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INTRODUCTION

Many services are characterised by the simultaneous presence of customers. Interactions between service customers present in the service setting are increasingly the focus of service management research (Colm et al., 2017; Heinonen et al., 2018). A wide range of insights into customer-to-customer interactions (CCI) have been generated given its impact on the customer experience. Empirical studies of CCI have, however, focused overwhelmingly on the customer perspective. There is limited empirical work investigating CCI from the perspective of the frontline employee (FLE). This is surprising given that customer recall of CCI often mentions FLE presence (Nicholls, 2010), and that FLEs are frequently identified in the literature as a key resource for CCI service recovery (e.g. McQuilken et al., 2017). This paper seeks to contribute to redressing this research deficit by providing information based on the views of employees who are regularly involved in managing CCI.

Thirty years of CCI research has produced significant outputs (Colm et al., 2017; Nicholls, 2010). The importance of studying CCI, whether negative (NCCI) or positive (PCCI), is increasingly acknowledged and it now belongs to the mainstream of services marketing (Nicholls, 2010). There are several reasons for this. First, CCI is recognised as widespread (e.g. Nicholls, 2010) and, for some services, more prevalent than customer-employee interactions (Miao and Mattila, 2013; Rowley, 1995). Second, in many service settings other customers frequently impact the customer’s service experience, which can have a profound and lasting effect on value creation and the customer’s overall perception of the service and its provider (Heinonen et al., 2018). Third, research shows that service organisations often ineffectively manage CCI (e.g. Baker and Kim, 2018). Fourth, whilst
NCCI is usually blamed on other customers, the focal customer still expects the service organisation to recover the situation (e.g. Baker and Kim, 2018). Moreover, customers attribute blame to service organisations that fail to respond to NCCI (Colm et al., 2017; Nicholls, 2005); a study by Baker and Kim (2018) found that whilst nearly 80% of respondents blamed another customer for the reported CCI incident, over 90% deemed the service organisation responsible for recovering the situation. This underscores biases in the attribution process as indicated by the attribution theory (Fiske and Taylor, 1984) whereby customers are likely to blame the system or employees (Bitner et al., 1994). These reasons underscore the relevance of CCI as a critical aspect of services marketing research, hence eliciting insights from the FLE perspective would extend key implications for marketers and service managers.

The investigation of service from the employee perspective is recognised as valuable in services marketing research. Previous research demonstrates FLEs as an excellent source of information about customers (e.g. Bitner et al., 1994). Menguc et al. (2016, p. 65) emphasise that “Customer-oriented frontline employees (FLEs) are widely regarded as valuable resources who promote competitive differentiation and enhanced performance outcomes”. As FLEs have boundary-spanning roles, marked by proximity to customers and frequent interaction with them, they can engage with the customers involved in the CCI and understand situations both from the customer and the service organisation viewpoint. A recent study (Verleye et al., 2016) examined the FLE perspective in determining customer engagement behaviours (CEBs) as job demands and job resources, and its impact on job stress-job strain relationships among FLEs. Given that acquiring a FLE perspective has been found useful in similar research contexts (e.g. CEB; customer misbehaviour; customer retention) it seems reasonable to assume that studying CCI and its handling from the FLE’s point of view could potentially contribute to our in-depth understanding and management
of CCI. Moreover, there have been previous calls for research into the FLE perspective on CCI. Following a review of extant research on direct CCI Nicholls (2010) called for research into: FLE general awareness of CCI; FLE awareness of specific types of CCI; FLE perceptions regarding their responsibility for dealing with CCI; FLE accounts of their strategy and tactics in dealing with CCI; and FLE perspective on any danger and stress involved in handling negative CCI. Other researchers have reiterated this call (e.g. Colm et al., 2017).

Researching CCI from the FLE perspective offers several advantages. Firstly, FLEs can see both sides of CCI situations, whereas customers tend to focus only on their side. Accordingly, FLEs are likely to form a more inclusive and balanced view of the CCI taking place than do customers. Secondly, as FLEs (unlike customers) are responsible for handling CCI, they are in a position both to provide insights into how to deal with CCI situations (and better engage with the customers involved) and to offer reflections on how it feels to intervene in CCI situations. Thirdly, research suggests that customers are unlikely to report CCI problems to employees. For example, Dorsey et al. (2016) found that customers sought employee intervention in only 7% of reported CCI incidents. Accordingly, given the lack of customer reporting of CCI, it becomes important to know whether FLEs themselves are aware and alert to CCI situations.

A key challenge that has emerged from the CCI literature is: How can employees deal with CCI? Several important questions that precede this challenge have, however, received little attention from researchers:

- How perceptive are FLEs of CCI?
- To what extent do FLEs see CCI as something which needs handling?
• How do FLEs handle CCI?
• How do employees feel when dealing with CCI situations?
• What are the consequences of CCI intervention for employee satisfaction?

This exploratory study seeks to address a gap in CCI research by discussing these questions and incorporating the FLE perspective into the study of CCI management. As service managers rely mainly on FLEs to recover NCCI situations, it is important to understand what is involved for the FLE engaged in CCI-related service recovery.

The study is grounded in the servuction system model (Eiglier and Langeard, 1977) and Martin and Pranter’s conceptualisation of compatibility management in service environments based on the relationships among Customer A, Customer B and the FLE within a situational context. It expands on Solomon et al.’s (1985) postulation of the dyadic nature of interactions in service encounters by emphasising the triadic nature of the C2C relationships when incorporating the role and perceptions of the FLE.

The research focuses on the direct on-site interactions occurring between service customers. It employs focus groups and in-depth interviews to explore FLE awareness, perceptions and reflections on CCI at a large library and council services hub in a UK city. Qualitative analysis leads to the identification of five main themes relating to the FLE’s abilities to perceive and conceptualise CCI; FLE feelings about dealing with CCI; and FLE management of CCI.

The paper extends the discussion of CCI and the FLE to consider the capacity of FLEs to engage with CCI and the consequences of this engagement. It contributes nine testable propositions concerning the FLE’s training for CCI interventions and FLE comfort with those interventions. A third contribution of the paper is providing practical managerial insights and identifying benefits to service managers of gaining a FLE perspective on CCI. These include:
assessing the extent to which FLEs comprehend how customer experience is influenced by other customer behaviour, and thus determine the extent to which FLEs require CCI training; capturing the range of responses FLEs employ to deal with CCI, especially NCCI, hence allowing effective assessment of the appropriateness of these responses and identification of good practice; and assisting service managers to understand the emotional workload that managing NCCI may place on FLEs.

This paper starts by briefly overviewing CCI and how it has been studied. It then highlights the research gap, drawing attention to the potential usefulness of an employee perspective. Next, the paper introduces the study context and outlines the methodological approach. Following this, themes which emerged are discussed while advancing propositions that build a conceptual framework for further conclusive research. The paper then highlights its theoretical, conceptual and managerial implications. Finally, some limitations of the study are discussed, while advancing directions for future research.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Customer-to-customer Interaction

The term CCI is conceptually broad and used in several ways including word-of-mouth and interactions between owners of goods. This paper, like previous service research (e.g. Martin and Pranter, 1989; Nicholls, 2010), employs it to refer to direct on-premises verbal and non-verbal behaviours by customers which influence the service experience of other customers present in the service setting. Non-verbal behaviours are usually occurring in real time, although sometimes they will have occurred previously, i.e. transtemporal CCI (Nicholls, 2005). Direct CCI is demonstrated conceptually in the servuction system model (Eiglier and Langeard, 1977) with its representation of the customer interacting directly with FLEs, physical surroundings and other customers.
The service encounter and its management are central to the customer experience and hence to customer satisfaction and retention (e.g. Bitner and Wang, 2014). There is increasing recognition that C2C interaction forms part of the service encounter, and that how customers perceive the behaviour of other customers contributes to their overall customer experience (Heinonen et al., 2018). Research findings show that PCCI will tend to attract customers to a service, whilst NCCI will tend to encourage avoidance behaviour (e.g. Tombs and McColl-Kennedy, 2003). Accordingly, managing CCI is an important part of managing the customer experience (Verhoef et al., 2009), and FLEs are recognised as having a central role here (e.g. Baker and Kim, 2018).

Service consumption frequently involves sharing the service setting with other customers. Empirical studies of CCI have found it to be a familiar facet of a wide variety of service settings from garden centres to trains (Nicholls, 2010). Several authors have suggested that in some services the impact of C2C interaction on the customer experience may be as significant as, or perhaps even more than, the impact of Employee-to-Customer (E2C) interaction (e.g. Lehtinen and Lehtinen, 1991; Miao and Mattila, 2013). Miao and Mattila (2013), for example, point out that for certain hospitality services, such as cruise trips, where the psychological distance between customers is close, other customers can be pivotal in determining whether a customer’s experience is satisfactory or not.

**FLE and CCI**

The remainder of this section considers how the CCI literature has discussed the FLE. Table 1 provides an overview of the perspectives from which the FLE has been discussed in the CCI literature. Some of the more significant studies mentioned in Table 1 are also discussed below.
In describing the dyadic nature of interaction in service encounters, Solomon et al., (1985, p. 100) emphasise the service encounter as “a psychological phenomenon that exerts a major impact upon outcomes”. They associate this with Lutz and Kakkar’s (1976) understanding of behaviour through a process model that incorporates the situation, decision processes and the social exchange. This model, a micro-formulation of the interpersonal dimension of situational influence, depicts the communication between the persons involved and their perceptions of each other’s behaviour (the FLE and the customer) within the situational context, mediated by emotional responses.

Taking this forward onto the triadic nature of CCI in service settings in the presence of customers A and B and the FLE, this encounter is a psychological situation that extends the above model and necessitates a closer exploration from the FLE’s viewpoint. CCI incidents often comprise unanticipated situations that are not role scripted for the customers or the FLE involved. They thus do not succumb to the Role and Script theory whereby customers and employees share common role expectations and a well-defined service script of the service experience (Bitner et al., 1994).

The contribution of FLEs to NCCI

Studies have drawn attention to how service organisations may contribute to the development of NCCI situations. Nicholls (2005) found that often NCCI incidents are provoked or intensified by situational factors. These factors include perceived inefficiencies of the service organisation such as unclear queueing systems, unused capacity at busy times and booking system errors. Likewise, Dorsey et al. (2016), identify crowded service settings, long waits and product scarcity as indirect triggers of NCCI. Similarly, FLEs can also be perceived as causing, or contributing to, NCCI. For example, Schmidt and Sapsford (1995) describe the
experiences of women in male-dominated pubs and highlight the perception that bar staff were in collusion with male customers in making female customers feel unwelcome.

*Customer expectations of FLE intervention in CCI situations*

Customers have expectations that service organisations and their employees will intervene in some NCCI situations and contexts. Failure to intervene in such circumstances can lead to the allocation of blame. The likelihood of the service organisation being blamed for NCCI will depend on customer perception of the frequency of such NCCI and the potential for controlling it. Indeed, Nicholls (2005) proposes that CCI service failures which customers perceive as controllable by the service organisation and/or recurring will be judged more severely. Support for this proposition is offered by a recent study on inappropriate visitor behaviour in theme parks that identified controllability and stability as significant factors (Tsang *et al.*, 2016).

*Approaches to using FLEs to manage CCI*

The CCI literature recognises the potential of using FLEs to deal with CCI, and that this may provide a new means of competitive advantage (Nicholls, 2005). Pranter and Martin (1991) outlined ten roles a service provider can perform in managing CCI. Martin (1995) provided an instrument, known as the customer compatibility scale, which can identify individual sensitivity to other customer behaviour. He suggests that the scale may be useful for ascertaining variation between employee and customer tolerances of other customer behaviour. Grove and Fisk (1997) discuss issues such as how FLEs might educate customers about appropriate behaviour and ‘police’ customers when necessary. The CCI literature has also considered the role of employees in encouraging PCCI. For example, several studies emphasise the potential for using employees as catalysts for getting conversations going between customers (e.g. McGrath and Otnes, 1995).
Whilst the notion of the FLE having a CCI role has received frequent mention in the CCI literature, it has received minimal research consideration. A limited number of CCI studies have included customer perception of employee response to CCI. Huang (2008) included four scale items relating to customer perception of FLE service recovery effort. Huang (2008) found that perceived employee CCI service recovery effort exerted a positive influence on customer satisfaction. Hoffman and Lee (2014) identified five tactics which students perceived their instructors as using to discourage disruptive student-to-student behaviour and discuss student views on the relative effectiveness of these tactics. McQuilken et al. (2017), using restaurant-based scenarios, found that FLE apology for delays caused by other customers overstaying table-booking times could be as effective as FLE effort to fix the problem. These studies, however, all examine the consumer perspective of the FLE in CCI situations and not the FLE’s perspective. The potential value of FLE insights based on engagement with the customers in the CCI situations has been overlooked in most previous studies.

Table 2 illustrates the approaches used to gain the customer perspective on CCI. These include: studies asking customers to recall CCI as they exited a service setting (e.g. Baron et al., 1996); studies in service settings asking customers to recall previous CCI in similar service settings (e.g. Grove and Fisk 1997); studies observing customers (e.g. McGrath and Otnes, 1995); and studies asking customers to respond to scenarios (e.g. Luther et al., 2016).

Of the twelve CCI studies contained in Table 2, only one study includes a FLE perspective. Luther et al. (2016), in a scenario-based study of the influence of interpersonal similarity of roommates on patients’ hospital satisfaction, had a FLE component in the form of a subsequent and subsidiary qualitative study consisting of four group interviews with nurses. The minimal research into C2C interaction from the employee point of view is surprising given its frequent
use to gain insights into E2C interaction. Given the triadic nature of some C2C encounters, it seemed appropriate to undertake an exploratory study with an in-depth FLE perspective on CCI.

**STUDY CONTEXT**

This study was conducted in a CCI-rich service environment: The Hive – a large library in Worcester, UK. There is quite a substantial literature on libraries and how they are used, which includes coverage of CCI-related issues (e.g. Hunter and Cox, 2014; Lange *et al.*, 2016). In recent years, attention has been drawn to a range of wider societal changes which are reshaping how libraries are conceived. The increasing availability of information in an electronic form has fostered a debate about the role of libraries in the modern world. In the context of university libraries, there have been discussions about the prevalence of group assignments and the consequent need for library spaces to provide for group work without disturbing those working individually (Bryant *et al.*, 2009). Another theme has been the challenge of accommodating the technologies, such as mobile phones, which some desire to use in libraries (Heaton and Master, 2006). The above discussion demonstrates that CCI is a relevant issue in library environments. As posited by Rowley (1995, p. 8), “The changing nature of the role of libraries and the activities that specific groups of users expect to engage in within the library building make it useful to revisit and reflect on the service experience and the role of customer-to-customer compatibility in that experience.”

The Hive, opened in 2012 and representing the joint vision of the University of Worcester and Worcestershire County Council, is a new type of library: a public-university library where diverse members of the public and students use the service alongside one another. The Hive has some 10,000 m² of space over five open-plan floors, with varied expectations for noise
level on each. The open plan design carries several important implications for CCI, including high visual contact and noise travelling. Each floor of The Hive is, however, zoned: Level 0 is a social space for shared study targeted mainly at teens; Level 1 has a large children’s area, café, exhibition space and Council customer service centre; Level 2 houses the Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service; Level 3 contains most of the book stock and has individual and group working spaces; and Level 4 is intended for silent study.

Following discussion between the researchers and senior managers at The Hive, it was recognised as a service setting where CCI is relevant. With a rich diversity of behaviour and perceptions, both positive and negative, from public users and university students, it offers a lucrative context for this CCI study. A range of secondary data sources, including user comments, complaints, local press, and employee observations, confirmed this.

The relevance of CCI to The Hive is more pronounced than most libraries given its user diversity and strong desire to be inclusive. The physical space at The Hive is shared by a diverse group of users. This diversity has several dimensions including purpose of visit, age, social background and size of party. The range of purposes of visits includes individual academic research; student group project work; socialising; activities for parents and babies/children; attending adult learning classes; paying council bills; and, for some, a safe place to warm up or recharge a mobile phone. The Hive has an inclusive mission and aims to actively welcome and serve members of the public who may be disadvantaged such as the unemployed and ethnic groups.

A useful academic framework on CCI underlines the relevance of CCI to The Hive. This framework (Martin and Pranter, 1989) outlines seven characteristics of services which are likely to increase the incidence of CCI. These characteristics are: customers being in close proximity to each other; verbal interaction among customers; engagement of customers in
numerous and varied activities; attraction of a heterogeneous customer mix to the service environment; the reliance of the core service on customer compatibility; customers waiting together for service; and expectations on customers to share time, space, or service utensils with each other. Services possessing at least one of these characteristics are considered as CCI-relevant, and services having three or more characteristics are considered CCI-intense. As all seven characteristics are demonstrated at The Hive, it should be considered CCI-super intense. The relevance of CCI to The Hive is further underlined by the fact that The Hive, with more than 2000 user visits per day, has many times more customers present than FLEs. High customer-to-employee ratios are also common in service environments such as trains, planes, hotels, leisure facilities, and large retail stores, thus demonstrating the study’s relevance to many service settings beyond libraries.

METHODOLOGY

The study uses qualitative research given the need to explore in-depth FLE awareness, perceptions and reflections on CCI through a flexible and adaptable research approach (Hennink et al., 2011). This helps to deconstruct the social and business implications of CCI incidents through the insight of subjects (FLEs) who are viewed as ‘social actors’. The study does not aim at generalising its findings but rather at using them to develop propositions for examination in future studies. The use of focus groups (FGs) and in-depth interviews to delve into the underlying occurrence and meaning of CCI situations allows participants to think of and analyse situations, observations and episodes thus aiding rich data collection (Bryman, 2016), in addition to offering their own interpretations through a sense-making discourse. Triangulation using FGs and in-depth individual interviews provided a more
comprehensive understanding of the issues in focus (Patton, 1999) and ensured validity through the convergence of findings from different methods.

Two FGs were conducted, each with six participants. The FGs started with a warm-up exercise designed to familiarise participants with the CCI concept. This was followed by brainstorming CCI situations in The Hive in pairs, then a group discussion of the types of situations identified. Participants reflected on their observations of CCI situations they have noticed without prior knowledge of the umbrella notion of CCI, and thus their experiences illuminated the discussion through opinions and exemplar incidents they recalled. Subsequently, fourteen in-depth one-to-one interviews were conducted with Hive FLEs who had not been in the focus groups. The number of interviews was determined using theoretical saturation and took into account good practice in qualitative research (Baker and Edwards, 2012; Crouch and McKenzie, 2006; Saunders and Townsend, 2016). In line with Guest et al. (2006), the study collected data from a fairly homogeneous population and examined a specific issue; hence, saturation was obtained after a relatively small number of in-depth interviews (ten), with very narrow variability within data obtained through conducting four more interviews thereafter. The emerging themes and data patterns were consistently reiterated as more interviews were conducted. Interviewees were in the age range 25-60, which is representative of the age range of The Hive FLEs. Participants in the interviews were all females whereas those in the FGs were mixed with more females than males, which corresponds to the gender weighting of The Hive’s FLE population. The sampling frame comprised front-facing employees with presence on the library floors and direct dealings with its customers; hence all participants had frontline roles. These roles included Library Customer Advisor, Learning Services Advisor, and Academic Liaison Librarian.
The duration of the interviews ranged from 40-75 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured thus allowing for in-depth probing via prompting incident recall and reflection. The findings of the FGs concurred with the interviews’ findings, and hence all transcripts were merged into one data set in the analysis. The interview questions were driven by the four main objectives of the study:

1) To explore the extent to which FLEs are aware of the CCI occurring in The Hive;

2) To gain insights into how FLEs make sense of the CCI they encounter;

3) To develop understanding of how FLEs approach and experience dealing with NCCI;

4) To extend implications for management based on FLE insights.

An interview guide with semi-structured questions was followed, and the following core questions were included in every interview:

- During your work at The Hive how aware are you of users of The Hive having interactions with other users of The Hive?
- Could you please describe one or two such interactions?
- In what ways have you responded to CCI situations?
- To what extent do you feel that you are able to handle C2C situations?

This approach allowed for flexibility, with the course of the discussion being influenced by interviewee responses and their natural flow. Indeed, several ‘off the cuff’ remarks by respondents led to fresh questions not anticipated prior to the interviews.

The FGs and interviews were transcribed, coded and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In the coding process, the researchers first collected the data and only when exploring the data decided which themes to focus on. There was no theoretical framework at the outset, but rather theory emerging from data collection and analysis.
(Corbin and Strauss, 2015). Such an approach was appropriate as little was known about the phenomenon being studied within the chosen context of The Hive.

Data validity was undertaken through respondent validation by summarising findings to participants and asking them to corroborate samples of the transcripts and the emerging themes. A 90% inter-rater reliability was achieved, established through multiple coding, whereby coding frames and samples of data interpretation were cross-checked by an independent researcher (Barbour, 2001).

The FGs and interviews were transcribed verbatim. Analysis involved moving back and forth recursively within the data set, constantly reviewing the codes under analysis as well as the emerging themes; along these lines, six stages of thematic analysis were followed (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The first comprised familiarization with the data to enable immersion and engagement at a ground level; verbal data was thus transcribed into written form. Secondly, initial codes/patterns were generated which were close to the raw data without over-interpretation. Thirdly, the researchers sorted the codes into potential themes using thematic mapping; codes were conceptualized through scrutinizing and choosing the most significant ones based on frequency and conviction, in line with the study’s objectives. Phase four involved actively reviewing emergent themes to refine them and illuminate final categories that are distinct but coherent based on evolving meanings and interpretations; in this sense, the researchers ensured the categories demonstrate ‘internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity’ (Patton, 1990). In phase five, the final themes were named and defined in context based on the analysis purposes. Phase six concluded the analysis process whereby a report was produced explaining the patterns identified, the content of the emergent key themes and the ensuing propositions.
**FINDINGS**

The data generated useful and deep insights into the CCI environment at The Hive. Five main themes emerged under three key categories: FLE engagement with CCI and the ability to identify antecedent customer perceptions and conceptualise CCI levels of variability and complexity; FLE feelings about dealing with CCI; and FLE management of CCI. The themes are discussed below, and Figure 1 depicts the analysis results via a thematic mapping of the codes and initial themes that subsequently led to the emergence of **the main themes and propositions, summarised in Table 3**. The themes are discussed by reporting the range of views related to each, evidencing these with paraphrased and verbatim quotes, and comparing findings to previous studies. Care was taken to achieve a balance between revealing the data and interpreting the data (Pratt, 2009).

**INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE**

**Theme 1: FLE Engagement with CCI and its Context**

In both the FGs and the interviews, FLEs readily identified with the notion of interactions between customers, even if not with the specific expression (i.e. CCI). As the employees interviewed had different frontline roles within The Hive, they tended to vary in their exposure to CCI and in the type and balance of CCI they engaged with. They also varied in their views of the relevance of CCI to The Hive, with some describing it as ‘relevant but secondary’, whilst most considered it a ‘regular, daily feature’ and ‘a big part of interaction’.

Some respondents strongly emphasised the **significance** of CCI to The Hive. One respondent stated that they were very aware of CCI in The Hive:

“it happens so often and so frequently, it becomes so normal, you do not notice it unless it is very positive or very negative... the normal just passes by”.
All participants managed to provide illustrations of both PCCI and NCCI occurring in The Hive. They stressed that there was a fair amount of positive interaction going on, such as: showing another customer how to use a system; helping others to find books; handing back a lost item; and shared interests at events. This FLE impression regarding the presence of a range of PCCI is consistent with the findings of many CCI studies based on the customer perspective (e.g. Grove and Fisk, 1997; McGrath and Ottes, 1995; Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2007; Yin and Poon, 2016).

Some employees felt that they were more likely to remember NCCI situations because it was their responsibility to spot such situations. Better recall of NCCI is consistent with previous research findings regarding evidence of a negativity bias in remembrance (e.g. Baumeister et al., 2001). Incidents mentioned included: concern about what another customer was viewing on his/her computer screen; others taking shoes off in hot weather; groups chatting next to an individual trying to work; noise in silent areas; irritation by the smell of another customer’s food; and various PDA (public display of affection) behaviours. In some of the incidents described, age differences between the customers involved were relevant, and this is consistent with the literature on customer age-difference related CCI (Nicholls and Gad Mohsen, 2015).

Whilst the current study is exploratory and focuses on the general employees’ perspective on CCI rather than a classification of the specific CCI they recalled, the CCI situations mentioned in the study are consistent with the findings of research into library user satisfaction (e.g. Bryant et al., 2009; Ellison, 2016; Lange et al., 2016). Thus, they support the notion that employees can identify analogous CCI to that noticed by customers themselves.
However, several examples of NCCI provided by FLEs were particularly interesting because they referred to customer actions which other customers would not perceive as caused by another customer but rather attribute it to failure on the part of the service provider; i.e. some customer behaviour impacted other customers but was not visible to them as a ‘customer-linked’ behaviour. For example:

- Another customer takes out multiple copies of the same book to ensure that colleagues on his course cannot get access;
- Another customer hides a book to use later.

Whilst considered relatively rare by the employees reporting it, this type of CCI, labelled ‘customer-concealed CCI’ by the authors, is conceptually of great interest (see discussion of theoretical contributions below). Moreover, conceptually similar ‘concealed CCI’ occurs in other service settings. For example, in clothes stores some customers hide clothing items in less-obvious racks so they may return to buy them later after browsing in other stores. Another customer searching for these clothing items (e.g. a certain size) and finding them unavailable may attribute this to poor stock-keeping by the retailer.

Accordingly, this research puts forward:

**Proposition 1:** The more (less) NCCI occurs in a service setting, the more (less) the likelihood that FLEs will recognise its significance to the customer experience and impact on customer satisfaction (P1).

**Proposition 2:** While customers and FLEs may both observe analogous incidents associated with NCCI, perception and ascription may differ in relation to ‘Customer-concealed CCI’ situations (P2).

**Theme 2: FLE Discernment of CCI Antecedents and Variation in its Complexity**
Generally, FLEs demonstrated a clear ability to discuss CCI in detail and with an
impressive appreciation of the level (or potential level) of complexity of some CCI
situations and of background factors influencing customer perceptions of them. For
example, FLEs were aware that user perception of noise could vary with context; i.e. what
constituted an acceptable noise level might depend on the time of day or the user density
level. This contrast is captured in one interviewee’s view:

“On a Sunday evening, when there is only a handful of people in there, noise travels very
quickly and then you feel you need to intervene and say ‘can you keep the noise down’.
But when it was busy across that floor in the day you wouldn’t actually notice the range
of different noises.”

The finding regarding the ability of FLEs to provide detailed and nuanced insights into
CCI situations has not previously been evidenced in the CCI literature. The literature
has only reported the ability of customers to provide such detail (e.g. Yin and Poon,
2016; Zhang et al., 2010). Role-taking theory, which involves the ability to enter the
perspective of another (Schwalbe, 1988), may be useful in explaining the ability of
FLEs to understand the customer’s perspective on CCI situations.

Furthermore, there was plenty of FLE reflection on the ‘purpose of being at The Hive’
varying for different users and weighing heavily on perceptions of ‘other-customer’
interactions. In one employee’s words The Hive has “a large range of customers there
for many reasons”. For example: some users are studying for exams; some are working on
team assignments; some are gaming; some are enjoying family time/children events, and
some are ‘hanging out’ with friends. This entails varying expectations and psychological
preparedness in perceiving and interacting with others, and possibly a variable subjective
awareness of the space and environment in context; such CCI antecedents can vary the complexity of CCI situations.

Likewise, FLEs were aware that the original cause of a tense CCI situation might not at times be apparent to them. This can be labelled ‘employee-concealed CCI’. For example, one respondent pointed out that, unknown to staff, a hostile CCI situation could be developing live on social media between users in The Hive; this could later result in visible NCCI without its original causes being apparent to the FLE present at the scene. It is thus proposed in this study that:

**Proposition 3:** Varying CCI antecedents, such as situational factors and ‘employee-concealed NCCI’, can delay FLE intervention resulting in customer dissatisfaction (P3).

The main source of awareness of CCI reported by FLEs was via observation of what was going on around them. The opportunity to observe is enhanced by using the roaming service model whereby many FLEs roam the service setting. Further, awareness of CCI resulted from conversations with colleagues, especially at shift changeovers. One respondent emphasised:

“If there is an issue, for instance I had mentioned to somebody they needed to talk more quietly, then I pass that information on to another member of staff so that we can monitor it between us”.

The ability of Hive employees to reflect in detail on service interactions they have observed is consistent with previous FLE research (Harris and Reynolds, 2004; Karlsson and Skålén, 2015). Moreover, service research has found FLEs to be accurate at assessing customers’ perceptions of service (e.g. Chung-Herrera et al., 2004). Within a CCI context, this finding in The Hive study is consistent with Luther et al. (2016) who show nurses reflect in detail on patient-to-patient interaction.
Theme 3: FLE Perception of NCCI Severity and the Appropriate Response

Employees were aware that CCI situations had different levels of seriousness and severity, and that customers could vary greatly in their sensitivity to CCI. This finding is consistent with previous CCI research that adopted a customer perspective (Grove and Fisk, 1997; Martin, 1995; Small and Harris, 2014). FLEs identified that some users try to influence others and draw their attention to stop an unacceptable behaviour via small cues, instead of calling it to the attention of the FLE; this is in some instances associated with customer sensitivity to making a bigger situation out of an incident by drawing attention to it. For example, one respondent described a situation of a female user getting unwanted male attention and “trying to handle it herself by just being polite and later moving elsewhere”. Accordingly, FLEs must be perceptive in sensing the necessity and appropriateness of intervening in such situations. Employee descriptions of handling CCI covered a wide spectrum of intervention strengths: from a soft “can you just keep your chat down, guys” approach to a hard-line “you need to leave now” approach and offer evidence of employee adaptiveness.

An important distinction that emerged from the employee perception of NCCI situations was between gradual and sudden CCI situations. Gradual situations are situations where a customer (or group) is behaving in a potentially disturbing way but which can be tolerated, or at least given longer to see if the behaviour ceases or settles down. For example, one respondent described situations where

“A group come in and say a few words to somebody they know, before hopefully moving on and sitting down to do their own thing.”
In such situations, an employee can ask a colleague for advice on whether and how to intervene. At The Hive, the gradual nature of the majority of NCCI situations means that employees can usually consult colleagues if unsure what to do.

Sudden situations, on the other hand, are situations where a customer is behaving in a way that is disturbing, cannot be tolerated, and requires immediate intervention. For example, a user purposely kicks over a chair. In such situations, there is no time to consult a colleague, and comprehensive prior training becomes essential (see discussion of managerial implications below). Gradual and sudden CCI situations are likely to be present in most service settings where CCI is relevant, and they involve differing stress levels for the FLE in charge. For example, in a hotel there will be gradual situations such as a large party increasingly congesting the lobby, and more sudden situations such as two guests having an argument. Whilst these findings regarding gradual and sudden situations are consistent with some service literature on interaction predictability, employee adaptiveness and training needs (e.g. Sony and Mekoth, 2016), the gradual and sudden CCI response distinction has not previously been discussed in the CCI literature.

Hence, this research advances:

**Proposition 4:** In service contexts where NCCI requiring an immediate response is anticipated, prior CCI-specific training becomes more crucial (P4).

**Proposition 5:** The more (less) immediately NCCI situations require intervention, the more (less) stressful they are for FLEs in the absence of CCI-specific skills (P5).

**Theme 4: FLE Comfort in Handling NCCI Situations**

Just as employees vary in their comfort in dealing with negative employee-customer interaction (Harris, 2013), they also vary in their comfort in dealing with NCCI. Respondents referred to the stress associated with the unpredictable reaction from customers
being cautioned, and the stress from having to respond live to such reactions. One respondent reflected:

“You never know what the customer reaction is going to be when you intervene. Nine times out of ten, if you handle it right, if you just say ‘can you keep the noise down, guys’, that’ll be fine, but on the tenth occasion you will get a ‘urgh?’ reaction or worse”.

Customers who are asked to stop or to modify their behaviour will react to that request in different ways. Some employee remarks showed that they engaged in contemplation and reflections after difficult CCI interventions. For example, one respondent spoke at length about her after-thoughts on a noise-related CCI situation that escalated in an unpredicted way. Her many reflections included whether she should have intervened earlier and differently, and how the situation had kept playing itself through her mind for weeks afterwards. Such reflection is consistent with the findings of other researchers into employee post-incident behaviour (e.g. Harris and Reynolds, 2004), and may be explained in terms of conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989). COR theory holds that individuals attempt to maintain and protect their current resources and acquire new resources. Accordingly, FLEs may desire to invest resources through emotional job engagement to maintain emotional energy by, for example, reflecting on how they might handle a NCCI situation differently in the future.

Moreover, when asked to provide CCI incidents, descriptions of situations included emotional reactions from FLEs, which shows empathy towards users and a sense of responsibility in wanting to make things right for them. A typical FLE response was

“I am happy to intervene to avert calamity or an incident and ensure other users of the library aren’t disturbed”.

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“I am happy to intervene to avert calamity or an incident and ensure other users of the library aren’t disturbed”.
Some discussions related to the judgement, and sometimes stress, of deciding whether to intervene. This judgement seemed to be quite challenging, especially considering The Hive’s inclusive philosophy that, unlike traditional academic libraries, seeks to avoid having extensive user regulation. As one respondent said:

“... because The Hive is a space for many different types of people, it is difficult to know when and how to intervene ... you don’t want anyone to feel excluded.”

Accordingly, this research advances:

Proposition 6: Feelings of empathy, stress and sense of responsibility may variably influence a FLE’s ability and willingness to intervene following a NCCI incident (P6).

FLEs mentioned that staff intervention styles varied with personality. Some staff considered the implications of intervening more deeply than others. For example, one interviewee mentioned that she was always aware that intervening may lead to a customer feeling not wanted at The Hive, and this went against The Hive’s inclusivity mission; these thoughts illuminate some decision-making influences and challenges in employees’ handling of CCI situations. It was also suggested that new workers, especially younger ones, may have difficulties in intervening, particularly in the absence of a clear script or written rules on how to deal with NCCI. One respondent reflected:

“When I first started, I felt uncomfortable intervening in certain (C2C) situations, but I feel confident now because I know the rules about what is expected of customers.”

Thus, findings raised the clear possibility that dealing with NCCI or its fallout can be a source of work stress and possibly an employee retention issue.

Accordingly, this research postulates:
Proposition 7: The less (more) experienced in handling NCCI the FLE is, the more (less) likely to feel apprehensive/hesitant in intervening in NCCI situations (P7).

Some of the CCI situations described can be analysed in terms of Nicholls’ (2005) concept of ‘echo-CCI’. This term refers to the CCI which occurs when one customer reacts to actions by another customer, i.e. it concerns follow-up CCI about the original CCI. Accordingly, echo-CCI is always part of a reaction to a CCI incident. An exemplar incident narrated by one participant stated that just by the library’s Children’s section, some children aged around 10-12 years had been swearing, and a mother with some young kids told these ‘tweens’ not to swear in front of her kids. So, the original CCI (which upset the mother) was the swearing and the echo-CCI was the mother telling them not to swear. A further echo was the ‘tweens’ response of ignoring what the mother was saying as they just giggled among themselves, leading to the employee’s intervention.

Echo-CCI becomes further complicated if an employee has to caution customer A (the victim of the original CCI) for abusive or excessive behaviour in their intervention. FLEs mentioned several incidents where they received sharp comments from customers who they had spoken to about their harsh reactions to an original NCCI situation. Some CCI situations can have several ricochets of interaction. As such, they are more complex than the typically contained dyad of employee-customer interaction. It is thus advanced that:

Proposition 8: Echo-CCI is more challenging to manage and thus requires a different level of FLE skill to anticipate and handle its complexity (P8).

The services literature has not previously discussed echo-CCI in terms of the FLE. It is an interesting area for future research and includes the sensitive issue of how the FLE ‘disciplines’ a customer who was originally the victim of another customer’s behaviour.
Theme 5: CCI as an Area for Strategic Human Resource Development (HRD) Focus

Employees generally managed CCI by drawing on skills imparted in an employee-customer interaction context but felt they would benefit from developing skills and experience in a CCI-training specific context. The study detected a willingness amongst FLEs to develop their skills in terms of handling CCI; FLEs perceived it as something specific to manage and as potentially their responsibility. One focus group comment emphasised that it had been:

“Very useful to raise issues and share experiences. Many common themes. Positive to have time to meet as a group and discuss”.

Some employees expressed the desire for more guidance on handling CCI, including greater clarification of when intervention should occur and in what form. This response is consistent with Schmidt’s (2007) finding of a positive relationship between job training satisfaction and overall job satisfaction. Some interviewees felt that they were intervening appropriately but would find it reassuring if a staff development event confirmed this. As one interviewee stated:

“I am happy to deal with certain situations, but I would like training to ensure that I’m dealing with situations the way that my employer would like me to”.

Generally, participants felt that an HRD focus on CCI issues would contribute to the development of a more consistent and less stressful approach to handling CCI. Accordingly, this research puts forward:

**Proposition 9:** Developing tailored HRD efforts that provide FLEs with CCI-specific training supports consistent handling of NCCI and effective CCI management (P9).

The above themes and propositions are summarised in Table 3.
The five themes discussed above augment the existing stream of literature on CCI management. To the limited extent that the CCI literature has considered the management of CCI and the role of the FLE, it has focused on what that role could or should be. This literature stream has been strongly influenced by Pranter and Martin’s (1991) identification of 10 CCI roles. The current paper, however, makes an original contribution by extending the discussion of CCI and the FLE to consider the capacity of FLEs to engage with CCI and the consequences for FLEs of this engagement. The paper also extends the existing literature by introducing a new discussion regarding how the level of immediacy of employee response to NCCI and the severity and complexity of the NCCI situation may influence the HRD approach to developing CCI-management skills.

DISCUSSION

Rowley (1995) explained that it might be instinctive for service providers to assume that customer-to-customer interactions is something beyond their control. But in many leisure and educational environments customers often spend several hours, so “the significance of customer-to-customer interaction is greater, and perhaps, more significant than the customer-to-service agent interact” (Rowley, 1995, p. 8). The implication is that those interactions not only need be attentively observed, but also proactively managed by the FLE. If FLEs are actively engage with such interactions and are mindful in managing them, they may be able to find innovative means of transforming the service experience for the customers involved, thus raising satisfaction and loyalty.

The aim of this research was to explore the insights of FLEs in their engagement with CCI. This is important as FLEs have a direct role in managing CCI, which stems from their...
crucial part in driving a satisfactory customer experience. There is however, very little CCI research conducted from the FLE perspective. The present research demonstrates the value of investigating CCI from the FLE’s standpoint. The primary contribution of this study has been to provide a deeper understanding of how FLEs perceive and engage with CCI, and how they conceptualise their role and ability in dealing with it given also the various intricacies of NCCI situations. This has led to the identification of a range of theoretical contributions and managerial implications as discussed next.

Theoretical and Conceptual Contributions

This study extends the CCI literature in four important ways. Firstly, it demonstrates how an employee-focused approach can bring out insights into antecedents of CCI in relation to customer perceptions, expectations and situational influences which cannot be elicited from customer-focused data. One example is the recognition of ‘customer-concealed CCI’ behaviours that impact customers, but which customers themselves would not attribute to CCI.

Secondly, the study reveals a crucial distinction between two types of NCCI situations: those that transpire gradually and do not require immediate intervention, and others that are sudden and demand immediate attention and action. The complexity and type of situation faced have an impact on FLE comfort in handling it and can lead to stress and emotional reactions, which has implications for HRD.

Thirdly, based on aspects of the themes identified in the qualitative analysis, the study advances a set of testable propositions about FLEs and CCI. The propositions highlight three key domains: FLE engagement with CCI and its relevance from the FLE’s point of view and perceptions of its more intricate typologies; the complexity of certain CCI situations and the effect of the FLE’s experience, willingness and ability to intervene, and ambivalence
about their role in handling it; and the need for formal and specialised training that
empowers FLEs, thus confirming their consistent alignment with the employer’s
expectations towards effective NCCI management. Fourthly, by examining a multifaceted,
on-­‐traditional and inclusive service, the study contributes to widening the body of CCI
research. The key themes highlighted by the study will now be discussed in turn.

**Importance of employee perspective:**   Firstly, the study demonstrates the capacity of
FLEs to directly offer insights into CCI and its effective management. The study is grounded
in employee perceptions rather than customers or the researcher’s own observations, or
student responses to abstract scenarios. Examining CCI from this perspective contributes to
the current literature on CCI by exploring how CCI is perceived, managed and coped with
by FLEs in boundary-­spanning positions.

**‘Concealed CCI’ behaviours:** Some of the incidents mentioned by employees show
that relying exclusively on customer perceptions of CCI might provide an incomplete
picture of other customer behaviours (see Findings: theme 1). Employee interviews revealed
actions undertaken by some customers that had negative consequences for other customers
but would not be apparent as CCI to those other customers (i.e. ‘customer-concealed CCI’).
For example, some library users hide books to use later, staff find such books and realise
what is going on, but customers would not fathom that a missing book was the result of
another customer’s intentional misbehaviour. Whilst such behaviour was considered
infrequent in this specific setting, it may be more common in some settings. Moreover, from
a theoretical point of view, it is interesting because it demonstrates that employees can detect
C2C matters that, whilst customers cannot perceive as rooted in C2C, do affect their service
satisfaction and engagement. Accordingly, from a managerial perspective, it may mean that
some actual customer misbehaviour is not observed as such by other customers, but rather
is incorrectly perceived as organisational inefficiency hence making the organisation look bad.

This finding is very interesting from a theoretical point of view because CCI studies are overwhelmingly customer-based, and therefore may not be as comprehensive as they claim. It suggests that previous classifications of CCI derived from customers may require revision to accommodate types of CCI that are imperceptible as CCI to customers. The findings also contribute a new concept, namely ‘concealed CCI’, to the CCI literature. A second type of ‘concealed CCI’, discussed in Findings (theme 2), is ‘employee-concealed CCI’. This type is interesting from a CCI management perspective because it demonstrates that FLEs, faced with NCCI situations, may be unaware of the roots of the situation they face. To the authors’ knowledge, the concept of ‘concealed CCI’ has not previously been discussed in the service literature.

**Distinction between gradual and sudden CCI:** Another important finding of this research is proposing a new way of classifying CCI based on the degree of urgency of response, and the distinction between gradual and sudden NCCI situations. This distinction has implications for how service employees should intervene, and consequently for CCI training needs (see discussion below).

**Widening the body of CCI research:** The present study, by researching a complex, non-traditional and inclusive servicescape, also contributes to broadening the scope of CCI research and developing the transformative service research (TSR) paradigm. Most CCI research occurs in for-profit contexts such as hospitality, retail and tourism. This study has examined a community resource with a clear inclusivity agenda, a context with minimal CCI research contribution. By examining CCI issues in a service environment which embraces the whole community and enables those without a higher education background
to experience that world, this research provides insights for organisations aiming to improve the lives of disadvantaged/vulnerable individuals. Furthermore, by revealing some of the challenges FLEs face in handling NCCI, the study offers findings relevant to improving employee well-being. Accordingly, the study will be of interest to those conducting CCI research in similar non-profit service environments.

**Contribution to triadic interaction service literature**

The findings of this study include useful insights into how FLEs sometimes interact with two customer parties simultaneously. For example, when intervening to sort out a disagreement or misunderstanding between two customers. As such, the study offers an extension to the service literature studying triadic interactions. Service research into interactions has had a strong emphasis on dyadic interactions. A wide range of dyadic issues, including customer satisfaction, service recovery, interpersonal persuasion, loyalty and job satisfaction, have been examined (Bitner and Wang, 2014; Lutz and Kakkar, 1976). But service encounters can also involve triadic interaction. Most triadic literature is based around care interactions (e.g. Cordella, 2011), B2B interactions (e.g. Holma, 2012), group service encounters (e.g. Finsterwalder and Tuzovic, 2010) and customer/FLE/manager triads (e.g. Fallon and Schofield, 2000). The present study has emphasised the relevance of triadic encounters in some CCI contexts involving Customer A, Customer B and the FLE. It has highlighted the potential complexity and stress for FLEs involved in encounters with two customer parties who are in dispute with one another. By examining C2C interactions involving employees the present study contributes to our understanding of triadic interactions.

**Managerial Implications**
Whilst the study’s specific context is a library, the issues examined potentially go beyond the world of libraries. The Hive represents a CCI-rich service setting, where proximity levels to other customers exceed those to employees. As such, the context studied has strong similarities with many other service settings such as passenger transport, hotels, and leisure facilities. These other service settings have much in common with public libraries in terms of core aspects of CCI such as close customer contiguity; sharing space/facilities/equipment; and waiting for service together. Accordingly, the study’s findings may have wider application. This needs to be confirmed by further research in other service settings as the findings presented here are qualitative and not generalisable. Likewise, the propositions put forward in this paper can be tested in other service settings to establish generalisability.

The research identifies several important implications for service managers and marketing strategists. The first concerns the distinction between gradual and sudden CCI situations discussed above. This distinction has major managerial implications; namely, whilst gradual situations can be prepared for with ‘on the job’ training, sudden situations require prior formal training and confidence (see Proposition 4). This distinction has not been made before in a CCI training context, but it can find support in the employee training literature for extreme service encounters. For example, Kokko and Mäki (2009) emphasise the importance of prior FLE training for dealing with difficult customer situations. Moreover, sudden CCI situations are far more demanding on staff emotionally than gradual ones (see Proposition 5) and may require internal service recovery effort (Bowen and Johnston, 1999). Service managers need to assess the relative balance of gradual and sudden CCI situations which their FLEs face and align their CCI training strategy accordingly. They may also need to counsel FLEs after experiencing stressful incidents and determine how these situations can be used for wider learning
purposes. Furthermore, equipping FLEs with CCI-specific training could support them in making informed judgements about the severity of NCCI situation and a better recognition of customer cues regarding the need to intervene. It can also lessen FLE apprehension in handling NCCI through guiding his/her sense of responsibility and empathy towards a more consistent way of managing CCI (see Propositions 6, 7, and 9).

Secondly, the newly introduced ‘customer-concealed CCI’ concept is of relevance to managers as some customers may attribute blame to the service organisation for some of this behaviour. Customers perceiving the service provider poorly due to NCCI has been discussed previously in the CCI literature (Nicholls, 2005; Huang, 2008), but such research has been in the context of the organisation’s failing to respond to situations, especially recurring incidents. The present study goes further and suggests that a different blame attribution mechanism may also exist: service organisations may receive blame for other customer behaviours that are not perceived as resulting from other customers (see Proposition 2). Also, ‘employee-concealed CCI’ may mean that in some instances FLEs’ awareness of a developing NCCI situation is too late for effective intervention (see Proposition 3). Accordingly, service managers need to be aware of both the extent and the impact of ‘concealed CCI’. They also need to consider how they can create systems which proactively detect, prevent and recover from ‘concealed NCCI’. In the context of such customer misbehaviour, this might include: anticipating likely incidents through recording and analysis of recurrence; monitoring the scale on which this activity is occurring; analysing which product/service aspects are most affected; and ensuring there are mechanisms that thwart or swiftly rectify these occurrences.
Thirdly, the finding that FLEs engage with CCI at a mindful level that enables its
detection, an understanding of its antecedents and analysis of their comfort level in handling
it has important managerial implications (see Proposition 7). It highlights the potential for
employee involvement and empowerment in the creative management of CCI. Managers
need to consider ways of effectively capturing FLE service wisdom regarding CCI,
especially given the usefulness of reading customer needs towards service improvement.
Managers also need to devise strategies for involving frontline staff in the human-centred
design, innovative development and implementation of CCI management approaches (see
Proposition 9). However, prior to this, managers should explicitly communicate the concept
and application of CCI so employees can see its relevance and impact on the customer
experience and satisfaction, and their crucial role in managing it.

Finally, service organisations may need to develop guidelines concerning CCI. These
guidelines could depict the types of CCI situations that are often problematic, such as ‘echo-
CCI’ (Proposition 8); explain how customers perceive these situations; and suggest
appropriate employee responses. Customer service workshops should be considered as one
avenue for communicating and further developing such guidelines; these workshops can
make use of gamification/simulation methods that involve practical role playing and
scenario analysis, allowing employees to sense situations from various perspectives.
Encouraging FLEs to record CCI incidents and observations and ensuring a forum for
sharing these experiences would help develop a CCI learning organisation. Research is
drawing more attention to how individual FLEs actually function in work groups and that a
coworker’s level of customer orientation can impact individual FLE’s attitudes,
engagement and performance (Menguc et al., 2016).

CCI has been shown to impact customer satisfaction and loyalty (Nicholls, 2010).
Effectively managing CCI can assist managers in meeting some of the goals set for their
business. These goals can vary between profit and non-profit contexts but may include **improving the customer experience and increasing retention**; increasing the usage of a facility; supporting employees perform their work and protecting employees and customers from physical and/or psychological harm.

**LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study has several limitations. Based on exploratory research, it focuses on a single organisation using FGs and in-depth interviews. The study identifies new themes in the field of CCI, paving the way for a larger scale study that further examines them for relevance. The number of interviews conducted are acceptable for an exploratory study and follow the rule of data saturation and checking for variability till the latter diminishes (Guest *et al.*, 2006; Saunders and Townsend, 2016).

The service organisation studied has a very customer-centric culture. As a pioneering experiment in how libraries can operate in the contemporary world, The Hive is a major investment and a high-profile project. Accordingly, its employees are particularly skilled at delivering customer service and highly motivated to manage the customer experience. Some of the findings reported in this study may have been different in a more mediocre service culture. Accordingly, it would be fruitful for a future study of the FLE perspective on CCI to be undertaken in an organisation with a less dynamic and customer-driven culture. In terms of national culture, the study was based in the UK, which may have specific social behaviours. Accordingly, the study’s findings should be investigated further in other countries. Likewise, it would be interesting to explore cross-cultural CCI. Some Hive customers are from cultural backgrounds with different rules and norms, but this did not emerge as a theme in this study.
Besides providing a set of propositions for future testing which include key moderators that shape perception, intervention and the need for focused training in relation to NCCI for FLEs, the study extends a range of topics for further research on the theme of CCI and the FLE. These include: comparison of employee-generated and customer-generated CCI critical incidents; FLE stress associated with dealing with difficult CCI situations; how FLEs share their experiences of interventions in problematic CCI situations and provide peer-support to one another; and the exploration of the role of the FLE in dealing with NCCI as constituting a form of skilled work. These topics will now be briefly outlined.

Comparing employee-generated CCI critical incidents with customer-generated ones would provide a useful dual perspective on CCI in a service organisation. Such a study would offer insights into the extent that specific CCI incidents identified by customers and employees overlap; the scale and significance of FLE-only CCI and customer-only CCI perspectives; and the capacity of FLEs to gauge the degree of seriousness with which customers perceive various types of CCI. Previous service research (e.g. Chung-Herrera et al., 2004; Harris and Reynolds, 2004) has successfully employed the CIT to gain both customer and employee insights.

Furthermore, research should investigate the FLE stress associated with dealing with difficult CCI situations. Such research has the potential to contribute to raising employee satisfaction and retention in service organisations. It would usefully augment the customer misbehaviour literature on employee stress and coping (Harris and Reynolds, 2004; Li and Zhou, 2013) to a specific focus on employee stress and coping following exposure to CCI tensions. It would also complement Miao’s (2014) work on the emotion-focused coping of other customers. Additional studies can investigate: the types of CCI situations more likely to cause FLE stress; individual employee personality traits and stress perception; and strategies used by FLEs to cope with CCI-induced stress.
Another interesting area of future research is studying the employee skills required for effectively dealing with problematic CCI encounters. Such research would be valuable for HRD purposes and could include addressing the issue of the relative complexity of the employee interaction skills required to dealing with triadic interactions (FLE + Customer A + Customer B) as opposed to dyadic interactions (FLE + Customer A). This would make an original contribution to the extensive literature on the service employee.

This paper illuminates a discussion of CCI from an employee perspective using a CCI-intensive context. Through in-depth exploration, it extends theoretical contributions as well as managerial implications that can assist a better acknowledgment of FLE perspectives. The paper has added its voice to calls for CCI research to broaden its focus from studying CCI to studying the effective management of CCI.

References


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Studies</th>
<th>Finding/contribution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FLE as a contributor to NCCI</td>
<td>Schmidt and Sapsford (1995)</td>
<td>‘Silent collusion’ of bar staff with drunk customers harassing female customers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anaya et al. (2016)</td>
<td>FLEs giving special treatment to selected customers causes discontent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer expectations of FLE intervention in NCCI situations</td>
<td>Boo et al. (2013)</td>
<td>Customers unlikely to complain about NCCI but expect FLE action (and not merely apology).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tsang et al. (2016)</td>
<td>Customers expect FLE intervention for controllable and predictable NCCI.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Baker and Kim (2018)</td>
<td>Customers look to FLE to recover NCCI.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FLEs as a resource for managing CCI</td>
<td>Pranter and Martin (1991)</td>
<td>Identify 10 roles for managing CCI – most of them involving FLEs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grove and Fisk (1997)</td>
<td>Makes several suggestions for FLE policing of NCCI.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nicholls (2005)</td>
<td>Provides illustrations of good practice in preventing and recovering NCCI.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>McQuilken et al. (2017)</td>
<td>Outlines ways of preparing FLEs to deliver effective displays of empathy and apology in NCCI situations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer views on FLE response to CCI</td>
<td>Nicholls (2005)</td>
<td>Lists acceptable and unacceptable FLE responses to NCCI.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hoffman and Lee (2014)</td>
<td>Identifies FLE tactics used to discourage disruptive student behaviour.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>McQuilken et al. (2017)</td>
<td>Found FLE apologies for delays caused by other customers to be effective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FLE/employee perspective on CCI</td>
<td>Luther et al. (2016)</td>
<td>Used group interviews to gain insights from nurses about NCCI and PCCI amongst hospital inpatients.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Colm et al. (2017)</td>
<td>Outline a range of CCI phenomena occurring at Italian service stations and report a similarity between customer and manager/supervisor perceptions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: CCI and the employee
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CCI Typology</th>
<th>Context of typology</th>
<th>Perspective</th>
<th>FLE view included</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Key finding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>McGrath and Otnes (1995)</td>
<td>CCI in retail setting (midwestern USA)</td>
<td>Consumer (in a live service situation; as interpreted by researchers)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>In-store observation (60 hours; 73 encounters), in-depth interviews (8 shoppers) and shopping with consumers (5 shoppers)</td>
<td>Identifies 11 shopper CCI roles: help-seeker; proactive helper; reactive helper; admirer, competitor, complainer, follower, observer, judge, accused, and spoiler.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Baron et al. (1996)</td>
<td>CCI in a large self-service format retail setting (UK)</td>
<td>Consumer (recall of current visit CCI on exiting a service setting)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Exit interviews (1,101) at IKEA asking respondents to report any spoken-interaction with other shoppers (OOP2).</td>
<td>Identifies five categories of oral-based CCI: Product-related; directions; procedures; physical assistance; and others.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grove and Fisk (1997)</td>
<td>Theme parks (USA)</td>
<td>Consumer (in a service setting, but recalling past CCI experiences)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>CIT (330 incidents)</td>
<td>Identifies two broad groupings of CCI incident: protocol incidents and sociability incidents.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parker and Ward (2000)</td>
<td>Helping behaviours between customers in garden centres (UK)</td>
<td>Consumer (exiting a service setting, but recalling past CCI experiences)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Exit questionnaire survey at a garden centre (467 questionnaires); In-depth telephone interviews (10)</td>
<td>Identifies four helping roles: Reactive help-seeker; proactive help-seeker; reactive helpers; and proactive helpers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Harris and Baron (2004)</td>
<td>C2C conversations during train travel (UK)</td>
<td>Consumer (in a live service situation; as interpreted by researchers)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Observations (some 200 hours over 65 train journeys) and interviews (28 – conducted on station platforms)</td>
<td>Identifies 10 activities that passengers engage in during train travel, several of which may involve CCI. Proposes that conversations between train passengers can serve to improve the service experience.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Study</td>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>Findings</td>
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<td>Zhang et al. (2010)</td>
<td>Based on a range of services. (USA)</td>
<td>Identifies the following types of CCI: conversation/getting along; helping; good atmosphere/nice crowd; observing/overhearing; ‘fighting’; other negative direct incidents; loudness; rudeness; and other negative indirect incidents.</td>
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<td>Dorsey et al. (2016)</td>
<td>Examines outcomes of extreme NCCI (rage); also considers triggers of rage in restaurants, retail stores, etc. (USA)</td>
<td>Identifies other customer behaviours contributing to rage: Negative sociability; verbal; going slower than expected; other protocol; children misbehaving; physical; mistreating employee; racial slur; stealing item/spot; intentional violence.</td>
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<td>Luther et al. (2016)</td>
<td>Investigates the influence of other patients in shared hospital rooms (Germany)</td>
<td>Roommates who are perceived as similar are viewed more positively. Roommate similarity improves overall evaluation of the service provider. Nurses could identify relevant similarity factors and operational constraints on implementing a similarity.</td>
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<td>Yin and Poon (2016)</td>
<td>Examines impact of other group members on a domestic package tour (China)</td>
<td>Identifies three main categories of CCI incident: Appearance; behaviours; and language.</td>
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<td>Colm et al. (2017)</td>
<td>Examines the direct and indirect influence of other customers present at a motorway service station. (Italy)</td>
<td>Identifies seven categories of CCI. Four relate to on-site CCI: proactive instrumental interactions, proactive social interactions, reactive...</td>
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<tr>
<td>Study Source</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Data Source(s)</td>
<td>Identifies CCI incidents</td>
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<td>Gursoy et al. (2017)</td>
<td>Examines disruptive customer behaviour which impacts other customers in hospitality industry contexts.</td>
<td>Consumer (consumer NCCI anecdotes posted on customer review websites)</td>
<td>Identifies seven categories of disruptive customer behaviour: Inattentive parents with naughty kids; oral abusers; outlandish requesters; hysterical shouters; poor hygiene manners; service rule breakers; and ignorant customers.</td>
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<td>Baker and Kim (2018)</td>
<td>Other customer failure in restaurants, transportation, theatres, retail &amp; hotels. (USA)</td>
<td>Consumer (an online marketing panel)</td>
<td>Identifies five types of CCI incident: Rudeness; proximity; loudness; child misbehaviour; and waiting for others.</td>
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**Table 2** Selected CCI studies and their source perspectives
Figure 1: Thematic Mapping of the Codes and Emergent Themes
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Supporting Codes</th>
<th>Propositions (P1 - P9)</th>
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</table>
| **1. FLE Engagement with CCI & its Context** | CCI frequency: Spot & recall  
CCI relevance to the customer experience  
Customer-concealed CCI  
Customer vs FLE perception of CCI situations | P1: The more (less) NCCI occurs in a service setting, the more (less) the likelihood that FLEs will recognise its significance to the customer experience and impact on customer satisfaction.  
P2: While customers and FLEs may both observe analogous incidents associated with NCCI, perception and ascription may differ in relation to ‘Customer-concealed CCI’ situations. |
| **2. FLE Discernment of CCI Antecedents & Variation in its Complexity** | Customer sensitivity to CCI: Situational influences  
FLE service wisdom: Observe & share  
Employee-concealed CCI | P3: Varying CCI antecedents, such as situational factors and ‘employee-concealed NCCI’, can delay FLE intervention resulting in customer dissatisfaction. |
| **3. FLE Perception of NCCI Severity & the Appropriate Response** | NCCI immediacy (Gradual vs Sudden)  
FLE judgement on severity & intervention strength  
Customer disposition to report NCCI for FLE intervention  
FLE stress in responding to NCCI | P4: In service contexts where NCCI requiring an immediate response is anticipated, prior CCI-specific training becomes more crucial  
P5: The more (less) immediately NCCI situations require intervention, the more (less) stressful they are for FLEs in the absence of CCI-specific skills. |
| **4. FLE Comfort in Handling NCCI Situations** | FLE feelings about handling NCCI  
FLE CCI experience level  
FLE stress from unpredictable customer reactions  
Echo-CCI | P6: Feelings of empathy, stress and sense of responsibility may variably influence a FLE’s ability and willingness to intervene following a NCCI incident.  
P7: The less (more) experienced in handling NCCI the FLE is, the more (less) likely to feel apprehensive/hesitant in intervening in NCCI situations.  
P8: Echo-CCI is more challenging to manage and thus requires a different level of FLE skill to anticipate and handle its complexity. |
| **5. CCI as an Area for Strategic HRD Focus** | Consistent handling of CCI & management expectations  
FLE disposition and CCI skills  
CCI significance to the customer experience  
CCI-specific training | P9: Developing tailored HRD efforts that provide FLEs with CCI-specific training supports consistent handling of NCCI and effective CCI management. |

Table 3: Final Themes, Supporting Codes and Research Propositions