Consumer Misbehaviour in Services: A Qualitative Study in India

Anindo Bhattacharjee[1], Neha Purohit[2]
[1]Assistant Professor, ASMSOC, NMIMS Mumbai
[2]Assistant Professor, School of Branding & Advertising, NMIMS Mumbai

Abstract

Consumer misbehaviour is a growing phenomenon these days in the services sector. The perils of the job of being a call centre executive or the incidences of verbal abuse or aggression on employees in services or deviant consumer behaviour such as shoplifting by customers in retail outlets is widely known but rarely reported. In fact many organizations, in their pursuit of following the mantra of "customer is king" become victims of wrong behaviour by the customers itself. The current study not only identifies the antecedents or motives of consumer misbehaviour that could be of interest for marketers but also proposes strategies to deal with or neutralize the consumer misbehaviour. The area of consumer misbehaviour in an emerging market context is still an under-researched area and every organization faces it in some form or the other. The findings of this paper are based on a nation-wide qualitative study on consumer misbehaviour based on semi-structured interviews. We are reporting the findings based on 24 of such interviews. We proposed a conceptual framework that can be the starting point for future confirmatory studies in this area of consumer research.

Keywords: Consumer misbehaviour, branding, marketing, Grounded theory, Qualitative, Emerging Markets.

Introduction

Consumer misbehaviour is a growing phenomenon these days in the era of shopping, retailing or business process outsourcing. The perils of the job of being a call centre executive or the incidences of verbal abuse or shoplifting by customers in retail outlets is widely known but rarely reported. In fact many organizations, in their pursuit of following the mantra of "customer is king" become victims of wrong behaviour by the customers itself. In fact consumer misbehaviour still remains a very under-researched area of study (ref. McCracken, 1988; Fullerton & Punj, 2004; Harris & Daunt, 2013; etc.). Customer misbehaviour can be defined as behavioural acts by consumers which violate the generally accepted norms of conduct in consumption situations and thus disrupt the consumption order (Fullerton & Punj, 2004). The deviant behaviours could be in the form of shoplifting, vandalism, financial fraud, physical/verbal abuse of other customers, consumer "rage", etc.

In this paper, we report the findings of a qualitative study on the Indian consumers, retailers and service providers about the phenomena of consumer misbehaviour, what constitutes misbehaviour or deviant behaviour in an Indian context, what are the various forms in which it exist and how can companies create strategies to deal with this 'menace' in their day-to-day customer interactions. The interview narratives talk about the account of misbehaviour by another consumer that they have observed while in a retail/service setting, the first-hand accounts of employees who have been victims of such misbehaviour and manager's accounts of how they manage these incidences. Moreover, please note that we will use the term 'consumer misbehaviour' and 'customer misbehaviour' interchangeably throughout the paper.

Conceptual Background

Customer misbehaviour

Customer misbehaviour can be defined as behavioural acts by consumers which violate the generally accepted norms of conduct in consumption situations and thus disrupt the consumption order (Fullerton & Punj, 2004). The deviant behaviours could be in the form of shoplifting, vandalism, financial fraud, physical/verbal abuse of other customers, consumer "rage", etc. Customer misbehaviour still remains an under-researched area in marketing especially in the emerging market context. To a surprising extent, much of this misbehaviour is tolerated and it eventually becomes a part of the consumers' experience of the product/service (Fullerton & Punj, 2004). The findings of a series of studies conducted earlier by Dootson et al. (2017) suggest that consumers actually differ in their subjective perceptions of right and wrong due to which there is a deviance threshold that allows consumers to engage in deviant behaviours which they subjectively perceive to be acceptable (despite the fact that it could be objectively wrong to engage in such a behaviour). Moreover, the research suggests that consumers may sometimes engage in deviant consumer behaviours because it allows them to maintain a positive self-concept (Dootson et al. 2017).

Motives for misbehaviour

Earlier research has shown that customers have various motives for engaging in misbehaviour. Some people engage in vandalism, and others, like the teenagers or juveniles, engage in abusiveness. Most of these deviant behaviours may be engaged less often but almost all consumers do engage in some form of deviant behaviour and so consumer misbehaviour often goes overlooked and is severely under-reported in crime statistics (ref. Fullerton & Punj, 2004; Daunt & Harris, 2012; etc.). Incidences of stealing and shoplifting are driven by quick financial gain motives and worldwide it leads to huge financial losses for the retailers to the tune of billions of dollars (e.g. Daunt & Harris, 2012; Dootson et al. 2017; etc.). Incidences of verbal abuse by customers could be driven by ego-motives; verbally and physically aggressive behaviour could be driven by a motive to take revenge through retaliation against an organization or against any specific individual in an organization (Daunt & Harris, 2012). One of the popular belief is that aggression is related to a sense of low self-esteem; however, research evidence suggests that high self-esteem may also lead to frequent aggressive or violent behaviours especially when one's highly favourable view of self is challenged by other people or circumstances (e.g. Anderson & Huesmann, 2007; Baumeister, Bushman, & Campbell, 2000; Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Shoham et al. 2015; etc.).

Research on Aggression, Everyday Sadism and Customer Incivility

Earlier research of abusive behaviour and aggression has revealed multiple motives and constructs that lead to such behaviour in social contexts (e.g. high levels of stress, bad mood, frustrations, etc.). According to Archer and Coyne (2005), aggression could be indirect, relational or social. These forms of aggression are intended to cause harm by using others, spreading rumours, gossiping, and excluding others from the group or ignoring them. In marketing contexts, indirect aggression could be indirect physical aggressions such as vandalism; relational aggression could be in the form of "threaten to terminate a business relationship as a client", or it could be in the form of abusive phone calls; and social aggression could be more direct such as verbal rejection, negative facial expression or body movement, or more indirect forms such as slanderous rumours causing negative word of mouth (e.g. Archer & Coyne, 2005; Anderson & Huesmann, 2007; Shoham et al. 2015; Krahé, 2021; etc.). From a social psychology perspective, aggression is a social problem in interactions between individuals and groups, resulting from the joint influence of the personal characteristics of the actors and the situational and societal conditions in which their behaviour takes

place (Krahé, 2021). And then there is customer incivility which is a lesser form of aggression with ambiguous motive. According to Sliter et al. (2010) – "Customer incivility is a low-intensity deviant behaviour, perpetrated by someone in a customer or client role, with ambiguous intent to harm an employee, in violation of social norms of mutual respect and courtesy." Incivility focuses on situations in which the intent to harm is ambiguous and it can be categorized into types: workplace mistreatment and daily hassles (e.g. Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001; Sliter et al. 2010; etc.).

Finally, there is paucity of research on sadism and more so its milder form that extends to the normal range of personality and behaviour like bullying, verbal aggression, internet trolling, etc. which is generally termed as everyday sadism which is a subclinical form of sadism (Buckels et al. 2013; Buckels et al. 2019; Paulhus & Dutton, 2016; Johnson et al. 2019; etc.). The term "sadism" has been used to characterize a range of cognitions and behaviours associated with the derivation of pleasure from infliction of physical or emotional pain on another person (e.g. Porter et al. 2018).

Methodology

Study Design

The study was based on a constructivist grounded theory approach because there is not much research on consumer misbehaviour in an Indian context. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in multiple locations and a wide cross section of industries (mostly service based) to generate rich data and facilitate data triangulation.

Data-collection and analysis

The interview data was collected from the respondents using audio-recording devices and subsequently converted into transcripts that were used for thematic content analysis. The data was coded using open, axial and selective coding by two different researchers on the same set of transcripts to facilitate investigator triangulation. Moreover this ensured greater credibility and transferability of the findings. The current paper will report the results of 24 interviews from the entire pool for reporting the themes uncovered related to customer misbehaviour.

The interview began with a set of open-ended questions asked to the consumers. These were followed by probing questions depending on the interviewee's responses to develop thick descriptions of the issues related to the consumer misbehaviour. Questions were explicitly related to consumers' understanding of the idea of misbehaviour, the different forms of misbehaviour, understanding the motives behind misbehaviour, and what organizations can do to deal with the menace of consumer misbehaviour.

After the first round of data analysis, follow-up interviews were conducted with some of the respondents based on the interview guide used. Also, at the end of every interview, transcription, and analysis followed, and any new theme identified was included in the subsequent interviews. This process continued until theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2008; Charmaz and Belgrave, 2012). The length of the interviews typically lasted from 30 minutes to 40 minutes.

A detailed thematic analysis was done on the fully transcribed interviews of the respondents using the qualitative data analysis software, Atlas ti. To take account of the openness of the interviews, we followed the guideline of Schmidt (2004) that it was essential not merely to take over the formulations from the questions that were asked, but to consider whether the interviewees actually took up these terms like "misbehaviour" or "consumer", what the terms meant to them, which aspects they supplemented, which they omitted and what new topics, which were not foreseen in the guide, actually turned up in the collected data. This helped us in taking a constructivist approach by constantly reviewing and updating the interview guide to capture any emerging themes. Finally, the narratives and data captured from all the interviews were independently analysed by the authors to

facilitate analyst triangulation and data triangulation before arriving at the final results of the study conducted.

Findings

After content analysis, based on the interview narratives, we have arrived at some themes and categories that eventually helped us identify the antecedents and consequences of consumer misbehaviour. Some of the important themes uncovered from the interview narratives that constitute the antecedents are opportunism, aggression, everyday sadism, and ego-satiation. These denote the motives behind the consumer misbehaving in a service context. We will now explain each one of them and their consequences.

Opportunism

Many a times the consumers engage in misbehaviour because of there is an underlying motive of opportunism. Like one consumer said that sometimes consumers make "fake complains/returns for getting refunds with the online delivery giants (e.g. Zomato)." Another respondent who was a service company's founder said (about customers) that – "Some are opportunist. They do this to get a better deal or to get rewards from the business because they know that for them their consumer is everything." Others may engage in deviant behavior such as stealing for their personal gains. Like one manager of a hotel said that there are instances when the guests in the hotel have "taken hair dryers or equipment that are not complimentary like soaps and shampoos." So, in opportunism, you may deliberately complain or express dissatisfaction in spite of the service provider taking all efforts to ensure quality and reliability of the service, simply because you want to take advantage of your position as a customer and also have some quick financial or material gains. The situation is especially tricky for many of the online delivery companies where they have to rely mostly on the customer feedbacks and switching costs for customers are comparatively low. To survive in the competition, and maintain their subscribers, they have to give the benefit-of-doubt in case of consumer fake complains, in favor of the customers simply to retain them. But this certainly increases the overall cost of doing business for the service provider.

Aggression/Incivility

Customers sometimes behave rudely with the service providers and can depict different forms of aggression. Sometimes it could be a verbal abuse or rude behaviour which can have a motive. As one respondent who is in customer service puts it – "there is a customer perception that verbal abuse on customer service executive leads to prompt resolution to complaints." Another way for customers to express their frustrations could be to spread negative electronic word-of-mouth (eWoM) on social-media pages. One of the respondents (a service provider) said that – "And that is when they either shout or you know, they put a really rude comment online, on your webpage." And then there are situations when customers engage in incivility where their aggression may not have any specific motive but it damages the service experience for other customers. For instance, one respondent said that "customers do not follow a said guideline and can cause ruckus and inconveniences to both the staff and the other customers." Another respondent from the hospitality industry said that – "There are also instances where someone who is drunk has also made a ruckus and caused inconvenience to the other guests." Such customer misbehaviour negatively impacts the employee morale manifesting as a form of workplace mistreatment or incivility but originating more so from the customer side. Moreover, by negatively impacting the overall service experience it causes indirect customer dissatisfaction for all those who witness the incivility or aggression in the service context. This can potentially impact the organizations' brand image both as a service provider (for the customers) and as an employer (for the employees). Such behaviour also impacts employee morale negatively and there could be higher attrition of employees in certain industries due to higher incidences of consumer misbehaviour through

aggression and incivility if the companies do not take appropriate strategies to neutralize the situation as we will discuss subsequently. Finally, one of the employees of the financial service industry says – "*In our daily routine job, where we try to sell loans to various targets consisting of people of ages ranging from different age groups like from an 18 year old to even people of 80 years of age, me and my colleagues often encounter with people and clients who lack basic order of mannerism and there is often heated exchange of words from there side with frequent use of foul language. This at times becomes very difficult for representatives like us to deal with such clients.*"

Lastly, there are fan misbehaviours (in the form of aggression) on celebrity social media handles who endorse certain service brands which not only creates negative eWoM but also erodes the goodwill of the organization and its services endorsed by these celebrities. Creating appropriate neutralizing strategies is the key to prevent the erosion of goodwill and brand equity due to negative brand image of the service provider.

Everyday sadism

There are instances where customers engage in misbehaviour simply because of the thrill associated with it without any other motive. For instance, one respondent said that – "Some people do it (misbehavior) for the thrill of doing it, I mean they think that they're cool, misbehaving with employees of different businesses and that's why they do it for the thrill and they have no other motive other than this." Such a behavior closely approximates the definition of everyday sadism. Consumers do depict everyday sadism sometimes. Another respondent (a female customer service executive) says – "Usually youngsters, you have a lot of people doing prank calls, prank messages. So having said that, definitely, I have been a part of a conversation that did include disclosing information that was not pertaining to my work. And in order to do so, we know about this, there are all kinds of, like I said, all kinds of consumers." This may not sadism in true sense, but still to make

prank calls and asking personal details by a stranger to a female colleague simply out of a sense of thrill and taking advantage of the position of being a customer, can be a subtler form of everyday sadism because it psychologically impacts the person (in this case the customer service executive). In other instances, the customer try to take advantage of the industry norm of being polite to the customers. For instance, one respondent in the hospitality industry said that – "Specially happens in the hospitality industry, I think because in the hospitality industry the staff are supposed to be very kind to the consumers, and this is something that the consumers take advantage of and tries to manipulate that." Such verbal aggression to deliberately cause humiliation is a form of everyday sadism.

Ego-satiation

There are instances where the employee is at fault and so the customer may react negatively to express his/her discontent. But then there are instances, as a respondent notes, where the employee is not at fault. For instance as another respondent notes – "the waiter does not know if your food is bland or it is salty, there's a certain way you can tell them that food isn't good but misbehaving with them or shouting at them, this isn't good." Moreover, there are consumers who may even force an apology from an employee/worker of the service provider in spite of no fault of the employee. As a respondent (service provider) expressed – "Obviously if we are on the wrong end of it or even if there is a there is a miscommunication or confusion, which was not really you know, a fault at our side and we still have to apologize and we have to clear that part for us." One of the employees of the a service provider expressed that – "it is so humiliating and frustrating for me to say 'sorry' to a customer in spite of no fault of mine. But I will have to do because it is expected of my job as a waiter in spite of the fact that the customer was at fault and behaved rudely with me." Moreover, organizations neutralize such situations by offering freebies and complimentary products which can further reinforce or encourage such misbehavior driven by the motive of opportunism

and ego-satiation. For instance, the owner of a service company puts it – "Then at times we do offer them (customers who are rude) complimentary products or if in certain cases if there is a discord with the customer, you give them free delivery at the same time, or you replace the product in the next few minutes." Dealing with such customer ego is especially important for start-ups who trying to establish their brand at their early stages. For instance, the founder a service start-up said – "So, because we are a new company, we have to deal with it (customer misbehavior). We must accept that consumer will be misbehaving, and we have to accept that there are people who want to create ruckus and want to trouble other people, so

we'll have to deal with it. The brand image that we are trying to build will be tarnished if we don't deal with consumer misbehavior appropriately. We have to accept that but then there are some ways that we can improve, how we deal with consumer misbehavior."

Discussions

Based on the themes explained above that have emerged from our India study on consumers about consumer misbehavior, we propose the following conceptual framework for Consumer Misbehavior giving the antecedents (motives) and the consequences of consumer misbehavior.

Figure 1. Antecedents and Consequences of Consumer Misbehaviour
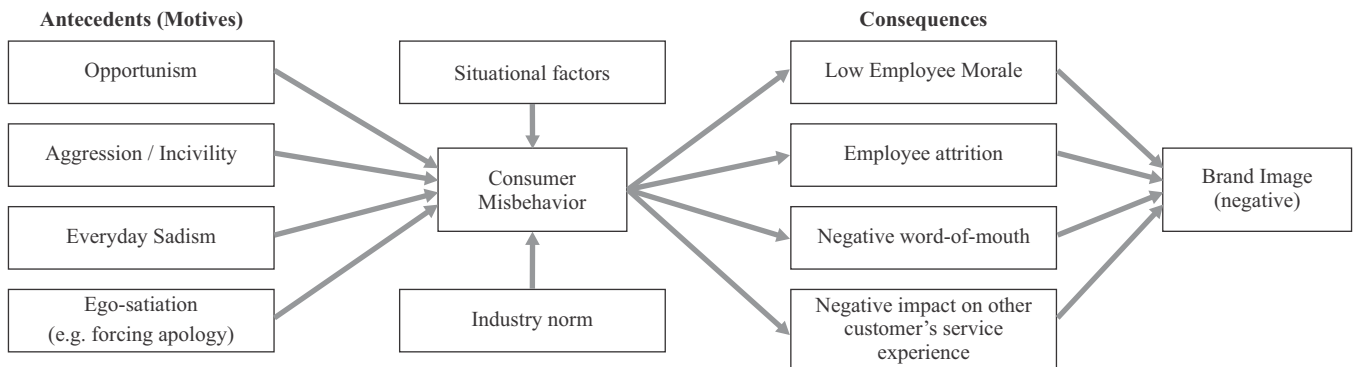
As we can see that the consequences of consumer misbehavior are – "low employee morale", "higher employee attrition", "negative word-of-mouth about the service", and "negative impact on other customers' service experience." All these consequences lead to negative brand image and higher cost of doing business for the service companies.

In addition, our study indicates the presence of consumer motives such as "everyday sadism" which has not been adequately covered in earlier studies on consumer misbehavior or deviant consumer behavior. Sadism has always been related to dark personality traits that an individual has and is considered extreme behavior of psychopaths. But the findings of our study show the existence of sadism in more subtle forms which is consistent with the recent research on the

psychology of everyday sadism where sadism extends to the normal range of personality (Buckels, 2018). Consumers seeking thrills has been uncovered in earlier studies as well (e.g. Fullerton & Punj, 2004) but thrill is also related to psychopaths and everyday sadism which came out in this study. Also, the study reveals ego-satiation as an important motive of consumer misbehavior which is consistent with the earlier study results on ego-gain motives, ego-driven revenge motives, etc. (ref. Daunt & Harris, 2012: p. 295). However, the subtheme of "forced apology" emerged in our study where the employee has to say apology to a misbehaving customer in spite of no fault of his/her. This theme has not been particularly highlighted in earlier researches on consumer misbehavior. This explains how the morale of the employee is negatively impacted by such ego-satiation motives of the customer, which has serious consequences

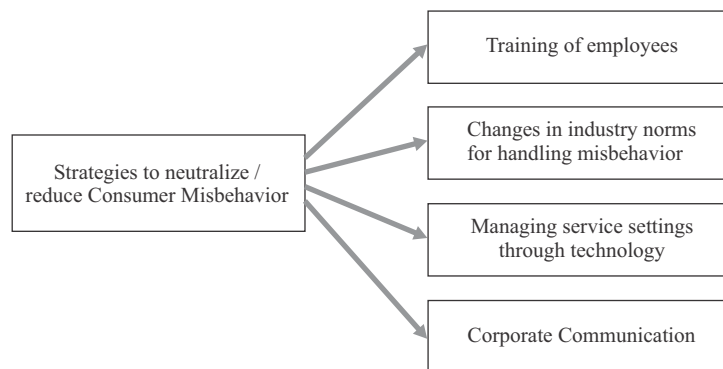for service organizations such as higher employee attrition.

Moreover, the link between consumer misbehavior and brand image is clearly emerged in our study which addresses the gap in consumer misbehavior research as identified by Fullerton & Punj (2004) where there is need to understand the relationship between customer dissatisfaction and misbehavior, origination of customer expectations from values and norms (e.g. industry norms, culture of consumption) and understanding what is acceptable consumer behavior in a particular national cultural context (e.g. India).

Consumer misbehaviour is a growing concern in many industries especially the ones that involve active interaction between the marketers and consumers such as in service settings where mostly

the consumer and the customer are the same. Moreover, consumer misbehaviour may lead to "consumer-to-brand impoliteness" as has been brought out by one of the recent studies (ref. Boissieu & Urien, 2022) and so has the findings of our study which has important implications to the way the image of a brand can be protected in the long run.

To reduce the negative impact of consumer misbehavior, service companies need to devise appropriate strategies to neutralize or reduce such deviant consumer behavior or customer misbehavior. From the result of our study and based on existing literature on prior studies we could identify four possible strategies which are depicted in Figure 2 and explained below.

Figure 2. Handling consumer misbehaviour in India

Training of employees: Some of the respondents we interviewed in the service organizations suggested behavioral or psychological trainings. For instance, one respondent (Founder) said that – "Training here means learning which a very psychological process, and the staff has to deal with this on a psychological level. So, workshops done by a psychologist on how to talk to customers can help employees a lot. To have a proper list of answers that they need to give to customers who are misbehaving with them." Earlier studies have advocated education of consumers, deterrence (e.g. Fullerton & Punj, 2004), managerial counselling, recruiting employees with personalities to tolerate

rude behaviors (e.g. Harris & Daunt, 2013), etc. as strategies to control misbehavior. But our study specifically indicates the type of training needed for employees in services to deal with misbehavior. Skills may vary according to the type of service offered and so skill-based training after assessing the skills required to effectively control and neutralize consumer misbehaving situations is needed. Like employees 'should be calm'; they should be 'self-aware'; and they should have 'ability to handle ambiguity', etc. Moreover, employees should be continuously trained with innovative ways to communicate and resolve conflicts with customers in a misbehaving situation. Our study

indicates the need for a more pro-active strategy of developing skills and competence, assuming that consumer misbehavior is a part of the culture of consumption and is supposed to stay, rather than taking reactive control strategies.

Changes in industry norms to handle misbehavior:
In some of the service industries like airline, hospitality, retailing, etc. companies have devised some specific strategies to counter the menace of consumer misbehavior. For instance, in airline industry, passenger misbehavior with co-passengers or flight attendants may be countered by either asking them to de-board the plane when it is on ground, or may be handed over to the airport security personnel on landing. A case in point is the recent incidence of two Air India passengers who were caught smoking on the flight (Manju V, 2022). Another instance is when a drunk passenger began screaming and assaulting the staff for no reason and the other passengers were getting disturbed; the person had to be handed to the security personnel in the airport (Kashyap, 2014). For shoplifting, the Section 379 of the Indian Penal Code that includes punishment of theft could be applied but many of these cases don't get reported (George, 2019). So, reporting of such cases is essential. Incidences of consumers misbehaving become highly pronounced on the Black Friday weeks in the West and during the festival seasons like Diwali in India. Retailers should convey their store policies clearly during such festivals to make consumers more aware and also should quickly react to any sign of aggression by removing the bad actors. Also, service providers can increase capacity to avoid any queuing problems increasing waiting time which could be frustrating the customers, and may be put more staff to improve responsiveness to the shoppers' concerns averting any possibility of a misbehaviour.

Managing service settings through technology:
Many of the retailers use various different technologies like RFID tags, CCTV surveillance systems, etc. to curb deviant consumer behaviors like shoplifting or theft. Service providers in the hospitality sector like hotels and restaurants can use CCTV surveillance to continuously gather recordings for any consumer misbehavior (e.g. aggression, verbal abuse, vandalism, etc.) which can be used as an evidence to report such misbehavior to law authorities like the police and also develop strategies to handle specific types of misbehavior by customers (ref. TNN, 2021). The occupational health and safety is the primary responsibility of the service provider and so both the lawmakers and the service companies should work towards defining the industry norms and guidelines to deal with the consumer misbehavior in their specific service settings.

Corporate Communications: In today's era of social media, any incident of misbehavior that is captured or any revenge taken by the customer by one tweet online, may easily blow out-of-proportions and so, the service companies should continuously work on appropriate corporate communication strategies to prevent the damaging impact on corporate reputation due to the spread of any negative word-of-mouth.

By effectively managing consumer misbehaviour through neutralization techniques, the service companies can safeguard themselves from any adverse impact on their goodwill and brand image. Moreover, the service marketers can save a lot of cost or prevent losses incurred due to deviant consumer behaviours, customer dissatisfaction and preventing negative word-of-mouth that can potentially erode the goodwill and brand equity. Moreover, by managing consumers who misbehave through appropriate behavioural responses, the company can not only prevent itself from a bad customer experience but also save themselves from losing a loyal customer. Some form of consumer misbehaviour which are driven out of sadism and vandalism are difficult to control and so companies should find innovative ways to avert any risk of such conflicting situation.

Conclusion

The area of consumer misbehaviour in an emerging market context is still an under-researched area and every organization faces it in some form or the other. The contribution of this study is that it fills the void of literature about understanding the phenomena of consumer behaviour identifying the various antecedents and the consequences of misbehaviour in the service-based companies in an Indian context. The conceptual framework (Figure 1) proposed can be an important starting point towards future confirmatory studies to establish the given model of consumer misbehaviour empirically. Moreover the study has been conducted at multi-locations and rich data was generated which enhance the credibility and transferability of findings of the study to various different service contexts. However, the study has still a limitation. It is only based on the data collected from a single-country setting (e.g. India) which may not be reflective of all the South Asian or emerging market consumers. Hence, subsequent cross cultural studies are needed to look into the comparative aspects of consumer misbehaviour across the different emerging markets. Moreover, this will also facilitate the framing of right policies that are standard across the various different geographical contexts, which would help the service company to ward of the threat of high consumer misbehaviour and prevent itself from a brand image erosion.

Finally the study intends to pave the way for future research on consumer psychology especially around the under-researched areas of understanding everyday sadism, aggression and ego-behaviours in consumers who misbehave or indulge in deviant consumer behaviour. Also, the framework can be used to conduct appropriate quantitative studies to identify the various moderating and mediating factors that influence the relationship between consumer misbehaviour, brand image and cost of marketing. The impact of macro-factors such as the culture of consumption and industry norms for the customer-service provider relationship shall also be considered in future research.

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