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Profile of Victims of Customer Aggression: CASE OF CALL-CENTER AND RETAIL WORKERS (A SURVEY)*

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ABSTRACT

Customer aggression is a form of workplace violence including any unacceptable hostile behaviors towards front line staff that creates an intimidating, frightening or offensive situation, and adversely affects work performance and well-being. Several studies of client abuse have revealed some characteristics of victims. The purpose of this paper is to present the main findings on the profile of customer victimization from a survey among the front-line call-center and retail workers, which was undertaken between January 2006 and December 2007 in Istanbul, Turkey. In brief, the present study yielded two main findings. Firstly, with regard to demographic profile, it seems that female, young, and single workers are more likely to suffer from customer violence*. Secondly, with relationship to the professional profile, the call-center operators, part time workers, and employees with less experience are at greater risk for client abuse incidents.*

Key Words: *customer violence, customer aggression, Turkey, retail sector, call-centers.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The theory and research on work related violence have generally focused on intra-organizational members as the source and targets of these behaviors. Yet, this kind of antisocial acts may also stem from customers (Grandey et al, 2004: 397). Customer aggression is a form of workplace violence including any unacceptable hostile behaviors towards front line staff that creates an intimidating, frightening or offensive situation, and adversely affects work performance and well-being. Figures indicate that customer victimization is becoming an important issue, especially for retail and service businesses. In Canada, for example, 71% of respondents in the Public Service Employment Survey reported to be attacked by clients, residents, or other members of the public (Schat and Frone and Kelloway; 2006: 52). Furthermore, a study by Trade Union Congress (TUC) showed that the form of verbal hostility carried out by disgruntled customers is widespread and increasing, especially among front-line service providers. According to the survey, 1 in 5 employees are subjected to customer aggressive acts every year (Boyd; 2002: 152). In addition, a British national survey has found that 16.7% of hotel employees have been harassed in their careers by a client or customer (Hoel and Einarsen; 2003: 12).

Customer aggression includes physical attacks and verbal abuse, as well as more subtle acts like bullying and sexual harassment, in 60 different behaviors captured by the Workplace Aggression Research Question (WAR-Q) (Neuman and Keashly; 2003: 25).

Physical violence is the physical force with the potential for causing harm. The most of physical attacks to staff is perpetrated by third parties outside companies including customers. In U.S., 67% of workplace homicides happen during the robbery (Schat and Frone and Kelloway; 2006: 52).

Verbal abuse is another type of customer aggression involving the use of language. The study of WAR-Q has discovered that the most common aggressive verbal acts are swearing, using obscene language or gestures, yelling, name calling and threatening eye contact. Studies show that verbal abuse is the most frequent kind of customer harassment against employees, in especial in what concerns to front-line staff. For example, a survey of the university staff by Spratlen (1995) found that 21% of respondents reported to be subjected to aggressive attempts of the third person (without their co-workers, supervisor or subordinate). Moreover, a survey of the part-time service providers suggested that 43% of the participants were exposed to the negative acts of customers, and most of these were verbal aggression acts (Grandey et al; 2004: 3). Finally, a recent British research by Shopworkers' Union (Usdaw) has showed that out of a random sample of 660 workers, 887 incidents of verbal abuse were reported (BBC; 2004).

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The literature put forward the philosophy of customer-driven management as a primary causal factor in generating client aggression. Especially in service sectors, a greater emphasis on customer satisfaction, and the culture of 'the customer is king' require employees to use emotional labor displaying certain emotions as part of their job. Consequently, workers are increasingly exposed to abusive behaviors and excessive demands from clients (Martino and Hoel and Cooper; 2003: 18). Furthermore, there is unequal power in relationship between the customer and employee owing to customer-oriented policies, which is also a key aspect of being a target of aggression (Grandey et al; 2004: 399).

Several studies of customer violence have highlighted some characteristics of victims. There is a higher risk for young employees in retail and fast-food sector, and women in nursing. Moreover, demographic and occupational characteristics may combine to place individuals at risk. For example, the risk, especially, may be heightened when the worker is obviously young or inexperienced (Schat and Frone and Kelloway; 2006: 54).

The purpose of this paper is to present the main findings on the profile of customer victimization from a survey among the front-line call-center and retail workers, which was undertaken between January 2006 and December 2007 in Istanbul, Turkey. The paper comprises 4 sections. Following the introductory section providing a conceptual framework, the section 2 gives a general description of the survey design and data collection procedures. The third section presents the results and discussion. Finally, the section 4 offers some concluding remarks.

2. THE METHOD

2.1. Sample

The participants in study comprised a heterogeneous sample of 734 randomly selected front line staff. Age range was from 16 to 46 (mean age of 25.13), and gender was distributed approximately equal in the sample (342 men and 392 women as 46.6% men and 53.4 % women). The respondents were employed on a full or part-time basis as supermarket cashiers (N=162), sales clerks in clothing stores (N=107), call-center operators (N=353) and workers in a variety of other occupations (N=112). The vast majority (86.2%) worked full-time. Over three-quarters of respondents (75.5%) were single, 22.9% were married and the rest of sample was divorced or separated. The work experience of participants ranged from less than a year to more than five years.

2.2. Questionnaire Design

The data collection process was conducted in 70 private-sector workplaces using a self-report questionnaire consisting of 27 questions. The participating companies ranged in size from less than 30 employees to 500 employees.

In the study, five categories of customer aggression were measured: verbal abuse, bullying, sexual harassment, threat of physical abuse and physical violence.

Questionnaire surveys were carried out by master students. The survey response was entirely voluntary. The self-report questionnaire was completed by the participations in private. To encourage frankness and openness, respondents were instructed to not put their names on the form.

The data was analyzed using SPSS version 10.0. To assess the findings, the survey employed frequencies and cross tabulations. The frequencies were used to describe the prevalence and nature of customer violence. The cross tabulations addressed significant correlations between the perceived customer aggression and profile of victims.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Age

Age is an important parameter in describing profile of victims in customer harassment cases. A study by Mayhew and Quinlan (2002) indicated that younger workers experienced more work-related violence than older ones, especially in the fast-food sector (Mayhew and Quinlan; 2002: 278). A survey of 2.214 employees among the Swedish municipal health-care sector by Viitasara (2004) has found that being young and having a short job tenure were significant individual risk factors for all professional groups considered (such as personal assistants, nursing specialists (Viitasara; 2004: 31).

In the present study, age seems to be of little importance with regard to the prevalence of customer aggression. However, the employees under 30 were found slightly more at risk than older respondents. Correlation between age and gender of victims revealed that women above 30 were more frequently exposed to negative acts than men in the same age group. The main reason that why younger workers are more likely to suffer from customer violence may be their inexperience and

inadequate training of younger workers. Another possible factor is their lack of awareness about anti-social behaviors from customers.

TABLO I: VICTIMS BY AGE GROUP

(N: 453)	20 < (%)	20-30 (%)	30 > (%)
Victims	80.49	82.37	67.35
Verbal Abuse	68.42	70.52	57.14
Bullying	28.95	47.38	30.61
Sexual Harassment	18.42	15.70	12.24
Threat of Physical Abuse	5.26	4.13	8.16
Physical Violence	0	2.48	2.04

Several differences between the age groups were found regarding the violence types. For example, the respondents under 20 years of age reported higher sexual harassment than the other age groups. The victims between 20-30 years of age experienced more verbal abuse, bullying and physical violence than the others. Victims over 30 years of age were more often subjected to threat of physical abuse than younger ones.

3.2. Gender

Although customer aggression is a potential workplace violence risk for both genders, there have been conflicting results from previous studies. While certain studies have shown an overrepresentation of men among the victims in case of customer violence, some reported a similar elevated risk for female employees. For example, Hurrell, Worthington and Driscoll (1996) suggested that male staff were two times more likely to have experienced customer violence than female ones. Similarly, Guterman, Jayaratne, and Bargal (1996) found that male social workers were more likely to experience both assaults and physical threats than female social workers in an American sample (Schat and Frone and Kelloway; 2006: 53).

However, a research in several health and social service organizations in Massachusetts concluded that female inpatient staff were found to be at increased risk in the sample (Flannery et al; 2001: 494). Likewise, in a study of patient harassment in a Midwest health care organization, Findorff et al (2004) revealed that 31.4% of female workers had experienced non-physical violence, compared with 26.6% of male workers (Findorff et al; 2004: 298).

TABLO II: VICTIMS BY GENDER

(N: 734)	Males (%)	Females (%)
Victims	73.7	81.9
Verbal Abuse	55.8	67.3
Bullying	40.6	44.9
Sexual Harassment	12.9	15.4
Threat of Physical Abuse	6.4	3.3
Physical Violence	2.9	2.0

Our study has found that the percentage of female workers exposed to customer harassment was higher than male workers. According to data, women have 1.1 more customer violence risk than men. Commenting on these results, there might be several plausible explanations for why women are over-represented in occupational violence. First, the rate of female employees affected by negative customer acts is actually more often than male ones. However, it could be that women are more sensitive to harassment behaviors and less hesitant than men (Martino and Hoel and Cooper; 2003: 6).

Considering violence forms, women are subjected to certain types of attacks to a much greater extent than men. Female employees were more frequent victims in the case of verbal abuse, bullying and sexual harassment than their male counterparts. For men, higher rates were detected comparing to women with relationship to threat of physical abuse and physical violence.

3.3. Marital Status

Marital status is another variable that is likely to influence one's susceptibility to customer violence. The studies support a hypothesis for an increased susceptibility to work related violence for single employees. A South African study noted that single respondents were more likely to experience more workplace violence than married ones (Steinman; 2003: 29). Moreover, Findorff et al (2004) discovered that single respondents were more inclined to report non-physical abuse (34.01%) as compared to married (30.25%) and divorced participants (28.36%) (Findorff et al; 2004: 298). Consistent with other studies, the present study found that there was a greater frequency of victims in

the single group (78.9%). Furthermore, the single women (81.9%) were found to be at increased risk from customer aggressions.

TABLO III: VICTIMS BY MARITAL STATUS

(N: 734)	Single (%)	Married (%)	Divorced (%)
Victims	78.9	76.2	66.7
Verbal Abuse	63.9	56.0	58.3
Bullying	41.9	48.8	8.3
Sexual Harassment	16	9.5	0
Threats of physical abuse	3.8	7.1	16.7
Physical Violence	2.2	3.6	0

When comparing reported type of violence, it was seen significant difference for marital status. A greater proportion of single (63.9%) reported verbal abuse compared to married (56%) and divorced (58.3%) respondents. However, married (48.8%) were exposed to more bullying acts than others. Threat of physical abuse seems to be more prevalent among divorced respondents (16.7%) to single and married victims.

3.4. Employment Status

No clear picture has emerged for the relationship between employment status and being customer victimization. A series of empirical surveys undertaken in Australia between 1993 and 1998 sought to explore the relationship between precarious forms of employment (temporary or casual, part-time) and susceptibility to violence (Perrone; 1999: 45). The European surveys on working conditions by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions have shown that permanent workers are more exposed than temporary agency workers to violence emanating from outside the workplace (Paoli and Merllie; 2001: 28).

Our study suggested that the part-time participants (less than 30 hours worked per week) experienced customer violence somewhat more often than full-time ones.

TABLO IV: VICTIMS BY WORK STATUS

(N: 734)	Full-Time (%)	Part-Time (%)
Victims	77.3	83.0
Verbal Abuse	60.8	69.0
Bullying	41.2	54.0
Sexual Harassment	13.2	21.0
Threat (s) of Physical Abuse	4.7	5.0
Physical Violence	2.7	1.0

This difference may be attributed to the profile of part time workers, and their working conditions. Firstly, part-time workers may have lower levels of education and less job experience than full-time workers.

Indeed, in our study, while 23% of part-time workers had more than 5 years job experience, it jumped to 44.7% among the full-time respondents.

Moreover, part-time workers are mostly scheduled to work in evening and late night shifts in retail sector and call-centers. The arrangement of shift work and night work may play a key role in generating violence. During the late shifts, especially in the retail industry, workers working alone are at special risk of suffering customer aggression.

In the study, a relationship between the employment status and the forms of violence was found also. For example, while the part time respondents experienced more verbal abuse, sexual harassment and bullying than full-time workers, full-time respondents reported more physical violence than their part time counterparts.

3.5. Vulnerable Occupations

Customer violence is especially a problem in the sectors involving work with the public. There is sufficient evidence to suggest that some groups of professionals can be considered to be more vulnerable to customer violence than others. For example, a report by HSE Home Office indicated that public transport workers (47%), nurses (46%), retail sales (29%), and teachers (%20) were occupations with high levels of worry about violence at work (Budd; 2001: 8). Similarly, Third European Working Conditions Survey suggested that service and sales workers were more exposed to violence from outside (Paoli and Merllie; 2001: 28).

In our study, the call-center operators constituted the group with the largest proportion of victims (85.6%), and they were 1.33 times more likely to be exposed to workplace violence than sales clerks.

The reasons behind it may be high workload and repetitive tasks, interacting with customers on phone and disproportionate or ambiguous client expectations.

TABLO V: VICTIMS BY PROFESSIONAL GROUP

(N: 734)	Supermarket Cashier (%)	Call-Center Operator (%)	Sales Clerk (%)
Victims	77.2	85.6	64.5
Verbal Abuse	63.0	68.8	45.8
Bullying	37.0	53	28.0
Sexual Harassment	17.9	26.3	16.8
Threat of Physical Abuse	2.5	5.1	2.8
Physical Violence	0.6	1.1	3.7

With regard to customer violence risk, the second most vulnerable group were supermarket cashiers (77.2%) who must display specific emotions at particular times in order to complete job tasks effectively, which may be identified as a main source of external workplace violence for retail workers.

On the other hand, sales clerks reported the lowest violence level. Possible reasons for that could be attributed to the working conditions and profile of them. Work experience is very important for minimizing and managing customer violence. The sales clerks had more work experience than others. While 54.2 per cent of sales clerks had 5 years or more job experience, it dropped to around 30% for the other occupations. Moreover, unlike cashiers and call-center operators, sales clerks have more personal and closer relationship with customers, which also contributes to limit the risk of customer violence. Finally, sales clerks generally have better working conditions in terms of less workload and higher control of their job that makes the sales clerks to be more resistant to outside violence.

Concerning occupational groups by forms of violence, 68.8 per cent of call-center operators reported having been subjected to more verbal abuse, bullying and sexual harassment than the sales clerks and cashiers. It is interesting to note that the call center workers also were found to experience more physical violence than the cashiers. Actually, they don't deal with customers physically. Probably they misunderstood the expression of physical violence or mistakenly marked the option. Thus, only 4 of 353 call-center staff chose it.

3.6. Professional Experience

Some studies have found that employees with less experience tend to be victims of work-related violence more frequently. Davies and Burgess (1988) suggested that officers with less experience were more likely to be assaulted than officers with more experience, regardless of their age (Cooke; 1992: 27). Guterman et al (1996) reported a significant effect of work experience such that less experienced workers were more likely to report receiving threats and being assaulted (Schat and Frone and Kelloway; 2006: 54). Recently, Kowalenko et al (2005) carried out a research with members of the Michigan College of Emergency Physicians and reached parallel results. Respondents who were verbally threatened were more likely to less experienced (Kowalenko et al; 2005: 144).

Our findings, partly in line with the previous studies, indicated that customer victimization incidents were more likely to occur among the participants with more than 1 year of experience and up to 3.

TABLO VI: VICTIMS BY PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

(N: 731)	Under 1 (%)	1 up to 3 (%)	3 up to 5 (%)	Over 5 (%)
Victims	71.6	86.0	72.8	76.9
Verbal Abuse	63.4	66.5	63.2	58.6
Bullying	38.7	51.9	35.2	41.7
Sexual Harassment	7.5	18.4	10.4	15.0
Threat of Physical Abuse	0	6.8	2.4	5.9
Physical Violence	0	1.0	3.2	3.9

Concerning types of violence, physical violence affected more the group with more than 5 years of experience (3.9%). The prevalence of sexual harassment, verbal abuse and bullying were relatively high for the group with 1-3 years of experience.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The present study investigated the characteristics of customer victimization among the front-line call-center and retail workers. The findings have described some demographic and occupational characteristics of targets of client aggression. With regard to demographic profile, firstly, female employees have the higher risk factor of being victim. Secondly, customer violence is directed to mostly young age groups. Lastly, single workers are more likely to suffer from customer abuse.

On the other hand, with relationship to the professional profile, the call-center operators are at greater risk for customer aggression incidents. Furthermore, the characteristics and employment conditions of part time workers make them easy targets for client harassment. Finally, employees with less experience tend to be more vulnerable to workplace violence.

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