motivation.	Interactions affect emotional well-being.
In managing indifferent customers, the AER approach is employed: Acknowledge their emotions, empathize genuinely, and provide prompt resolution for effective issue resolution.	Manages indifferent customers through acknowledgement, empathy, and resolution.

Table 3 above shows examples of the meanings interpreted from the critical statements clustered into themes.

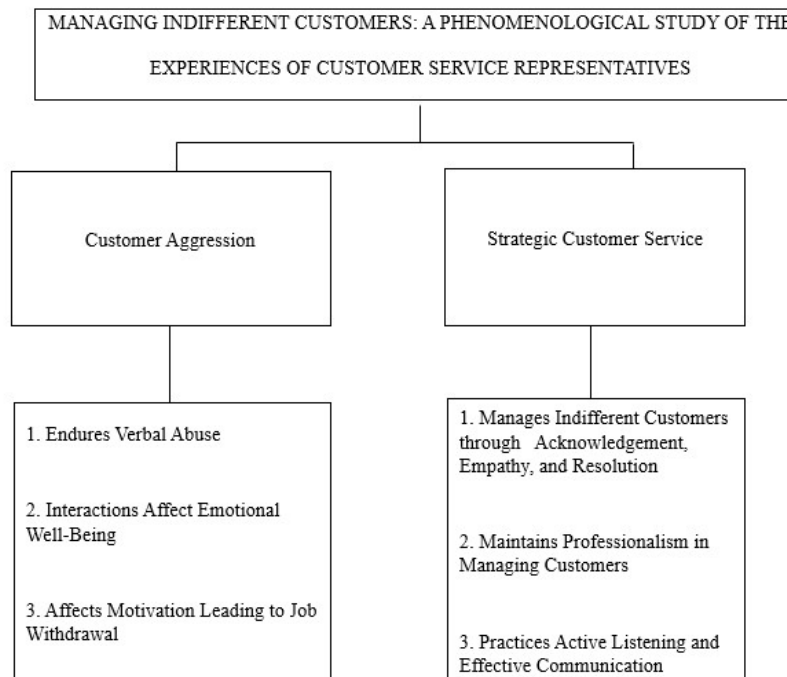


FIGURE 1. Thematic map

Emergent Theme 1: Customer Aggression

Customer aggression poses a significant challenge within today's work environment, especially for service sector employees who directly interact with customers. This aggressive behavior can manifest in psychological forms such as rudeness, verbal abuse, hostile behavior (e.g., shouting, swearing), and threats (. A. S. Dursun S., 2014). According to Akkawanitcha et al. (2015), encounters with aggressive customers have detrimental effects on customer service representatives, including stress, burnout, negative impacts on psychological well-being, and feelings of dehumanization, decreased job performance, and higher intentions to leave their job.

Cluster Theme 1: Endures Verbal Abuse

This theme highlights the challenge that customer service representatives endure verbal abuse when customers are frustrated.

Experiencing verbal aggression or abuse from customers, including yelling, threats, and rudeness, are the typical occurrences when customers become frustrated. The mantra "Customer is Always Right" is often taken advantage of by customers who make absurd requests or treat service employees unjustly. Impolite, arrogant, or hostile customers are one of the predicaments that customer service representatives face in their daily operations (Bamfo et al., 2018).

In the study of Booyens et al. (2022), verbal abuse is a common form of misbehavior encountered by service employees.

As stated by four participants, customers yell or scold when they are frustrated and when they make demands.

"I was scolded, and the customer said awful things to me. The customer was in a rush and wanted me to fix the problem instantly, which is not possible because I am still checking his concern." (Participant A)

"They argue, scream, make a threatening gesture, and use inappropriate language or personal insult to emphasize or point in their situation." (Participant B)

"One of the unforgettable experiences I had with an indifferent customer was the very first time I got yelled at. He yelled at me, called me names, and did not even try to hear me out." (Participant C)

"I encountered a challenging situation where the customer began the conversation by shouting at me and barely allowed me to speak." (Participant F) *"I was scolded because the customer complained of a wrong item. This happened many times. Actually, it is not the riders' fault but the sellers."* (Participant G)

In addition, according to customer service representatives, customers also use profane and inappropriate words when their problem is not immediately resolved.

"The common problem is that they have a huge bill, and it

needs to be reduced immediately. Most of them are even shouting and throwing some profanity words." (Participant D)

"Sometimes, especially if their needs will not be hastily addressed, they would be indifferent and then show profanity." (Participant E)

"Most of the time, our customers become indifferent when their requests or the help they need cannot be given immediately. So, when their requests take time to be resolved or their concerns are not settled. Technically, they get angry at the agents, and sometimes they curse or something." (Participant H)

"Most of the time, they want an immediate and direct solution when they call. However, technically, not all issues can be resolved within that call, so they get furious. The worst-case scenario is when they curse and say many things." (Participant J)

The participants' statements revealed that customers yell, scold, and use profane language when their concerns are not hastily addressed.

In the business industry, service employees face verbal abuse (i.e., belittling, offensive, condescending expressions, and venting frustration). According to [Cabillo and Daño \(2020\)](#), impolite language to humiliate employees, treat them with disrespect, or yell at them is the verbal abuse that some customers do to service employees.

Cluster Theme 2: Interactions Affect Emotional Well-Being

This theme highlights that customer service representatives face stress and negative emotional and psychological well-being as a result of verbal abuse from indifferent customers. According to [J. Kim et al. \(2018\)](#), when customer service representatives endure verbal abuse from customers, it intensifies their job stress and contributes to emotional fatigue. [Szczygiel and Bazińska \(2021\)](#), customer service representatives exposed to stressful working conditions are emotionally exhausted.

Customer service representatives face stress and negative emotional and psychological well-being as a result of verbal abuse in managing indifferent customers.

"I think stress because interacting with indifferent customers can be stressful for long exposure, and such situation can lead to chronic stress, which can negatively impact physical and mental health and burnout... continuously dealing with an indifferent customer can lead to burnout, which can cause a sense of emotion, exhaustion, detachment and lack of motivation or energy". (Participant A)

"Negative feelings including the exhaustion, discomfort, and

frustration which can lead to long-term emotional strains and anxiety, which is true." (Participant B)

"To tell you honestly, I cried a lot during the first years of my work experience. Though I knew full well that I would deal with different kinds of people daily in my line of work, it was still hard to fake a strong facade when I was in an actual scenario. It was really draining physically and mentally to the point where I even questioned myself if I was on the right path." (Participant C)

"As human beings, of course, it frustrates, stress, and in some ways, it will challenge our capabilities." (Participant D)

"When I was just starting in the service, I couldn't believe and accept that there are people like them who act like such. I was traumatized and vigilant with their presence, and I tried to avoid them. However, in the long run, after 28 years in the service, things like this do not affect me anymore. I got used to it." (Participant E)

"In my experience, when the customer becomes indifferent, especially during the first shift, I also become indifferent. I would not want to talk to anyone, even my friends or coworkers. I get annoyed with everyone, especially when my calls are indifferent. Sometimes, I want to disconnect from all of them to relieve the psychological burden. It is like when you go to sleep, you are still thinking about it, affecting your desire to sleep." (Participant H)

Based on the statement of the participants, interactions with indifferent customers negatively affect emotional and psychological well-being as a result of verbal abuse.

[Akkawanitcha et al. \(2015\)](#) conducted a study that revealed a detrimental influence between customer aggression and customer service representatives' emotional and psychological well-being and self-esteem. Verbal abuse resulted in negative affectivity, anxiety, depression, and stress on the psychological well-being of the service employees.

Cluster Theme 3: Affects Motivation Leading to Job Withdrawal

This theme emphasizes that the stress, negative emotional experiences, and psychological well-being faced by customer service representatives due to verbal abuse have a significant impact on their motivation and propensity for job withdrawal.

According to [Li and Zhou \(2013\)](#), experiences of customer service representatives, such as discontent and emotional exhaustion, may lead to organizational and industry turnover. The findings of the study conducted by [Gustiawan et al. \(2023\)](#) found that when employees perceive a high level of rudeness from customers, it tends to reduce their commitment and connection to their job or organization.

Customer service representatives viewed stress, negative emotions, and psychological well-being struggles resulting from verbal abuse as significantly impacting their motivation and increasing the likelihood of considering job withdrawal.

"There are instances when our colleagues cry instead of resolving the issue when the customers are shouting at them. They get scared and end up crying, contemplating on quitting the job." (Participant H)

"Yeah, that is the reality when you are on duty. When riding a jeepney going home, they sometimes cry and contemplate quitting the job. Hahaha! You cannot help but wonder why you entered this industry." (Participant I)

Based on the statement of the participants, viewed stress, negative emotions, and psychological well-being struggles resulting from verbal abuse significantly impact their motivation and increase the likelihood of considering job withdrawal.

Customer rudeness causes a decline in employee job satisfaction and increased job stress, affecting productivity and performance and resulting in customer disloyalty and lost profits (G. Kim et al., 2014). Moreover, employees revealed that job withdrawal happens due to customer incivility, an unhealthy work environment, and emotional exhaustion, hindering job performance and satisfaction (Shin et al., 2022).

Emergent Theme 2: Strategic Customer Service

Active listening enhances understanding, enabling better fulfillment of others' needs and gaining respect through assistance. Moreover, customer service representatives must maintain calmness and professionalism while dealing with indifferent customers (Akkawanitcha et al., 2015).

Cluster Theme 1: Manages indifferent Customers through Acknowledgement, Empathy, and Resolution

This theme highlights customer service representatives' strategies: acknowledging the customer's concerns prevents conflicts arising from disregarding their voice, and the use of empathy plays a crucial role in calming and understanding their perspective. Empathy, termed "vicarious introspection," involves genuinely comprehending the situation from the customer's viewpoint, distinct from sympathy. Once the customer has expressed their frustration and regained composure, the customer service representative can proceed to communicate and provide a resolution (Clope, 2008).

Two participants stated they use acknowledgment, empathy, and resolution strategies to manage indifferent cus-

tomers.

"Based on my experience, most of the time when a customer is indifferent, it is part of the job to acknowledge them always, to show empathy and understand their feelings, even though in reality, you do not feel it (being plastic), but it is like you make it, you know? So, you acknowledge the customer with AER, and then after that, you provide them with options or solutions to address their concerns." (Participant H)

"When it comes to managing indifferent customers, we have AER. A is for Acknowledge, you have to acknowledge the customer's emotion or concern. Let the customer vent out first. E is for empathy, which is the first thing we emphasize. Put yourself in the customer's shoes to make them feel better understood, not just using empty words. The third is resolution. After empathizing, of course, the customer's emotions will calm down. Please provide the information right away because they are now listening. You need to provide the resolution and what needs to be done, and set expectations for them so their issue can be resolved." (Participant J)

Based on their statements, the participants effectively use acknowledgment, empathy, and resolution strategies to manage indifferent customers.

Frank and Otterbring (2023) state that human acknowledgment significantly increases customer loyalty. Moreover, empathy and apologies from service employees were found to have a moderating impact on the connection between the severity of service failures and subsequent reconciliation, retaliation, and avoidance (Radu et al., 2019). Furthermore, continuous service reliability and problem-resolution monitoring are crucial for enhancing customer satisfaction. These factors significantly impact customer contentment (Andrade et al., 2020).

Cluster Theme 2: Maintains Professionalism

This theme highlights maintaining professionalism as one of the strategies that customer service representatives use in managing indifferent customers. Customer service representatives must be composed and remain courteous, efficient, and professional when interacting with indifferent customers (Akkawanitcha et al., 2015). Moreover, the prevailing professional belief in the legal field mandates that lawyers conduct themselves professionally when interacting with clients. This entails employing logical and rational thinking and communication while setting aside personal emotions and feelings from their work (Kadowaki, 2015). Customer service representatives think remaining professional and composure is an effective strategy when managing indifferent customers.

"First, stay calm, be professional, and listen carefully, then

provide AER by remaining calm and professional. The customer service representative must remain calm and professional even if the customer is indifferent or aggressive by maintaining a composed demeanor. Customer service representatives can defuse the situation and keep the conversation focused on resolving the issue; now, you must listen actively to the customer's concern." (Participant A)

"As a customer service representative, you must demonstrate professionalism and calm. Let them vent out, carefully listen to every word they say so you will know how to position yourself. Finally, show empathy and let them feel you are there to help them address their issue promptly. This strategy is effective because they eventually become happy at the end of the call. It is not an easy job, but it is self-fulfilling if you can resolve and help them with their issue." (Participant D)

Based on the participants' statements, they think that remaining professional and composure is an effective strategy for managing indifferent customers. Professionalism in the workplace encompasses the capacity to comprehend and fulfill duties and obligations, foster interpersonal relationships, and prioritize work-related concerns without being swayed by emotions. Work professionalism is critical for success in professional endeavors and managing customer interactions.

Cluster Theme 3: Practices Active Listening and Effective Communication

This theme highlights active listening and effective communication as one of the strategies that customer service representatives use to manage indifferent customers effectively. According to [Min et al. \(2021\)](#), actively listening improves our understanding of others' thoughts, emotions, and viewpoints, enabling us to meet their needs and our own better. Rushing or offering insufficient solutions often results from a lack of complete comprehension. By accurately grasping the message, we can more effectively address the other person's requirements, ultimately increasing our value and earning respect through our assistance to others.

Moreover, while it is widely understood that effective conflict resolution requires communication, engaging in negative communication patterns can intensify frustration and escalate conflicts. Ineffective communication requires the speaker and listener to alternate roles in expressing feelings and thoughts, for they transmit information accurately and clearly while minimizing unnecessary or redundant communication ([Brower & Darrington, 2012](#)).

In this study, the following participants said they employ active listening and effective communication when managing

indifferent customers.

"Before you explain your side, let them vent first and listen to what they are going to say until they are tired and done talking." (Participant E)

"The best strategy in such situations is simple: Listen. Allow your customers to express their frustration, even if they shout or anger towards your products. Letting them vent first or release their emotions is important before you attempt to assist them." (Participant F)

"In my opinion, actively listening and avoiding interruption when indifferent customers are venting or releasing their anger are the most important strategies. It is also important to remain quiet and let them express their frustration, subsequently listen to their concerns, and address their issues. Doing this allows you to empathize and understand your customers' concerns." (Participant I)

"Open communication is important, give them assurance that there is nothing to be worried about. If you made a mistake, inform your customer and be accountable for it, take responsible actions." (Participant G)

Based on the participants' statements, they employ active listening and effective communication when managing indifferent customers.

According to [Manusov et al. \(2020\)](#), a service employee's ability to actively listen is a crucial communication tool for handling dissatisfied customers. When employees listen attentively and offer apologies, customers perceive that their issues are genuinely addressed, leading to improved engagement, trust, and overall satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of customer service representatives in managing indifferent customers were described in this study. The themes that explained the customer service representatives' strategies in managing indifferent customers were acknowledging the customer's concern and emotion, employing empathy, providing a resolution, maintaining professionalism, and practicing active listening and effective communication. These were the strategies that customer service representatives used to manage indifferent customers. Knowledge of managing indifferent customers plays a vital role in the business industry.

This study focused on determining how customer service representatives of a company handled or managed indifferent customers using a qualitative research design. In addition, 10 participants were selected according to the criteria: employees, managers, or supervisors who experienced interacting with indifferent customers. Also, this study was limited to employees who encountered indiffer-

ent customers only since they were the ones who managed and interacted with them. The study was conducted in the respective homes of the target employees from March 2023 to June 2023.

The results of this study revealed that even though most customer service representatives effectively managed indifferent customers, there were still those who could not turn indifferent customers into satisfied customers. Thus, the data gathered and analyzed have paved the way to make implications for the furtherance of the company, managers and supervisors, employees, and recommendations to future researchers.

The following are the implications of the findings of this research. For customers, they should realize that it is not at all times that they are right. They should remember that customer service representatives are also humans and capable of being hurt. The company should prioritize providing additional training and resources for customer service representatives to improve their skills in managing indifferent customer interactions. The support should include communication techniques, conflict resolution strategies, and stress management. The company can improve customer satisfaction, retention, and overall good reputation by addressing this issue. Also, for the managers and supervisors, though, employees play a significant role in managing indifferent customer interactions; the managers and supervisors can also help by closely monitoring customer interactions, providing timely feedback, and offering guidance on handling difficult situations. Managers and supervisors play a crucial role in identifying training needs and implementing strategies to improve the performance of employees. The collaboration of employees, managers, and supervisors could help find the best and healthy way to manage indifferent customer interactions.

In addition, for the employees, since employees are the main force or front-line staff that manages indifferent customers, they should be proactive in acquiring additional skills and knowledge to handle indifferent customers effectively. Furthermore, employees should take advantage of training opportunities provided by the company and seek personal development resources independently. Employees can enhance their performance and job satisfaction by continuously improving their abilities.

Recommendation for Future Researchers

The focus of this study was on the experiences of customer service representatives in managing indifferent customers. Also, this study focused on the strategies used by customer service representatives to manage indifferent customers. Hence, the following are recommended.

A more significant number of participants could be conducted in a similar study that uses a quantitative research design. Given that the study mainly examined customer service representatives' experiences in managing indifferent customers, future researchers may decide to concentrate on customers who have shown indifferent behavior and learn about the reasons behind their actions.

Additionally, to foster an environment where customer service representatives feel appreciated and supported, future researchers may prioritize understanding the impact of a customer-centric organizational culture on managing indifferent customers. This culture is achievable through various methods such as training programs, incentives, open communication channels, and policies prioritizing customer satisfaction. They can explore the specific strategies and actions implemented by the organizations to foster such a culture and assess its impact on the work of customer service representatives' job satisfaction, performance, and customer outcomes.

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