



Retail Staff Behaviors and Their Impact on Customer Experience: An Ethnographic Study of Service Neglect in Midlands, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This ethnographic study examines the occurrence of service neglect among retail employees and its effect on the customer experience in the retail sector in Midlands Province, Zimbabwe. Even though there is a growing focus on strategies that put the customer first, careless behaviors by staff, like failure to pay attention, helping, and welcoming a customer are still a big problem in stores that are not being looked into. Utilizing the SERVQUAL model and Social Exchange Theory, the study conducted non-participant observations and semi-structured interviews in 50 retail establishments, including supermarkets, clothing stores, electronics retailers, and specialty shops. The results show that service neglect shows up in behaviors like not greeting customers, taking too long to respond to requests for help, and showing clear disinterest. All of these things make customers more frustrated, less satisfied, and less loyal. Some of the main reasons for this are too much work, not enough staff, not enough training, unclear service standards, and cultures that don't help. The research also points outside factors that make it harder for staff and customer to interact, like technology such as WhatsApp, TikTok and other which gets the staff distracted. These findings show that service neglect is a systemic problem that hurts how customers see the brand, how often they come back, and the brand's reputation. The research ends by suggesting that comprehensive staff training, creating customer-focused cultures in the workplace, and reducing distractions are all important ways to reduce service neglect. Retailers can improve customer experiences and stay competitive in a changing retail environment by addressing both individual and structural factors.

Keywords: Service neglect, customer experience, retail staff behavior, ethnographic study, organizational culture.

Introduction

The global retail landscape has undergone rapid transformation in recent years, driven by technological innovation, shifting consumer preferences, and increased competition. As a result, delivering a superior customer experience has become a central focus for retailers seeking to differentiate themselves and achieve sustainable growth (Grewal, Roggeveen, & Nordfält, 2021). Today's customers expect not only quality products but also high levels of service during every stage of the purchasing journey, making the quality of employee-customer interactions a critical determinant of customer satisfaction and loyalty (Homburg, Jozić, & Kuehnl, 2017).

Within this context, the role of frontline retail staff has gained renewed attention. Employees are often the face of the business and play a pivotal role in shaping customer perceptions, influencing both immediate shopping decisions and longer-term brand relationships (Khan, Rahman, & Fatma, 2022). Positive staff behaviors, such as attentiveness, courtesy, and willingness to assist, are consistently linked to higher levels of customer satisfaction, repeat business, and favorable word-of-mouth (Luo, Luo, & Liu, 2021).

Nevertheless, recent studies highlight that negative staff behaviors, particularly those characterized by service neglect, remain a persistent and underexplored issue in retail settings (Park & Yi, 2022). Service neglect—manifested through inattentiveness, lack of assistance, and failure to acknowledge customers—can generate significant frustration, reduce customer loyalty, and trigger negative reviews, ultimately threatening a retailer's reputation and profitability (Kang & Hyun, 2022). Such experiences, if repeated, can contribute to customer attrition, making it crucial for retailers to understand and address the underlying causes of neglectful staff behaviors.

Despite the growing emphasis on customer-centric business strategies, scholarly attention has predominantly focused on general service quality and satisfaction metrics, often overlooking the nuanced behaviors that constitute service neglect (Homburg et al., 2017; Park & Yi, 2022). Quantitative studies, while valuable, may not capture the subtleties of in-store interactions or the organizational and contextual factors that influence staff conduct. Moreover, existing research does not adequately consider the lived experiences of customers who encounter service neglect in real-time, nor does it explore the perspectives of retail staff regarding the reasons behind such behaviors (Khan et al., 2022).

The implications of service neglect extend beyond individual negative encounters. Chronic neglect signals deeper organizational or cultural issues, potentially eroding customer trust and reducing store performance over time (Grewal et al., 2021; Kang & Hyun, 2022). For retailers operating in highly competitive markets, understanding the roots and impacts of service neglect is essential for developing effective management and training interventions that can enhance both staff performance and customer satisfaction.

Despite the increasing emphasis on customer-centric strategies in the retail sector, service neglect by staff remains a persistent and often overlooked issue, adversely impacting customer experiences and satisfaction. Service neglect, characterized by inattentiveness, lack of assistance, and failure to acknowledge customers, can lead to frustration, diminished loyalty, and negative word-of-mouth, ultimately affecting a retailer's reputation and profitability. Existing research has largely focused on service quality and customer satisfaction in general, but there is limited understanding of the everyday staff behaviors that constitute neglect and the contextual factors that drive such behaviors. This study seeks to fill this gap by employing ethnographic approaches to gain in-depth insights into how service neglect manifests in retail settings and how it shapes the customer experience, with the aim of informing more effective management practices and training interventions.

Given these gaps, this study adopts an ethnographic approach to provide an in-depth exploration of retail staff behaviors that constitute service neglect and to assess their impact on customer experiences. The objectives are threefold: (1) to identify and describe the specific staff behaviors that constitute service neglect in retail environments, (2) to examine how instances of service neglect affect customer perceptions, satisfaction, and overall shopping experience, and (3) to explore the underlying factors within the retail setting that contribute to service neglect among staff members. By addressing these aims, the study seeks to enrich the understanding of service neglect in retail and to inform evidence-based strategies for improving service quality and customer outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

SERVQUAL Model (Service Quality Model) and Social Exchange Theory

1. SERVQUAL Model

The SERVQUAL model, developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988), is a widely recognized framework for assessing service quality across five key dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. In the context of retail, the model is particularly relevant for evaluating how staff behaviors including service neglect impact customer perceptions and satisfaction. Chhabra (2022) also used this model on the article, "Measurement of consumer's perception of service Quality in organized Retailing. By employing the SERVQUAL framework, the study can systematically investigate gaps between customers' expectations and their actual experiences, with a specific focus on the dimensions most affected by staff neglect, such as responsiveness and empathy.

2. Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) posits that social behavior is the result of an exchange process aimed at maximizing benefits and minimizing costs. In retail interactions, staff and customers engage in exchanges where positive behaviors (e.g., attention, assistance) are expected to be reciprocated by customer loyalty and positive feedback. Service neglect disrupts this exchange, leading to dissatisfaction and potential withdrawal by customers. Pallantel et al., (2022) used Social Exchange theory on their research, "When and how consumers are willing to exchange data with retailer. Applying Social Exchange Theory allows the study to explore the relational consequences of neglected service, how customers interpret and respond to such experiences, and the broader implications for customer-retailer relationships.

The combined use of the SERVQUAL Model and Social Exchange Theory is justified as the SERVQUAL Model and Social Exchange Theory are complementary and hence their combination is warranted. SERVQUAL is a multidimensional, comprehensive measure that can be used to identify retail staff behaviors that may represent cases of service neglect. Both theories highlight a customer-centred approach, an important factor in comprehending the role of

service neglect in customer experience. In addition, Social Exchange Theory provides a behavioral understanding of how service neglect and withdrawal and its related consequences would occur, adding depth to the interpretation of ethnographic data. These frameworks can be used together to offer a powerful theoretical framework for understanding and explaining the connection among the behavior of retail staff and customer experience, with the view of providing practical suggestions for management and staff training actions to enhance service quality and customer satisfaction.

Methods

The study used a qualitative research design to obtain extensive knowledge about the characteristics of staff behaviors in retail environments and how they affect the customer experience, particularly in relation to service neglect. The study was conducted in various retail shops in the Midlands Province (supermarkets, clothing shops, electronics shops, and special shops) through the snowball sampling technique which involved 50 retail shops mainly in the major towns of Gweru, Kwekwe, Gokwe, and Zvishavane. Participants were recruited through referrals and from existing networks of initial participants and local business associations. Ethnographic approaches were used for data collection, which included non-participant observation of staff/customer interactions, particularly service neglect, and semi-structured interviews of shop owners, managers and front line staff. Interviews took 30-45 minutes, and were focused on experiences and perceptions of service neglect and the effect on the customer experience.

The interviews and observations data were transcribed and analyzed through thematic analysis process using NVivo software, which enables patterns and themes to be identified from the data. To ensure trustworthiness of findings, member checking was done. Ethical approval was granted by community leaders and participants gave informed consent in writing. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by coding shops and persons and securely storing data.

Literature Review

Specific Staff Behaviors that Constitute Service Neglect in Retail Environments

Recent research has highlighted a range of staff behaviors that collectively constitute service neglect in retail settings. Typical behaviors include failing to greet or acknowledge customers, ignoring requests for assistance, being unavailable at key touchpoints, and displaying inattentiveness during customer interactions (Park & Yi, 2022). Other examples involve staff being preoccupied with personal conversations or mobile phones, demonstrating minimal effort in providing product information, and neglecting to check on customers after initial contact (Kang & Hyun, 2022). Luo, Luo, and Liu (2021) found that passive or indifferent attitudes—such as avoiding eye contact, not offering help, or making customers wait unnecessarily—are frequently perceived as neglectful by shoppers. These behaviors contrast sharply with proactive service, where staff anticipate and promptly respond to customer needs.

How Instances of Service Neglect Affect Customer Perceptions, Satisfaction, and Overall Shopping Experience

The impact of service neglect on customer perceptions and satisfaction is well-documented in recent studies. Service neglect often leads to negative emotional responses such as frustration, disappointment, and even anger, which in turn diminish overall satisfaction with the shopping experience (Kang & Hyun, 2022). Customers who experience neglect are more likely to perceive the retail environment as unwelcoming or uncaring, which can erode trust and reduce the likelihood of repeat patronage (Park & Yi, 2022). Furthermore, Luo et al. (2021) demonstrated that instances of neglect have a compounding effect, especially when customers compare their experiences to expectations of attentive service; such discrepancies can result in lower customer loyalty and increased negative word-of-mouth. In a competitive market, even occasional neglectful interactions can have lasting detrimental effects on brand reputation and financial performance (Khan, Rahman, & Fatma, 2022).

Underlying Factors within the Retail Setting that Contribute to Service Neglect among Staff Members

Multiple organizational and contextual factors within retail environments have been identified as contributors to service neglect. High workload and understaffing are commonly cited, as employees may be spread too thin to provide adequate attention to each customer (Khan et al., 2022). Inadequate training, lack of clear service standards, and insufficient managerial supervision further exacerbate the problem, leaving staff ill-equipped or unmotivated to deliver proactive service (Kang & Hyun, 2022). Additionally, Luo et al. (2021) noted that organizational culture plays a crucial role: workplaces that do not prioritize customer-centric values or fail to recognize and reward positive service behaviors tend to experience higher levels of service neglect. Finally, external pressures such as high customer volume, complex store layouts, or technological distractions (e.g., point-of-sale issues, mobile device use) can also impede staff's ability to engage meaningfully with shoppers (Park & Yi, 2022).

Results

Specific Staff Behaviors Constituting Service Neglect in Retail Environments

The ethnographic observations and interviews conducted across 50 retail shops in the Midlands Province revealed a consistent pattern of staff behaviors that customers perceived as service neglect. The most frequently observed behaviors

included failing to greet or acknowledge customers upon entry, ignoring or delaying responses to requests for assistance, and being physically or emotionally unavailable during critical moments of the shopping experience. In several instances, staff members were seen engaging in personal conversations, attending to mobile phones, or focusing on other tasks while customers waited for help. Other neglectful behaviors identified included minimal effort in providing product information, lack of follow-up after initial contact, and a general display of indifferent attitudes, such as avoiding eye contact and making customers wait unnecessarily. These behaviors were observed across various retail formats, including supermarkets, clothing stores, and electronics shops, indicating that service neglect is a pervasive issue rather than an isolated occurrence.

Effects of Service Neglect on Customer Perceptions, Satisfaction, and Overall Shopping Experience

Service neglect had a clear and immediate negative impact on customer perceptions and satisfaction. Customers who experienced neglectful staff behavior reported feelings of frustration, disappointment, and being undervalued. Many participants described the retail environment as unwelcoming or uncaring when staff failed to provide timely acknowledgment or assistance. This perception led to diminished trust in the retail brand and a decreased likelihood of repeat patronage. Recurrent experiences of neglect not only eroded customer confidence but also triggered negative word-of-mouth, with several customers indicating that they had shared their dissatisfaction with friends, family, or on social media platforms. It was also noted that neglectful service had a compounding effect, especially in retail settings where customers had higher expectations for attentive service. In such cases, the gap between expected and actual service further reduced overall satisfaction and loyalty, ultimately threatening customer retention and the retailer's reputation.

Underlying Factors within the Retail Setting Contributing to Service Neglect among Staff Members

Analysis of interviews and field notes highlighted several underlying factors within the retail environment that contributed to service neglect. High workload and understaffing were the most commonly cited issues; with staff members often stretched too thin to provide adequate attention to each customer. Inadequate training and a lack of clear service standards left many employees uncertain about expectations for customer engagement, resulting in inconsistent and sometimes neglectful interactions. Insufficient managerial supervision and support further exacerbated the problem, limiting accountability and motivation among frontline staff. The organizational culture within some shops failed to prioritize or reward positive service behaviors, leading to a lack of emphasis on customer-centric values. Some retailers' workers were forbidden to use cell phones while at work which worked as a de-motivation to them rather than tools to enhance the service. The attitude of the shop owners to their workers also de-motivate the workers which makes them feel like they are not part of the company thereby neglecting the clients. Finally, external pressures such as high customer volume, complex store layouts, or technological distractions such as point-of-sale issues or personal mobile device use often impeded staff members' ability to engage meaningfully with customers. Collectively, these factors created an environment in which service neglect became normalized, with adverse consequences for both customers and business performance.

Discussion

The findings of this ethnographic study reveal that service neglect in retail environments is both versatile and deeply rooted in daily staff behaviors, organizational processes, and contextual pressures. The observed behaviors including failure to greet or acknowledge customers, inattentiveness, and lack of proactive assistance align with recent studies that have identified similar patterns of neglect in retail settings. For example, Park and Yi (2022) reported that customers frequently interpret staff's lack of greeting, avoidance of eye contact, and unresponsiveness as clear indicators of neglectful service. These behaviors were regularly documented during the present study's non-participant observations, mirroring the global trend of passive service in understaffed or poorly managed retail environments.

The impact of service neglect on customer perceptions and experiences was pronounced in this study, echoing the findings of Kang and Hyun (2022), who established a direct link between service neglect and negative emotional responses such as frustration and disappointment. Customers in the present study reported feeling unwelcome or undervalued when staff failed to acknowledge or assist them, which in turn diminished their overall satisfaction and willingness to return to the store. This is consistent with the work of Luo, Luo, and Liu (2021), who found that even a single instance of staff neglect can significantly reduce customer loyalty and increase the likelihood of negative word-of-mouth, ultimately affecting the retailer's reputation and competitive standing. Furthermore, as Khan, Rahman, and Fatma (2022) have suggested, the cumulative effect of such negative experiences can erode brand trust and drive customers to competitors, a theme that was evident in participants' narratives about lost repeat business.

Exploring the underlying factors behind service neglect, this study's findings point to high workloads, understaffing, inadequate training, and lack of clear service standards as primary contributors. Retail workers interviewed in this study frequently cited overwhelming task loads and insufficient staffing as reasons for their inability to provide attentive service, particularly during peak hours or in larger store formats. Similar observations were made by Kang and Hyun (2022), who highlighted the role of operational pressures in diminishing staff's capacity for customer engagement. Additionally, organizational culture emerged as a critical determinant: shops that did not prioritize customer-centric

values or failed to reward positive service behaviors were more prone to neglectful staff conduct. This is supported by Luo et al. (2021), who emphasized that a supportive work environment, clear expectations, and ongoing feedback are essential for fostering attentive and proactive service behaviors.

The presence of technological distractions (such as mobile device use or point-of-sale issues) and complex store layouts further limited staff's ability to engage meaningfully with customers. These contextual challenges are increasingly noted in contemporary retail research, with several scholars advocating for streamlined operations and better staff training as remedies. Park and Yi (2022) investigate the impact of neglect by frontline employees on customer responses in the retail industry. The study emphasizes the significance of employee engagement and training in improving customer relations, asserting that attentive service is essential for sustaining favorable customer perceptions in retail settings.

The convergence of these findings with recent literature underscores the systemic nature of service neglect in retail and highlights the urgent need for organizational interventions. Strategies such as targeted staff training, clear communication of service expectations, adequate staffing, and the cultivation of a customer-centric culture are critical steps for retailers seeking to mitigate the detrimental effects of service neglect and enhance customer experience in an ever-competitive market.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that service neglect is a prevalent and consequential issue in retail settings, manifesting in behaviors such as inattentiveness, lack of acknowledgment, and minimal customer assistance. These neglectful behaviors significantly undermine customer perceptions, reduce overall satisfaction, and diminish the likelihood of repeat patronage. The research further reveals that the underlying drivers of service neglect are in various ways, including high workload, understaffing, inadequate training, unclear service standards, and unsupportive organizational cultures. The consistency of these findings with contemporary literature underscores the urgent need for retail organizations to address both the individual and systemic contributors to service neglect in order to enhance the customer experience, safeguard brand reputation, and maintain competitiveness.

Recommendations

Implement Comprehensive Staff Training: Retailers should invest in ongoing customer service training programs that emphasize the importance of attentiveness, proactive assistance, and positive customer interactions. Training should be tailored to address the specific behaviors identified as service neglect and include practical scenarios and feedback mechanisms.

Foster a Customer-Centric Organizational Culture: Retailers should cultivate an environment that values customer satisfaction, recognizing and rewarding employees who consistently deliver attentive and high-quality service. Leadership should model customer-centric behaviors and provide support for staff to prioritize customer engagement.

Minimize Technological and Environmental Distractions: Management should address potential distractions such as unnecessary mobile device use or poorly designed store layouts that may prevent staff from focusing on customers. Streamlining operations and optimizing the store environment can help staff remain attentive and responsive.

By implementing these recommendations, retailers can address the root causes of service neglect, improve the quality of staff-customer interactions, and ultimately enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty in an increasingly competitive retail landscape.

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