
Guest editorial: Reconsidering the customer's role in decent work: value co-creation and co-destruction in service encounters

1. Introduction

In services, value is co-created with customers (Vargo, 2008). This premise, which has oriented the discipline for decades, has cast the frontline employee as a central co-creator of value alongside the customer: employees, with their competence and relational effort, transform a service into value-in-use for the customer. Four decades of frontline research have pursued the same logic, documenting how employee conduct shapes customer satisfaction, loyalty, perceived quality and recovery (Subramony *et al.*, 2021). Most often, the guiding question has been the same: how does the employee shape the customer's experience in a positive way?

This special issue inverts that question, asking how the customer shapes the employee's work and whether the resulting interaction contributes to or undermines decent work. This responds to a broader call to rethink how services are designed, delivered and sustained within a dynamic network of actors, technologies and institutions (Heinonen, 2025).

The topic is particularly timely. Decent work has moved from the periphery of service scholarship toward its center, drawn there by transformative service research (Anderson *et al.*, 2013; Ostrom *et al.*, 2021) and by the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 8, which commits to full, productive and dignified employment. Decent work, which directly affects employee well-being, has thereby become a legitimate object of inquiry, also in light of the challenges posed by AI innovations (Mende *et al.*, 2026). Its antecedents, however, continue to be sought largely within the organization, for example, in remuneration, contractual arrangements, scheduling, supervision and human resource practices. The customer appears primarily in studies of customer mistreatment and frontline workers experiencing vulnerability (Subramony *et al.*, 2023). Less attention has been devoted to understanding the customer as an actor whose behavior may shape the conditions under which employees experience their work.

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This editorial introduces the second part of the special issue on *Making Service Work Decent Work: Marketing Perspectives to Uplift Human Well-Being and Service Excellence*, a theme that has elicited considerable interest among marketing scholars. The first part (Colurcio *et al.*, 2025) established decent work as a core concern in service research. Traditionally examined through the lenses of economics, industrial relations and labor law, decent work has so far been approached largely from an organizational perspective. A services marketing perspective redirects attention to the interaction itself and to the role of service design and management in improving employees' working conditions through the quality of service encounters. In the previous special issue on Decent Work, Baum and Winchenbach (2025) identified the customer as the actor most frequently omitted from the decent-work equation. The articles selected for this issue continue this line of inquiry by examining, from different theoretical perspectives, how customer behavior shapes employees' work experiences.

2. Theoretical background

Service-dominant logic holds that value is co-created as actors integrate resources within service ecosystems and service encounters (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Vargo, 2008). If that integration is genuinely reciprocal, the resources customers contribute do not cease to matter once the service outcome has been produced. Civility, trust and recognition may function as operant resources for frontline employees (Vargo and Lusch, 2004), whereas hostility, entitlement and disrespect may deplete the resources upon which employees draw in their daily work (Hur *et al.*, 2016). In either case, customer behavior affects not only customers' own value-in-use but also the relational conditions under which frontline employees perform their work. Recent service research has also begun to recognize that institutional arrangements and interactional norms can positively contribute to service employees' well-being, highlighting the role of multiple actors in shaping supportive service environments (Chapman *et al.*, 2025).

Plé and Chumpitaz Cáceres (2010), writing in this journal, provide the complementary perspective. Value is not invariably co-created; interaction may also co-destroy value, resulting in a decline in the well-being of at least one actor within the service system. Subsequent scholarship has shown that co-creation and co-destruction are not mutually exclusive outcomes but may coexist within the same service system (Čaić *et al.*, 2018). Viewed through the lens of decent work, this perspective becomes particularly relevant. Decent work is fundamentally concerned with dignity, safety and well-being in working life (ILO, 1999; Subramony and Rosenbaum, 2024). Consequently, customer behaviors that undermine employees' dignity, psychological safety or well-being can be understood as instances in which value is co-destroyed from the employee's perspective.

Although the individual papers included in this special issue draw on different theoretical traditions and do not explicitly adopt service-dominant logic, we interpret them collectively through the lens of value co-creation and co-destruction. This perspective enables us to examine how customer participation extends beyond customers' own value creation to encompass employees' experiences of work and, ultimately, the conditions under which decent work is enacted. It situates

customer behavior along a continuum. At one end are behaviors that undermine employee well-being, dignity and psychological safety; at the other are behaviors and relational conditions that support resilience, inclusion and well-being.

3. Overview of the special issue

The eight papers are organized around three broad themes, moving from interactional harms to structurally constrained service contexts and finally to the role of technology in reshaping the customer–employee relationship.

3.1 The customer as co-destroyer

Three papers address most directly how customer behavior may undermine the conditions associated with decent work by affecting employees' well-being, dignity and psychological safety.

The first contribution considers the origins of destructive customer behavior. In "The impact of perceived crowding on customers' desire for revenge in service failure situations and its underlying mechanisms," [Song et al. \(2026\)](#) examine how perceived crowding influences customers' desire for revenge following service failure. Their findings show that perceived crowding increases revenge intentions through the sequential effects of ego depletion and moral disengagement. The study further demonstrates that self-focused recovery messages reduce customers' desire for revenge. By identifying conditions under which customer retaliation becomes more or less likely, the paper highlights how the service environment may indirectly shape the relational conditions frontline employees face.

The second paper shifts attention from customers' intentions to employees' experiences. In "Customer incivility, surface acting, burnout and well-being in Gen Z hairdressers," [Huang \(2026\)](#) shows that customer incivility contributes to surface acting, which in turn increases burnout and reduces subjective well-being among Generation Z frontline employees. Social support weakens these relationships, suggesting that supportive workplace relationships can mitigate the negative consequences of difficult customer interactions. The study illustrates how repeated customer incivility can erode employee well-being through emotional labor processes.

The third contribution examines how customer interactions intersect with identity. In "Serving through stigma: the passing drivers and well-being outcomes for young non-heterosexual men in service work," [Matthews et al. \(2026\)](#) investigate the experiences of young non-heterosexual men who engage in passing behaviors while serving customers. Their findings show how identity management within customer interactions affects employee well-being and illustrate the challenges faced by workers belonging to stigmatized social groups. The study highlights how customer-facing service work may create additional emotional demands for employees whose identities are potentially subject to stigma, reinforcing the importance of psychological safety as an essential dimension of decent work.

3.2 Customer relationships in informal and precarious service contexts

The second theme moves beyond individual encounters to examine the broader institutional contexts in which customer interactions occur. Across these studies, customer behavior remains important, but its effects are shaped by informal labor markets, platform governance and structural inequalities that influence employees' opportunities to experience decent work.

This interplay is particularly evident in "Service work, gender and well-being: the role of customer behavior in shaping the experiences of female drivers," in which [Mogaji et al. \(2026\)](#) examine female drivers operating within Nigeria's informal transport sector. The study shows that customer behavior simultaneously represents both a source of vulnerability and a source of support. Experiences of gender bias, harassment and safety concerns coexist with positive customer interactions that foster resilience and job satisfaction. The findings illustrate the dual role customers may play in shaping employees' work experiences, particularly when institutional protections are limited.

In "Decent yet indecent! Unveiling dual realities of fairwork in India's ride-hailing sector," [Khan et al. \(2026\)](#) explore gig workers' perceptions of decent work. Although drivers value flexibility, autonomy and earning opportunities, they also report financial instability, opaque platform governance, weak grievance mechanisms and limited collective representation. The study demonstrates how broader platform structures shape employees' work experiences, suggesting that positive customer interactions alone cannot compensate for structural deficiencies in working conditions.

[Akahome \(2026\)](#) extends this structural perspective in "Empowering African student workers in Poland's fast-food industry: pathways to fair and supportive work." Focusing on African student employees, the study shows how structural vulnerability and managerial exclusion undermine psychological safety, while empowerment practices and supportive organizational environments strengthen employees' well-being and sense of inclusion. The paper illustrates how organizational support can foster more inclusive and supportive working environments for service employees experiencing vulnerabilities.

3.3 Technology as a mediator of the customer–employee–decent work relationship

The final theme considers how technology reshapes customer–employee interactions and, consequently, the conditions under which decent work is experienced. Rather than replacing human relationships, technology becomes an additional actor influencing service encounters.

In "How service robot design shapes moral disengagement during service failures," [Vinoi and Shankar \(2026\)](#) investigate how different service robot designs influence customers' moral disengagement following service failures. Their findings demonstrate that robot design affects customers' propensity to morally disengage in interactions with robotic service agents. The study raises important questions about how technological design may influence customer behavior within increasingly technology-mediated service encounters.

The special issue concludes with “Technology and decent work in elderly care: a case study,” Codini *et al.* (2026). Examining the introduction of voice assistants in an Italian nursing home, the authors show that technology can enhance employees’ well-being when its implementation is supported by appropriate organizational and relational practices. Rather than technology itself determining decent work, the study highlights the importance of aligning technological innovation with employees’ needs and organizational processes to promote well-being across the service ecosystem.

4. Integrative discussion

Three considerations emerge from the papers of the special issue.

First, customer behavior is not simply an element of service delivery but an important determinant of employees’ work experiences. The issue documents multiple forms of interactional harm, including retaliation following service failure (Song *et al.*, 2026), customer incivility (Huang, 2026), identity-related challenges in customer-facing work (Matthews *et al.*, 2026) and gender-based harassment (Mogaji *et al.*, 2026). While these studies adopt different theoretical perspectives, they collectively demonstrate that customer interactions have consequences extending beyond service outcomes to employees’ well-being and experiences of work. It is worth noting, however, that several of the harmful behaviors documented in this issue are not solely the expression of individual customer dispositions. Situational conditions, including perceived crowding (Song *et al.*, 2026), service failure and the visibility of stigmatized identities in customer-facing roles (Matthews *et al.*, 2026), shape the likelihood and intensity of interactional harm. This observation carries implications for how responsibility is understood: service environments and organizational design choices also contribute to the conditions under which co-destruction occurs.

Second, decent work is shaped by the interaction between customer behavior and structural conditions. The contributions examining informal work, platform labor and migrant employees (Mogaji *et al.*, 2026; Khan *et al.*, 2026; Akahome, 2026) demonstrate that supportive customer relationships alone cannot eliminate structural disadvantages, nor do unfavorable interactions occur independently of wider institutional contexts. Rather, organizational arrangements, labor market structures and managerial practices shape how frontline employees experience and manage customer behavior. A further dynamic emerges from these contributions that warrants attention. In contexts marked by structural precarity, positive customer interactions may come to function as an informal substitute for the protections that formal labor arrangements fail to provide, offering recognition, relational support or income stability that institutional mechanisms do not guarantee (Mogaji *et al.*, 2026). This substitution is both a resource for workers experiencing vulnerabilities and a source of fragility, since it renders their experience of decent work contingent on relational outcomes that remain inherently uncertain.

Third, technology emerges as an increasingly important mediator of the customer–employee relationship. Voini and

Shankar (2026) show that service robot design influences customers’ moral disengagement during service failures, whereas Codini *et al.* (2026) demonstrate that technology can contribute positively to employee well-being when implemented through appropriate organizational practices. Together, these studies suggest that technological innovation should be understood not as replacing human relationships but as reshaping the conditions under which service interactions occur. Read together, the two contributions point to a dual challenge for service organizations. Technology must be designed with attention both to how it shapes customer behavior during service failures (Voini and Shankar, 2026) and to how its implementation affects the working conditions and well-being of frontline employees (Codini *et al.*, 2026). That these two objectives may not always align suggests that decisions about service technology cannot be evaluated on the basis of customer experience outcomes alone.

Overall, the papers portray customer behavior as an important component of the relational conditions through which decent work is experienced in services. Although they examine different contexts, employee groups and theoretical perspectives, the contributions collectively show that customer interactions can either undermine or support employee well-being, while broader organizational and institutional arrangements shape the extent to which these interactions influence working lives.

5. Directions for future research

Viewing customers as participants in shaping decent work opens several promising directions for future service research.

Measurement. Future research could develop measures to capture the contribution of customer behavior to employees’ experiences of decent work. Existing service research has predominantly assessed value from the customer’s perspective; less attention has been devoted to understanding how interactions create or diminish value for frontline employees themselves.

Mechanisms. The studies identify different mechanisms linking customer behavior to employee outcomes, including moral disengagement (Song *et al.*, 2026), emotional labor (Huang, 2026) and identity management (Matthews *et al.*, 2026). Furthermore, research could examine how these and other psychological mechanisms interact across different service contexts.

Technology and customer behavior. As technology increasingly mediates service encounters, further work is needed to understand how technological design influences customer behavior and employee experiences. The findings reported by Voini and Shankar (2026) raise several questions about how emerging technologies may reshape customer norms and expectations in service interactions.

Structure and interaction. The contributions focusing on platform work, informality and employees experiencing vulnerabilities highlight the importance of organizational and institutional contexts. Future studies could investigate how organizational support, labor regulation and platform governance moderate the effects of customer behavior on employees’ experiences of decent work.

6. Concluding remarks

For decades, service research has primarily examined what employees do for customers. The papers brought together in this special issue encourage the field to consider the complementary question of what customers do for – and to – employees. Taken together, these contributions suggest that customer behavior is not merely an outcome of service management but an important element of the relational environment in which employees experience their work. While organizations remain central in creating decent work through employment practices, leadership and organizational design, the service encounter itself also represents a meaningful context in which dignity, respect, inclusion and well-being are reinforced or challenged.

This editorial has proposed value co-creation and co-destruction as an integrative lens for interpreting these diverse contributions. Although the individual papers draw on different theoretical traditions, together they indicate that customer participation extends beyond customers' value creation to influence employees' work experiences. Recognizing customers as participants in shaping decent work, therefore, broadens the service research agenda and highlights new opportunities for service marketing to contribute to both employee well-being and service excellence.

Vania Vigolo 

*Department of Management, University of Verona,
Verona, Italy, and*

Maria Colurcio  and **Angela Caridà** 

*Department of Law, Economics and Sociology,
University of Catanzaro, Catanzaro, Italy*

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