Engaging in emotional labour when facing customer mistreatment in hospitality

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

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

1. Introduction

Customer service is one of the most important elements in achieving customer satisfaction and repeat business with the ultimate goal of developing a sustainable competitive advantage (Christofi et al., 2013, 2014, 2018; Dietz et al., 2004; McCance et al., 2013; Salanova et al., 2005; Stabler et al., 2010). To achieve customer satisfaction and loyalty, service employees are often required to apply organisationally-imposed display rules and guidelines regulating emotional conduct towards customers (Diefendorff & Richard, 2003; McCance et al., 2013; Thrassou et al., 2020). To adhere to these display rules and guidelines, employees engage in emotional labour (EL), which is defined as the process of employees managing their emotions to comply with organisational expectations during their interactions with customers (Hochschild, 1983).

The main premise of EL is that employees must adhere to display rules that instruct which emotions should be expressed during work (Gabriel & Diefendorff, 2015; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987). Research on EL has mainly focused on two strategies for regulating employee emotions, namely surface acting (SA), which involves faking required emotions and suppressing felt emotions, and deep acting (DA), which involves exerting effort to feel and express required emotions (Gabriel & Diefendorff, 2015), to provide quality service that safeguards the customer experience.

Relatedly, customer service representatives are exposed to various work-related stressors. One important stressor that is applicable to service employees only is customer mistreatment. Customer mistreatment refers to the low-quality treatment that customers give employees, which takes several forms, ranging from making ambiguous demands to

being verbally aggressive (Baranik et al., 2017). In many service occupations (including the hospitality industry, which offers the empirical context of this study), employees are asked to display positive emotions and to suppress negative emotions, even in cases of customer mistreatment. This organisation-imposed practice has been collectively referred to as "integrative display rules" (Gabriel & Diefendorff, 2015). If employees feel emotions that differ from display rules, it has been theorised that they will actively regulate their emotions to ensure appropriate displays (Gabriel & Diefendorff, 2015; Grandey, 2000). In this context, interactions with difficult customers who behave in an unfair and verbally hostile manner heighten EL requirements for service employees (McCance et al., 2013).

Research on EL in relation to customer mistreatment has been so far incomplete (Goussinsky, 2015; Hu et al., 2017) and there are several calls for further research thereto (Baranik et al., 2017; Karatepe, 2015). That is, research so far has focused mainly on the presumption that employees should exhibit inauthentic emotions or else engage in SA so as to abide by organisational rules when interacting with aggressive customers, without articulating the scope of DA as a more effective alternative (Hoffmann, 2016; Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018). Moreover, extant research has identified several negative effects of EL on employees,[1] but has neither explored how to alleviate them nor how the presence of these effects may differentiate between SA and DA strategies (McCance et al., 2013). Neither does extant literature provide any empirical evidence of how to engage employees more in DA rather than SA (Baranik et al., 2017; Goussinsky, 2015), even though several researchers have argued that the use of DA when interacting with aggressive customers may lead to better outcomes[2] for both customers and employees (Baranik et al., 2017; Goussinsky, 2015; Huang & Dai, 2010; Hur et al., 2015; Karatepe, 2010; Karatepe & Nkendong, 2014; Kim et al., 2012; Wing et al., 2018). However, even that body of research has failed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact that DA has in alleviating the negative effects of SA as part of interactions with aggressive customers. Based on the above, current research has failed to provide a holistic understanding of (a) the conditions under which employees engage in SA and DA in the hospitality industry; (b) the effects on employees that arise from SA, and how these can be overcome; (c) whether the means to overcome the negative effects of SA can simultaneously stimulate engagement with DA; and (d) what are the effects when employees engage in DA during interactions with aggressive customers. Thus, further research is required in these sparsely researched areas so both academia and practice can develop a coherent understanding of how EL strategies can help effectively manage customer mistreatment to boost service satisfaction and repeat business. It is, therefore, towards addressing the aforementioned research gaps at which this paper is aimed.

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

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

[2] E.g. an increase in motivation, service performance, and employee engagement, as well as a decrease in employees' emotional dissonance, absenteeism, emotional exhaustion, stress, and burnout. Also, customers enjoy a more genuine service experience.

2. Literature review and theoretical development

2.1. The concept of emotional intelligence

The concept of emotional intelligence (EI) originates from Daniel Goleman and attracted significant attention among researchers and practitioners in the last two decades. The proponents of EI have contended that it is a type of social intelligence, thus it differs from the Big-Five Personality traits and academic intelligence (Huang et al., 2010; Law et al., 2008; Song et al., 2010). Even though there is a plethora of definitions of EI, four dimensions of EI have been identified and are widely accepted (Huang et al., 2010): (1) self-emotion appraisal (a person's ability to comprehend her or his deep emotions and express such emotions naturally); (2) other-emotion appraisal (a person's ability to perceive and comprehend the emotions of other human beings around them); (3) use of emotion (a person's ability to use of his or her emotions for constructive activities and individual performance); and (4) regulation of emotion (a person's ability to regulate his or her emotions, thus, enabling a faster recovery from negative conditions, such as psychological distress). The extant literature on the concept showed that EI has a strong influence on behaviors and work attitudes for jobs that employees must manage and control their emotions often and extensively (e.g., Zeidner et al., 2004). Social skills are the most important skills for workers in the service sector in order to manage customer relationships (Huang et al., 2010; Thompson et al., 2001).

2.2. Handling aggressive customers: a role for emotional labour

The rate at which employees face aggressive customers, of any type, is very high, according to existing literature (Goussinsky, 2011; Grandey, 2000; Harris & Reynolds, 2003). As with many service industries, the hospitality industry and those employees offering customer service therein, are experiencing aggression (Daskin, 2016) from verbally, emotionally, and physically aggressive customers (Harris & Reynolds, 2003). Anger-provoking events have intensified the need for service providers to regulate their emotions (Goussinsky, 2011), and this is even more compelling, as they now increasingly face demanding and angry customers than before (Grandey, 2000). For example, Harris and Reynolds (2003) found that almost 82% of service providers working in the hospitality industry have been subjected to customer mistreatment during the time of their research. It is also stated thereto that aggressive behaviour is very usual among customers in the hospitality industry, which is mainly due to the increased demands that these consumers have from spending money for leisure.

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

2.3. Contagious emotions and emotional labour

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

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

Relatedly, extant literature in EL shows that service providers more likely engage in SA when interacting with aggressive customers (Deepthi, 2015; Goussinsky, 2015; Grandey, 2000). This is because, as employees get "infected" by the negative feelings of their customers, they reflexively fake their adopted negative feelings to handle them, which is seen as an unconscious, and thereby less mentally painstaking, way out of a difficult situation. Therefore, the contagious effects of customers' negative feelings on service employees makes it difficult for them to engage in DA when handling customer complaints and anger (Goussinsky, 2015; Huang & Dai, 2010). In what follows, we review literature in affective events theory so as to shed light on the reasons behind employees' leaning towards SA when faced with customer mistreatment.

2.4. Affective events theory

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

2.5. Buffers to SA effects

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

Extant literature supports that employees that have a feeling of belonging in their workplace find it easier to overcome the effects of SA (Grandey & Melloy, 2017; Xanthopoulou et al., 2018). Having a sense of belonging is an important variable in buffering against negative effects, as the need to belong to one's workplace positively relates to the generation and display of positive emotions, whereas it negatively relates to generating and displaying negative emotions (Yagil & Medler-Liraz, 2017). Satisfying this employees' need for belonging is important for organisations, as it could act as a buffering measure against SA effects (Yagil & Medler-Liraz, 2017). As such, service employees with a strong psychological need for belonging to their workplace may find it more difficult to interact with aggressive customers, as these interactions negate the positive emotions that this need for belonging generates. In particular, such employees are required to handle the negative emotions that arise from customer mistreatment and are more likely to engage in SA to adhere to organisational expectations. On the other hand, employees who can handle the contradiction between the positive emotions that arise from their need for belonging in the workplace and the negative ones that emanate from their interaction with aggressive customers, are more capable of engaging with DA. These studies call for further research on how to engage employees more in DA and what would be the positive outcomes thereto, while taking into consideration the positive effects that the need for belonging to the workplace pose to individual and organisational levels (Yagil & Medler-Liraz, 2017). The literature identifies that, to achieve a sense of belonging, employees need to perceive that the organisation they work for cares about them, values their opinion, and shares their feelings (Hur et al., 2013). Employees who believe their organisation supports them also have a strong sense of belonging (Yagil & Medler-Liraz, 2017) and are more able to cope with the negative consequences of SA (Hur et al., 2013). In line with these findings, other researchers suggest that employees will also engage more in DA when they perceive the organisation supporting and caring for them (Hur et al., 2013; Kumar-Mishra, 2014).

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

The negative consequences of EL have been researched by studies that draw on conservation of resources theory as well. These studies have particularly evaluated the extensively depleting effects of SA and whether social interactions with co-workers (i.e. giving and receiving help) can mitigate the negative consequences of EL (Brotheridge & Lee, 2003; Uy et al., 2017). Results indicate that within-person daily SA positively predicted end-of-day emotional exhaustion, and that the effect of emotional exhaustion spilled over to work engagement the following day (Uy et al., 2017). This research also showed that giving help buffered the depletion process while receiving help did not. Helping others could affect one's sense of self-esteem and the importance of resource congruence in improving the efficacy of buffering against the effects of SA (Grandey & Melloy, 2017). The theoretical and practical significance of how giving help at work buffers the negative effects of SA

EL is a new factor and warrants further research (Wong et al., 2017).

Training is another buffer identified in the literature as curbing the effects of EL and of SA, in particular. Organisations, specifically leaders, play an important role in helping employees cope with the stressors and consequences they face at work (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002). This help can take the form of initial as well as continuous training in, among others, developing capable and resilient customer service staff, which interact with clients daily (Goussinsky, 2012; Grandey et al., 2004; Wang & Groth, 2014). According to Wang and Groth (2014), employees should also be trained to engage in DA when interacting with aggressive customers. Literature has shown that using DA instead of SA will lead to more positive outcomes for employee performance and work experience (Blau et al., 2010; Hochschild, 1983; Peng et al., 2010). Although there are various techniques to train employees on using DA, existing literature is inconclusive on whether resorting to DA is possible when interacting with aggressive customers, and how it could be achieved (Goussinsky, 2015; Karatepe & Nkendong, 2014). Therefore, further empirical research should be conducted to find out how training will help employees engage more in DA when interacting with aggressive customers.

Besides, training is a very helpful tool for people in management positions who form employees' attitudes and perceptions (Edelman & van Knippenberg, 2017). Current literature discusses how managers engage in SA when interacting with their employees as well as when dealing with difficult customer situations (Huyghebaert et al., 2018). Training managers to engage in DA has been proven to be highly beneficial for their role (Edelman & van Knippenberg, 2017; Huyghe-baert et al., 2018), and it is argued that it could also be beneficial for their staff. This is because the latter will be motivated to engage in DA, since their leaders do so as well. However, extant research has not yet provided conclusive evidence on this matter and as such it should be investigated further.

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

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

The role of job autonomy as a buffer to the negative effects of SA has also been studied. Job autonomy is the extent to which an employee's job provides him/her with freedom of choice, a high degree of independence, as well as discretion in the way they perform and execute their job (Goussinsky, 2015). Job autonomy goes along with self-monitoring and drive, another aspect that has been taken into consideration when dealing with aggressive customers and EL. It has been argued that people that are high in self-monitoring are affected less by EL, and specifically SA consequences (Huang & Dai, 2010). However, there is no conclusive research so far, to the best of our knowledge, that

examines how job autonomy is related with an employee's potential to engage with DA.

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

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

2.6. Deploying DA in interactions with aggressive customers

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

This literature indicates that there is a need to enhance the use of DA and avoid SA during employee interactions with aggressive customers, especially in the hospitality industry. Customers would be more satisfied to see employees expressing authentically caring emotions when the former are unhappy about the service they have received; thus, they would be happier if employees performed DA. However, existing literature has demonstrated that employees mostly engage in SA during their interactions with aggressive customers (Barsade, 2002; Deepthi, 2015; Goussinsky, 2015; Grandey et al., 2007; Harris & Reynolds, 2003; Hoffmann, 2016; Huang & Dai, 2010). Since customers need employees to display genuinely focused and dedicated emotions, it has been argued that they can tell whether employees' emotions are fake, something which, in turn, would make them remain unhappy and dissatisfied, if they confirmed pretended emotions (Grandey, 2003; Groth et al., 2009; Karatepe, 2010; Lee, 2016).

This literature indicates that DA is important in service recovery procedures when an employee is dealing with an angry, dissatisfied customer (Goussinsky, 2015; Lee, 2016). Such literature argues that increased use of DA will have positive consequences in service recovery, and overall employee performance. In fact, it is argued that the negative effects that occur when SA is deployed will be reduced or overcome with an increased use of DA, and employees will benefit with a decrease in

burnout, less dissatisfaction and absenteeism, as well as less feelings of depersonalisation and conflicts between their role as an employee and a family member (Kim et al., 2012). In this respect, recent studies investigate how the effects of SA can be effectively eliminated (Baranik et al., 2017; Kuba & Scheibe, 2017; Wing et al., 2018; Wong et al., 2017). The question raised by these scholars is whether the ways to overcome the negative consequences of SA could simultaneously work towards encouraging employees to use DA, and what would be the effects from doing so in interactions with aggressive customers. This latter question has yet to be explored, and our research is geared at addressing it (Goussinsky, 2015; Lee, 2016; Xanthopoulou et al., 2018).

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

3. Methodology

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

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

3.1. Sampling and data collection

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

The reliability of our sampling criteria for the purposes of this research was confirmed, as these were also deployed in similar studies (e.g. Karatepe et al., 2009; Wang & Groth, 2014). Our initial sample included respondents who worked at different five-star hotels in Cyprus to ensure responses would not be biased from the micro-dynamics of customer mistreatment impinging on a specific hotel. This approach is in line with Karatepe et al (2009) and Lu et al. (2013), who suggested that selecting participants from different hotels, but with the same quality ranking (e.g. five-star hotels), would provide more trustworthy and valid research outcomes. As soon as we confirmed the appropriateness of our sampling criteria, we applied snowball sampling, where already identified respondents were asked to invite people from their social network who met the aforementioned criteria too. However, no more than five participants were taken from the same hotel and the recruitment of informants for the sample stopped when information saturation was reached (Christou, 2018; Fan et al., 2019; Saunders et al., 2012; Tsaur et al., 2019).

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

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

Informal, in-depth semi-structured interviews were employed as the appropriate data collection tool, as this method has been proven to make people feel comfortable, offering the scope from emergent themes to arise (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Each interview proceeded from a list of general "grand tour" questions (Christou, 2018) (see Table 2 for interview protocol). This interview protocol guided the interview process and provided the flexibility to request additional information in response to what the researchers saw as significant responses (Bryman, 2004). Each interview lasted approximately 60 min, and the actual place in which interviews took place was mutually agreed with each respondent. All interviews were recorded (with each participant's consent) and were transcribed. Interviews were conducted in English and no remuneration or any other "gift" in exchange for respondents' time was offered, other than sharing with them the anonymous results of the research.

4. Data analysis

Abductive reasoning was used to analyse the data (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000; Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Suddaby, 2006). Abductive logic recognises that theoretical understandings previously acquired as part of the research process should loosely guide data analysis (Dubois & Gadde, 2002), allowing ample scope for any data-emergent, non-theory fitting insights to inform the analysis (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000; Dubois & Gadde, 2002). To analyse the data abductively, thematic

Table 1
Characteristics of participants in the in-depth, semi structured interviews.

Respondent	Sex	Organisation (All hotels are five-star)	Position	Years of experience
Respondent 1 (R1)	F	Hotel A	Waiter	15
Respondent 2 (R2)	F	Hotel A	Waiter	16
Respondent 3 (R3)	F	Hotel A	Receptionist	9
Respondent 4 (R4)	M	Hotel A	Receptionist	6
Respondent 5 (R5)	F	Hotel A	Barwoman	9
Respondent 6 (R6)	F	Hotel A	Waiter	20
Respondent 7 (R7)	F	Hotel A	Waiter	25
Respondent 8 (R8)	M	Hotel A	Waiter	25
Respondent 9 (R9)	M	Hotel A	Waiter	8
Respondent 10 (R10)	F	Hotel A	Clients Relations	9
Respondent 11 (R11)	M	Hotel B	Waiter	20
Respondent 12 (R12)	M	Hotel B	Waiter	21
Respondent 13 (R13)	M	Hotel B	Barman	8
Respondent 14 (R14)	M	Hotel B	Barman	6
Respondent 15 (R15)	F	Hotel B	Receptionist	8
Respondent 16 (R16)	M	Hotel B	Head waiter	26
Respondent 17 (R17)	M	Hotel B	Head Receptionist	9
Respondent 18 (R18)	F	Hotel B	Clients Relations	6
Respondent 19 (R19)	M	Hotel B	Waiter	13
Respondent 20 (R20)	F	Hotel C	Clients Relations	8
Respondent 21 (R21)	F	Hotel C	Receptionist	6
Respondent 22 (R22)	M	Hotel C	Waiter	8
Respondent 23 (R23)	M	Hotel C	Waiter	18
Respondent 24 (R24)	M	Hotel C	Waiter	17
Respondent 25 (R25)	F	Hotel C	Barwoman	7
Respondent 26 (R26)	M	Hotel C	Waiter	19
Respondent 27 (R27)	M	Hotel C	Receptionist	8
Respondent 28 (R28)	F	Hotel C	Barwoman	22
Respondent 29 (R29)	M	Hotel C	Head Receptionist	18
Respondent 30 (R30)	F	Hotel C	Receptionist	6
Respondent 31 (R31)	M	Hotel C	Waiter	8
Respondent 32 (R32)	M	Hotel D	Receptionist	8
Respondent 33 (R33)	F	Hotel D	Clients Relations	9
Respondent 34 (R34)	F	Hotel D	Waiter	13
Respondent 35 (R35)	M	Hotel D	Barman	8
Respondent 36 (R36)	M	Hotel D	Waiter	6
	M	Hotel D	Receptionist	7

Table 1 (*continued*)

Respondent	Sex	Organisation (All hotels are five-star)	Position	Years of experience
Respondent 37 (R37)				
Respondent 38 (R38)	F	Hotel D	Barwoman	6
Respondent 39 (R39)	F	Hotel D	Waiter	7
Respondent 40 (R40)	F	Hotel D	Waiter	18
Respondent 41 (R41)	M	Hotel D	Barman	8
Respondent 42 (R42)	F	Hotel D	Receptionist	12
Respondent 43 (R43)	M	Hotel D	Waiter	9
Respondent 44 (R44)	F	Hotel D	Receptionist	19
Respondent 45 (R45)	M	Hotel E	Waiter	8
Respondent 46 (R46)	F	Hotel E	Wedding coordinator	15
Respondent 47 (R47)	F	Hotel E	Clients Relations	8
Respondent 48 (R48)	M	Hotel E	Waiter	19
Respondent 49 (R49)	F	Hotel E	Receptionist	8
Respondent 50 (R50)	F	Hotel E	Clients Relations	7
Respondent 51 (R51)	M	Hotel E	Receptionist	13
Respondent 52 (R52)	F	Hotel F	Receptionist	6
Respondent 53 (R53)	M	Hotel E	Barman	12
Respondent 54 (R54)	F	Hotel E	Barwoman	8
Respondent 55 (R55)	F	Hotel E	Barwoman	25
Respondent 56 (R56)	M	Hotel E	Receptionist	8
Respondent 57 (R57)	F	Hotel E	Waiter	20
Respondent 58 (R58)	M	Hotel E	Waiter	24
Respondent 59 (R59)	F	Hotel E	Barwoman	7
Respondent 60 (R60)	M	Hotel F	Waiter	8
Respondent 61 (R61)	F	Hotel F	Barwoman	8
Respondent 62 (R62)	F	Hotel F	Clients Relations	10
Respondent 63 (R63)	F	Hotel F	Receptionist	19
Respondent 64 (R64)	M	Hotel F	Waiter	20
Respondent 65 (R65)	M	Hotel F	Barman	18
Respondent 66 (R66)	M	Hotel F	Barman	7
Respondent 67 (R67)	F	Hotel F	Receptionist	8
Respondent 68 (R68)	M	Hotel F	Barman	9
Respondent 69 (R69)	F	Hotel F	Receptionist	16
Respondent 70 (R70)	M	Hotel F	Waiter	22

Table 2

Interview protocol.

Interview Questions
Interview Question 1:
How do you feel about your job in relation to handling customers in general?
Interview Question 2:
a) Who do you consider to be an aggressive customer? Describe him/her.
b) How does their behaviour affect you in terms of doing your job?
Interview Question 3:
How do you handle your own emotions while interacting with aggressive customers?
Interview Question 4:
a) How do you react in front of an aggressive customer? Describe a situation where you were facing customer aggression and how you have reacted.
b) Do you feel that the way you react reflects the way you feel at the moment of such interactions?
Interview Question 5:
a) How does hiding your true emotions (being called surface acting) in front of an angry customer affects you on a personal level?
b) In what level and up to what extend does engaging in surface acting during your interactions with aggressive customers affects the way you feel and behave both at work or/and in your personal life?
Interview Question 6:
In what ways does engaging in surface acting when handling difficult or angry customers is affecting your relationships with customers, colleagues and management?
Interview Question 7:
a) What kind of support would you expect from people within your working environment (i.e. colleagues, managers or other stakeholders) to help you overcome any negative consequences occurring from hiding your true emotions when you deal with aggressive customers?
b) What kind of support would you like to receive from the people that are close to you (family, friends) to overcome those negative consequences?
c) Have you received any help of any kind in order to overcome those negative consequences? If yes, was it helpful and in what extend? Mention any other kind of support you would need in general.
Interview Question 8:
In what level could you personally help yourself overcome those negative consequences?
Interview Question 9:
a) Do you feel that you could be able to offer more genuine emotions during your interactions with aggressive customers (i.e. when you have to smile you feel happy at the same time)? If yes, how would you do that?
b) What kind of support of any kind (from within or outside your working environment) would you need to be able to offer more genuine emotions to your angry customers?
Interview Question 10:
a) What would help you create a better understanding on why your customers feel the way they do when they are angry?
b) How would this affect the way you impose the right emotions when you deal with them?
Interview Question 11:
a) How would you feel if you were able to impose positive feelings and actually feel positive in front of an angry customer?
b) How would this affect the negative consequences that are occurring due to the fact that you are engaging in surface acting when interacting with aggressive customers? Would it affect them in a positive way? If yes, how and in what extent?

content analysis was applied to the 70 transcripts and interview notes,[3] involving three major rounds of coding, which were operationalised through the use of Microsoft Excel. Thematic content analysis aims at identifying the underlying meanings of the narrative, by reading the data, delving deeper into their underlying issues, and organising the findings around common themes. The *first round of coding* involved applying conceptual codes to the textual data from the transcripts and interview notes, which fully reflected terms respondents used (Gioia et al., 2013), until saturation was reached (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This process led to the generation of a large volume of first-order concepts (Gioia et al., 2013). A *second round of coding* involved an exhaustive process of identifying similarities, patterns, and differences among the first-order concepts, with a view to narrowing them down to a distilled

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and more manageable number (Gioia et al., 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The second-order themes that emerged out of this process, therefore, represented constellations of the large number of first-order concepts, and were coded using used terminology (Gioia et al., 2013). Eventually, a *third round of coding* referred to a back-and-forth process between first-order concepts, second-order themes, and the theoretical underpinnings of the research (Gioia et al., 2013) on EL, contagious emotions, and affective events. This exercise involved blocks of verbatim text re-organised and re-examined to identify which of their assigned concepts and themes could be interpreted in light of existing theories and which could not (Gioia et al., 2013). This last round of coding was informed by a concomitant consideration of data and existing theory (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007), and led to the constellation of second-order themes to fewer, aggregate, thematic categories. (Christou, 2018; Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Gioia et al., 2013). The outcome of this analysis is presented in the following section and is summarised in a conceptual framework thereto (Christou, 2018; Christou et al., 2019; Farmaki et al., 2020).

Finally, to ensure the trustworthiness and procedural rigor of the research, naturalistic inquiry approach principles were followed (see also, Christou, 2018; Fan et al., 2019). In this respect, transferability, credibility, confirmability, and dependability were assessed. Transferability of the research was considered by providing a detailed description of the qualitative research process, including the interview protocol and informants' demographic and work information. This approach enables future researchers to conduct an empirical transfer of the current findings in other contexts or in the same context at a different point in time (Fan et al., 2019). To ensure credibility, triangulation and peer debriefing techniques were used. First, based on the data triangulation premise (Fan et al., 2019), informants were recruited from various channels and sources (purposive and snowball sampling techniques). The interviews were conducted at multiple times (over three months) and places, with participants from different cities across Cyprus. Further to data triangulation, investigator triangulation was also applied. All researchers conducted intra-team communication on a regular basis, including the data analysis process, to ensure the credibility and accuracy of the results. Theory triangulation was also deployed by considering multiple theories and perspectives during data analysis (Jack & Raturi, 2006). As two of the authors were simultaneously and separately conducting the coding process, the dependency of the coding results was examined by the coders' iterative and interactive discussion, while the remaining authors reviewed the results for consistency and completeness. Regarding confirmability, an audit trail, including interview recordings, transcripts, and minutes of research design discussion, was safely kept to verify the overall research process and results.

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

5. Findings

5.1. SA as the main way to engage in emotional labour in customer mistreatment

Our findings confirm extant literature (Goussinsky, 2015; Grandey et al., 2007) in that employees engage in SA when they interact with aggressive customers. According to the theory of contagious emotions, employees are naturally infected with feelings of discomfort (and anger) when interacting with aggressive customers (Huang & Dai, 2010). Scholars (e.g., Huang & Dai, 2010) concluded that in interactions with aggressive customers, employees tend to engage in SA, as display rules deem it unacceptable to exhibit negative feelings in interactions with customers. Sensibly, however, it is suppressing and challenging for employees to deal with aggressive customers when the organisation

does not allow them to demonstrate their true feelings. The respondents agreed that they perceive a customer as aggressive when s/he either complains in an unacceptable manner or raises their voice. As part of such experiences, our findings demonstrate employees reporting feelings of discomfort when dealing with such customers, as organisational rules require them to suppress their negative feelings and treat customer in a positive way, as if unaffected by their behaviour.

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

(Respondent R3)

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

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

(Respondent R18)

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

(Respondent R65)

5.2. The negative effects of SA when interacting with aggressive customers

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

5.3. Stress, symptoms of burnout, and reduced well-being

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

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

(Respondent R5)

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

(Respondent R28)

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

Unfortunately, it is not only stress though. It is beyond that. I get severe headaches every day […]. Most of the days, I cannot even play with my children. I just lay on the couch and I don't want to talk to anybody. The neurologist I have visited said my headaches are being called tension headaches. Caused from stress.

(Respondent R1)

The findings confirm extant literature that burnout is a negative effect from employees engaging in SA, in general, and when employees use SA in aggressive customer situations, in particular (Dewe et al., 2010). It is important to note here that respondents who reported such symptoms more had been working in the industry for more than ten years and had accumulated multiple experiences from interacting with aggressive customers.

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

(Respondent R28, 22 years of work experience)

5.4. Increase in smoking and alcohol consumption

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

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

(Respondent R20)

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

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

(Respondent R8)

5.5. Shielding the family from work pressures with SA at home

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

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

(Respondent 70)

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

(Respondent 18)

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

(Respondent 58)

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

(Respondent R2)

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

(Respondent R62)

5.6. Negative perception of colleagues, the managers and the job in general

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

My relationships with my colleagues and managers are negatively affected. I am so stressed out that I cannot smile to them and feel positive. Also, the managers are not helping us, so I tend to feel negatively (about them), and it shows.

(Respondent R70)

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

(Respondent R46)

5.7. Increase in absenteeism and sick-leave requests

Responses also revealed a need to take sick-leave more often due to having to engage with SA. In this respect, respondents argued that resorting to SA in interactions with aggressive customers often made them feel they had to also resort to SA to claim sick-leave as well. They argued that while they do request sick-leave when feeling unwell, they also, at times, do so in order to get some rest and distance themselves

from their demanding customer service role.

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

(Respondent R50)

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

(Respondent R13)

5.8. Making more mistakes and decreased job performance

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

I tend to make mistakes and my performance is being decreased as well. I mean I am a waiter for more than ten years now and whenever I face such situations, I make mistakes. Right before the interview, for example, I had to deal with a very aggressive customer. I could have handled him better but I got confused and I said that we cannot give him what he wanted. Yet, this was wrong. Because I was stressed, I forgot that we can now offer this product on the all-inclusive package. Now that I am thinking about it, I made him angrier simply because I got confused and had black-out with all his aggressiveness.

(Respondent R16)

5.9. Spill over of negative attitudes towards customers in general

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

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

(Respondent R52)

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

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

(Respondent R69)

Yet, as argued before, there is research claiming that engaging more in DA when interacting with aggressive customers would lead to better service performance and a decrease in both negative physiological and psychological effects of SA (Goussinsky, 2015; Huang & Dai, 2010; Hur et al., 2015; Karatepe, 2010; Karatepe & Nkendong, 2014; Kim et al., 2012). However, as noted in the rationale supporting this research, this claim has not been empirically explored in terms of how resorting to DA can be achieved in aggressive customer contexts and whether it can

emerge as an outcome of changing the conditions that cultivate an SA approach in customer mistreatment. Our findings as presented hereafter attempt to close this gap.

5.10. Inducing DA in aggressive customer interactions

5.10.1. Developing a genuinely caring attitude towards customers

Our findings show that when employees are capable of understanding the reasons behind their customers' anger or anxiety, they are in a better position to handle these feelings without being infected by them. This in turn makes them capable of displaying genuinely caring and positive (i.e. DA) emotions towards complaining or aggressive customers rather than pretending to be caring while suppressing negative emotions generated out of a superficial engagement with the customer. In addition, our findings demonstrate that employees who maintain closer customer relationships show more genuine appreciation and reaction to their customers' feelings and concerns. It should be noted that engaging in DA to handle negative customer emotions involves employees developing their empathetic skills, which is important for them to be able to restore the customer service experience. This raises the relevance of emotional intelligence in developing skills that enable DA. According to the respondents, developing empathy to enable DA engagement is more likely to be achieved when they experience a positive work environment; enjoy job autonomy and drive; work as a team; receive constructive managerial support to avoid negative emotional display rules, and receive positive feedback and DA leadership; are offered tailored training; and enjoy family support. To them, better conditions at work will equip them with all the necessary psychological and emotional skill-set that shall enable them to engage in DA, which will in turn positively affect the customers.

> I would be able to offer more genuinely caring emotions to customers, if I felt positive myself both towards customers and my job in general. Give me more teamwork, some positive feedback and let me receive some help from my managers. I would then be more able to, but also more willing to, treat my customers' complaints with both really positive and genuine emotions.
>
> (Respondent R23)

5.10.2. Positive internal organisational conditions

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

> You are asking me what would help me offer more genuinely caring and positive emotions. That means not acting as I do all the time. Well, the internal culture should have been more positive. The things that we discussed about before, that is. Managers that are helpful, give us more positive feedback, an increase in teamwork, better targeted display rules. All these would help me handle in a genuinely positive and understanding way difficult customers. Being more positive. Simple to me, but difficult for the managers to get it maybe.
>
> (Respondent R12)

5.10.3. Better leadership from managers

Previous findings indicate that trying to understand why customers behave negatively would lead to positive outcomes in customer service. To this end, the respondents of our study argued that a manager's

leadership skills are also important. Our findings reveal that a manager should have the ability to listen to their employees and understand and help them to develop their inter-personal and emotional intelligence skills to help them to better understand their customers' needs and to act genuinely to them. The respondents also argued that managers exhibiting these leadership skills should also be capable of demonstrating DA towards their employees, customers and other stakeholders. Their argument is that a good manager-leader demonstrating engagement with DA would inspire employees to embrace this behavioural approach as well in their interaction with customers, whether aggressive or not. Therefore, our findings lead us to argue that managers who improve their leadership skills based on principles of honesty, empathy and a willingness to share the challenging customers experiences would create a work environment where employees are more willing to engage in DA, especially when interacting with aggressive customers.

> I could offer more genuine emotions if I had a leader in front of me who has managed to do the same with the customers. You know the people who have the power need to help us in any way possible. To simply lead the way towards those positive emotions. This would be helpful.
>
> (Respondent R44)

> We need to follow an example, maybe. The example of our managers and how they behave. My manager seems to be acting in front of the customers, especially when they act aggressively. There are times when the customer leaves and my manager talks very negatively to me about that customer and his/her attitude. There are also various occasions that they talk down to us. I tend to follow their examples, really. They are the leaders, right?
>
> (Respondent R18)

5.10.4. Training towards a DA emotional approach

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

> I said it before, training that is concerned with managing negative feelings would be helpful. But believe me, if you bring the most professional person in the world to teach me the most advanced techniques, it won't work if you don't have a positive working environment and leaders! Leaders that care and show the way. Provide that, and then they can train us! Not the other way around.
>
> (Respondent R62)

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

> Ok, and training as well [is important …] to learn the techniques that will enable me to offer more natural and genuine emotions. They have offered various types of trainings at the hotels I have been working for before. But I said it a lot of times during this interview. If management team does not lead the way and the organisational culture is not helping you, then you do nothing with training only. I will still act in front of the customer, get stressed after that and all the negativity will be created again. So train me at the right time with the right conditions being in place.
>
> (Respondent R28)

In terms of training itself, some respondents also argued that they

attended training sessions on customer service without much success, as such sessions often did not meet their needs or industry practices.

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

> (Respondent R62)

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

> (Respondent R37)

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

6. Discussion

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

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

The research further provides a holistic picture of fragmented literature on the various negative SA effects on employees, the organisation, and eventually on customers. These are: experiencing stress, a reduced sense of well-being, and burnout symptoms (the latter for employees working for more than ten years in the industry); smoking and consuming alcohol; transposing SA at home with negative effects on family life; perceiving colleagues, managers, and the workplace negatively; increasing absenteeism and sick-leave; making more mistakes and decreased job performance; and having a negative attitude towards customers in general. Other than a sense of burnout, all other SA effects were evidenced among respondents from all age groups.

The findings confirmed previous studies service employees reflexively resort to SA when under the aforementioned conditions, leading to
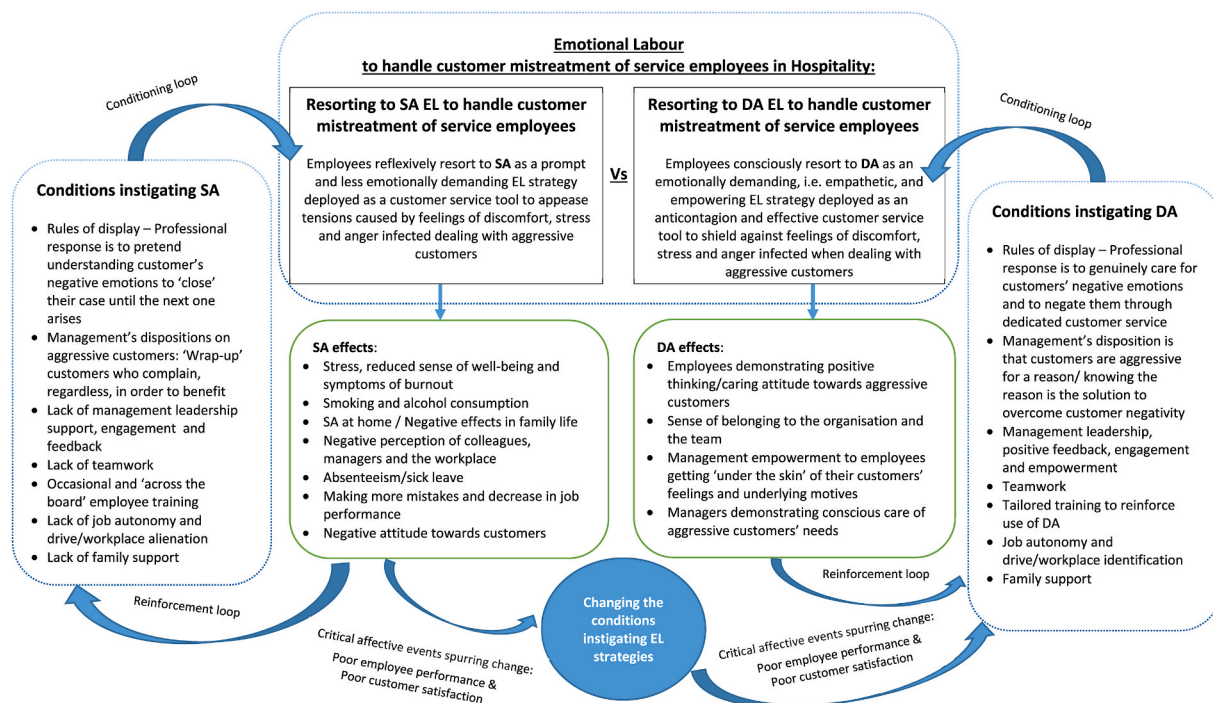

Fig. 1. Engaging in EL to handle customer mistreatment of service employees: A conceptual framework.

the SA effects. Resorting to SA can be explained by both the theory of contagious emotions and the theory of affective events. That is, the more prevalent the conditions are that instigate the suppressed, superficial, and pretended handling of negative customer emotions, the more likely it is that service employees will be infected and affected by these emotions, thus reinforcing, through their "automated", reflexive conduct, the very conditions that give rise to their SA EL.

Most importantly, our findings reveal comprehensive ways to control and overcome the negative effects of SA EL per se, extending the literature on how to handle the customer aggressiveness, in general. Our framework shows the production, reproduction, and reinforcement of conditions instigating SA, which will eventually give rise to critical, affective events that question the efficacy of those conditions, progressively nullify them, and spur the need for change (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). These events are conceptualised in our model as recurring and accumulating incidents of poor employee performance and customer satisfaction, which change employees' dispositions and other organisational conditions that concern handling effectively aggressive customers. Such change in our framework points towards conditions that arise from efforts to overcome the effects of SA EL while simultaneously encouraging DA EL in customer mistreatment situations. These conditions confirm literature on DA enablers and refer to management: approaching customer aggressiveness by helping employees empathise with the customer's feelings to identify the reasons behind their negativity; providing positive feedback to and empowering service employees (Blanchard et al., 1999; Jeon & Yom, 2014; Seibert et al., 2004); genuinely engaging with aggressive customers that conforms to the aforementioned dispositions, thereby setting an example for service employees; encouraging teamwork in handling difficult customers; providing tailored training to reinforce DA EL in handling customer mistreatment; and promoting an organisational culture that includes job autonomy, drive, and feelings of belonging with the workplace; and, employees' family support. Besides, findings extend the literature on DA by identifying rules of display that are capable of inducing DA EL when guiding employees to focus on empathising with their customer's negative emotions, as a way of helping them to identify the reasons behind their negativity, and to offer targeted and genuinely caring services. Our findings show that when these conditions are present, they enable service employees to develop skills that empower them to consciously engage with DA, develop positive and genuine feelings (Blanchard et al., 1999; Jeon & Yom, 2014; Lucas et al., 2008; Seibert et al., 2004) in customer mistreatment contexts, and demonstrate empathy to aggressive customers. These emotional intelligence skills (Austin et al., 2007; Ioannidou & Konstantikaki, 2008; Jeon & Yom, 2014; Lucas et al., 2008; Skinner & Spurgeon, 2005) help us conceptualise DA EL as an anticontagion buffer to customer aggressiveness and negativity, enabling employees to offer effective customer service. Our research in turn showed that engagement with DA spawns positive effects in handling customer mistreatment, which in turn reinforce the very conditions that enabled them in the first place. Our study identified the following effects: employees demonstrate positive thinking and a genuinely caring attitude towards aggressive customers; employees' sense of belonging to the organisation and the presence of team spirit empowers them to handle challenging customers; management's actively empower employees to empathise with their aggressive customers' feelings to appreciate their underlying motives; managers are ready to lead by demonstrating conscious care and service restoration in situations of customer aggressiveness.

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

6.1. Theoretical contributions

Our study contributes in a number of ways. First, it offers a comprehensive framework in the under-researched area of handling aggressive customers in the hospitality literature. Until now, research has focused more on handling aggressive colleagues and supervisors and

less on handling customers' behaviours. The current study adds to the existing knowledge on how to handle aggressive customers by placing emphasis on emotions, which impact on individual well-being and performance. Theory has revealed ways to handle angry and upset customers but has not effectively dealt with employees' emotions and how those affect the whole interaction. Specifically, our framework provides valuable insights on the conditions under which employees engage in SA and DA EL strategies in customer mistreatment situations, while articulating how shifting from SA to DA can be effected. Sparse research has been incomplete in this subject, and has not focused on the role of EL in aggressive customer contexts per se; rather, it focused more generally on how to overcome the negative consequences arising from customer aggressiveness. In contrast, this study contributes insights both of employees routinely and reflexively engaging in SA in such contexts, and of the conditions that can enhance employee performance and customer satisfaction through DA EL in a uniquely demanding industry, as hospitality is (Karatepe, 2011). Second, our study contributes a holistic understanding of the conditions and effects implicated in both SA and DA to the theory of EL. To our knowledge, this is the first study that brings the pieces of a fragmented puzzle together to produce a framework on the conditions instigating SA, its effects, and how these can give rise to critical affective events to change these conditions and bring about DA. Third, we contribute a perspective of DA to the literature of contagious emotions, which conceptualises DA as an anticontagion buffer to the negative feelings of aggressive customers. Our findings show that DA can help employees shield themselves from those feelings, while enabling them at the same time to think positively and attempt to empathise with their customers' feelings and their underlying reasons, which are seen as prerequisites for employees offering value-adding customer service. Fourth, we contribute a perspective to affective events theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) of events that are critical, due to their recurring and cumulative nature, in affecting prevalent emotions, dispositions, and behaviours. Such critical affective events are capable of spurring changes of the very conditions implicating employee conduct, employee performance, as well as employee and customer satisfaction. Fifth, we contribute to the literature of marketing, and more specifically to that of customer service, a holistic framework on appreciating the role that EL can play in handling challenging customers. As it has been discussed in the literature review, customers are able to understand whether employees exhibit genuinely positive and caring emotions during their service experience, and tend to respond more positively towards organisations whose employees are performing that way (Boyd, 2002). As such, our developed framework adds to the current theory in terms of how to enhance customer experience in challenging customer contexts.

Finally, our study contributes novel insights to the literature of management control. More specifically, at the core of management control theory is that employees do not always perform according to the organisation's expectations, because of motivational problems (Merchant, 1985; Merchant & Van der Stede, 2012; Ouchi, 1979). These problems occur because individuals are self-driven and, thus, there is often an incongruence between individual and organisation objectives (Merchant, 1985; Merchant & Van der Stede, 2012). Theory on management control has attempted to address motivational problems (Latham, 2004; Merchant & Van der Stede, 2012) in employees' performance through the design of appropriate management control systems (Malmi & Brown, 2008) comprising behaviour controls, such as display rules and guidelines in our study, coupled with appropriate incentive and reward schemes (Condly et al., 2003; Malmi & Brown, 2008). Behaviour controls guide employees' behaviour and actions towards the achievement of a particular objective, while incentive and rewards schemes are introduced to address motivational problems, such as effort aversion in objective attainment (Condly et al., 2003; Malmi & Brown, 2008; Merchant, 1985; Ouchi, 1979). Our study contributes insights in that behaviour controls and incentive and reward schemes need to embrace measures to guide behaviour and incentivise

performance, which are centred on developing positive emotions about the organisation and workplace. This is in order to develop employees who are intrinsically dedicated to the organisation and are capable of handling challenging situations such as customer mistreatment. So far, the literature on management control has been prolific in identifying behaviour controls that are exhaustive in terms of the detailed guidelines they offer and monetary and non-monetary incentive and reward schemes (Condly et al., 2003; Malmi & Brown, 2008; Merchant & Van der Stede, 2012). However, a recognition of the importance of linking these control and performance arrangements with the cultivation of appropriate emotions to employees is notably absent.

6.2. Practical implications

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

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

7. Concluding remarks

Drawing on EL, contagious events, affective events, and emotional intelligence theories, this research provided a holistic framework identifying the conditions and effects of SA and DA EL in customer mistreatment situations in the hospitality industry, as well as the stimuli involved in changing these conditions to enable DA. While the research identified that resorting to SA was the predominant EL strategy that the participants engaged with, they deployed DA by identifying the negative effects that arise from SA EL and ways that such effects could be overcome. In turn, the respondents argued that the steps required to overcome the negative effects of SA are those that disable the conditions causing it and instead induce service employees to conduct DA EL. Effectively, our study offers customer service employees' perspective on how to overcome the negative effects that arise when they operate under specific conditions that guide them towards an SA EL strategy. Our research concludes that a DA EL strategy enables service employees to deploy positive emotions about their workplace and job, which buffer

against the contagion of negative emotions and behaviours exhibited by aggressive customers. Service employees need to use DA EL to infuse themselves with positive emotions and develop emotional intelligence skills such as empowerment and empathy, which are encouraged under certain conditions such as: rules of display that pay attention to generating genuinely positive feelings at the workplace; management's dispositions that to restore customer satisfaction, it is important to understand aggressive customers' emotions; management's paradigmatic leadership, positive feedback, engagement and empowerment when it comes to handling aggressive customers; a sense of teamwork in such customer context; tailored training of DA techniques; job autonomy and drive, as well as workplace identification; and family support.

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

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