***I Want to Speak to the Manager!***

**An Exploration of Customer-Cashier Interactions**

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**Abstract**

Interacting with cashiers to obtain goods and services is a commonplace task for most Americans. However, the relationship between customers and cashiers has been generally overlooked in ethnographic research. This study included exploration of the nature of interactions between customers and cashiers. Normative rules of conduct were identified for people of each group. Field sites included physical business establishments and virtual websites, such as forums, review boards and scholarly journals. Research subjects included customers (51.3% female; ages 6-70) and cashiers (71.4% female; ages 16-65) who were defined by their role at the time of data collection. The main research methods utilized in this study were participant observation, observation, artifact analysis, and interviews. Secondary research methods included literature reviews, mapping, and a survey. The overarching finding was that social attitudes and expectations for cashiers create a climate in which cashiers are dehumanized and vulnerable. Ultimately, cashiers are expected to maintain a polite, enthusiastic, robotic persona while rules of conduct for customers are mostly unrestrictive.

**Introduction**

Cashiers are a fundamental part of the American materialistic society. They are the final gatekeepers for customers to make in-store purchases. During 2016, there were 3.6 million cashiers in the US (US Bureau of Labor Statistics). Most consumers complete transactions weekly (Brooks). Evidently, interactions between customers and cashiers are more relevant to American culture than most people actively consider.

This study uncovered a deeper understanding of the interactions between customers and cashiers across settings. An important exploration involved understanding the separate experiences of customers and cashiers during transactions. Another intention was to identify rules of conduct for customers and cashiers. Additionally, influences on the nature of interactions between customers and cashiers were explored. Thus, the foundation of this project covered a broad array of questions which were eventually narrowed into smaller findings.

**Field Sites**

Field sites included businesses which require customers to interact with cashiers to obtain goods and/or services. All physical business observations took place in Humboldt County, California. Field sites were split into two categories: local establishments and commercial enterprises. For the purposes of this study, ‘local establishments’ are defined by a few distinct traits. Local establishments normally have more than one cashier working each register at a time; slower establishments may only have one cashier working each shift. Cashiers often share a staff-space behind the cash register. Local establishments are relatively slow-paced compared to commercial enterprises. These businesses are mostly privately-owned. Unlike corporate chains, each local establishment has a singular or small number of locations. Commercial enterprises are often corporately owned. Commercial enterprises typically have many customers and transactions are fast paced. Most of the time, cashiers do not leave the cash registers except for during breaks and after shift completion. The necessary distinction between local establishments and commercial enterprises correlated to differences in the customer-cashier dynamic.

**Research Subjects**

The subjects in this study were split into two categories: cashiers and customers. During observations, participants were defined as their role at the time. Cashiers were identified as the workers employing the cash register during the transaction process. Cashiers may also produce goods from behind the counter to give to customers after the transaction is complete. Fifty-four cashiers were observed altogether, including 38 females (71.4%) and 16 males between the estimated ages of 16 to 65 years old. All interviewees and forum commenters were cashiers. During observations, customers were identified as the people ordering and/or purchasing goods and services through the cashier. There were 384 customers observed total including 197 females (51.3%) and 187 males estimated to be between the ages of six and 70 years old. All reviews were contributed by people in customer roles. Eighty-two respondents from the survey had cashier experience (67.2%) and 40 were customers without cashier experience.

**Methods**

Note: All research materials can be provided upon request.

**Participant & Field Observations**

This study included 117 recorded participant and field observation periods of interactions between customers and cashiers. These observations occurred over a total of 16 hours and 44 minutes. Participation observation entailed standing in line with other customers and purchasing goods from a cashier. Field observation occurred at seating areas within viewing and hearing distance of the cash register(s). Positive interactions were subjectively identified and included joking, lighthearted conversations, tipping, etc. Negative interactions included obvious irritability, aggression, etc.

**Interviews**

Two interviews were conducted during this study. Both interviews were semi-structured. A list of questions was provided but not strictly followed. The first interview was with the self-proclaimed “Gatorade Slinger” (GS), a 19-year-old female cashier. The interview took place on November 2, 2017 and was 29 minutes and 24 seconds long. The interview objective was to understand GS’s experiences, complaints, and pleasures working as a cashier. This interview led to an abundance of data which directed the evolution of this study toward more cashier-centered objectives.

The second interview was with “Happy Cash” (HC), a 22-year-old female cashier, and took place at the Library Café (Humboldt State University Campus, Arcata, CA). The interview took place on November 21, 2017 and was 26 minutes and 17 seconds long. The interview objectives were to explore the power struggles that occur when working as a cashier and how she handles customers who are taking advantage of her or expressing hostility. Again, an objective was to understand the positives and negatives of being a cashier.

**Artifact Analysis**

Ninety-six artifacts were analyzed. Artifacts consisted of memes, reviews and physical objects. Memes are pictures often accompanied by a short amount of words. They are typically humorous and prevalent on social media. Thus, memes are cultural artifacts which reflect modern means of communicating shared views. The memes in this study were mostly collected through Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit. Reviews of businesses were gathered on Yelp (a review website). Customers write reviews to express their opinions of businesses’ products, atmosphere and customer service. Many of the Yelp reviews in this study were taken from pages about observed workplaces. Physical objects which influence the nature of interactions between customers and cashiers were analyzed as well.

**Survey**

One survey was conducted which yielded 122 responses. The survey was distributed through public Facebook and Instagram posts. Most responses were from people younger than 26 years old living in California and Connecticut. The objective of the survey was to explore customers’ self-reported attitudes and behaviors with cashiers. The survey also aimed to understand customers’ expectations of cashiers.

**Mapping**

Seven maps were created to depict different businesses. The maps featured the areas of each business in which interactions occur between customers and cashiers. These maps included the line area, distribution of cash registers and cashiers’ spaces, food pick-up areas, and seating sections. Maps provided a visual representation onto which observation memories were projected.

**Literature Reviews**

Fifteen literature reviews were conducted. Literature included scholarly articles, informal articles, and forum reviews. Scholarly articles provided information from existing research which offered guidance for research pathways. Some articles offered statistical information about customer-cashier interactions. Informal forum boards provided information about cashiers’ experiences, complaints, and praises. Information about commonplace and unusual cashier experiences was also included.

**Findings**

***Main Finding 1:* Societal expectations and attitudes toward cashiers create a climate in which cashiers are dehumanized and vulnerable.**

Note: This finding does not imply that all customers treat cashiers poorly. Instead, this finding implies cashiers are at-risk for customers with negative intentions.

*Sub-finding 1.1: Cashiers are expected to maintain constant positivity and etiquette.*

While working, cashiers adopt a robotic ‘customer service persona’ separate from their normal personality. An ethnography on cashiers in France produced a set of rules for cashiers to follow when interacting with customers. These rules included “look at them with a smile” and use an “enthusiastic voice” (Bernard 2007). Furthermore, in response to an inquiry about norms for cashier behavior, Reddit forum commenters recommended “just smile and say uh-huh” and “appear like a friendly and enthusiastic person” (Reddit). These examples illustrate how cashiers are expected to sustain a constant mask of positivity. A meme including an image of a smiling person whose eyes look obviously unenthused is described as, “Pretending to be interested when a customer complains about something” (@Beth\_Otton; twitter). This meme expresses how cashiers are expected to smile and remain polite regardless of their potentially conflicting feelings. This expectation for cashiers to suppress their emotions for the sake of customers is dehumanizing and leads to a robotic customer service persona. This persona often displays itself through the ‘customer service voice.’ In a forum on this subject, over 300,000 people related to a post that said, “My customer service voice is actually a different person, like I don’t even know who that person is” (Female Thoughts). Thousands of people responded with related stories about their ‘customer service voices.’ One black woman expressed how she puts on her “most Caucasian tone” to make people respect her in the workplace (Female Thoughts). Essentially, cashiers are required to strip their identities and personalities to conform to marketplace standards when at work. This dehumanization effect is often overlooked and accepted, reinforced by society’s expectation of cashiers to remain positive, smiling, and polite.

*Sub-finding 1.2: Customers expect to be the center of attention when interacting with cashiers.*

During extended interactions, customers often exhibit entitlement to attention from workers. An observation of a women and a young child at Northtown Coffee (Arcata, CA) illustrated this sub-finding in a blatant manner. She walked up to a cashier and started asking about ratios of milk-tea-sugar-etc. The cashier answered her questions and then left because his shift ended. As soon as he left, the customer asked another cashier the same. At this point, the child was climbing on the tables and counters and through the windows. Meanwhile the woman continued talking to the cashier about the same topic. A new cashier came in at the same moment a new customer walked in. While the new customer was trying to order, the woman began asking the new cashier the same questions and followed him while he made the new customer a drink. The woman left with one small drink after 30 minutes of badgering the cashiers. This observation exemplified how this customer expressed entitlement to every cashiers’ attention for as long as she stood there, regardless of her purpose. If customers do not feel they’ve received a proper amount of attention, they may lash out by arguing, complaining to a manager, or posting a negative Yelp Review. For example, one man gave a business a two-star review, because the cashier “barely even wanted to go beyond just doing her job.” He elaborated that the cashier had given him his drink and returned to speaking with a co-worker (“Northtown Coffee”). He did not state what more he wanted from the cashier. This complaint implies the man felt the cashier should give him attention until *he decided* she could stop. This corresponds to the cashier rules “look attentive even as you work” and “continue looking them in the eye as you leave” (Bernard 2007). Essentially, customers expect cashiers to give them full attention no matter the situation.

*Sub-finding 1.3:* *Customers can be disrespectful, but cashiers should not reciprocate.*

Cashiers are at high risk of being reprimanded if they exhibit disrespect regardless of a customer’s attitude. This sub-finding was evident during an observation at Walmart (Eureka, CA) of a 20- to 30-year-old man. Supposedly, the cash register was malfunctioning and the transaction was proceeding slowly. Suddenly, the man started yelling at the cashier, aggressively making statements such as “You people do this s\*\*\* to me every time I come here!” Eventually, the customer slammed his fists on the counter and stomped out. During the entire interaction, the cashier remained polite and apologetic and continued attempting to troubleshoot the cash register. Interviewee Gatorade Slinger (GS) relayed a similar story about a woman whose husband lost his wallet. The woman called GS and screamed at her for a few minutes, claiming she stole the wallet. The woman also called the police on GS. GS remained quiet and tolerated the woman’s behavior. Shortly after, the wallet was found in the woman’s trash can. These stories illustrate how customers can yell and swear at cashiers, even blaming them personally for matters out of their control. Meanwhile, cashiers could not reciprocate the same behavior without being reprimanded or fired. This correlates to a “Sucky Customer Archetype” on Customers Suck!: “Mean Bastard: literally just gets his jollies making physically small women and new staff cry” (“A canonical list of SCs”). This archetype was one of the most popular ones on the thread, indicating how many cashiers have dealt with this sort of behavior from customers. There are evidently less rules for customer behavior than there are for cashiers. Customers can treat cashiers most any way they want, while cashiers are restricted by workplace expectations.

*Sub-finding 1.4: Customers can take advantage of cashiers being ‘stuck’ in the workplace.*

Cashiers are often required to remain in, or very close to, the business’s storefront throughout their shifts. In each interview, Gatorade Slinger (GS) and Happy Cash (HC) shared experiences when customers come in regularly to be “used as a therapist.” HC elaborated about a woman who came into her workplace several times a day to complain to her about prices and vent for lengthy periods of time about how she needs to support her gambling addiction. GS said, “I have lots of regular customers who come in and tell me everything about themselves.” She expressed feeling as if these conversations were entirely one-sided. This concept is repeated in the Sucky Customers (SC) Archetype: “Mr. Freaky Lonelyheart: a lonely person who insists on hanging in the store and engaging you in conversation about his weird obsession” (“A canonical list of SCs”). Multiple memes illustrate the same concept of customers telling cashiers their “life stories,” regardless of what cashiers want (@DanielRadiance; twitter). These examples support the claim that customers can utilize the cashier’s restricted position at work to appease their own emotional needs. This is also evident when customers relentlessly participate in unreciprocated flirtation, such as with the “Desperate for a Date” SC Archetype who “uses [cashiers] as their personal dating service” (“A canonical list of SCs”). These customers take advantage of the vulnerability that is exacerbated by workplace restrictions. While cashiers could theoretically tell customers to leave, they often feel they cannot do so without retaliation from the customer and/or feelings of guilt. This phenomenon commonly results in cashiers tolerating customers’ unreciprocated approaches. Lastly, in some situations, customers steal by taking advantage of cashiers having to remain at the cash register. This is especially prevalent when there is only one cashier working. For example, in an observation at Lighthouse Plaza, the female cashier was the sole worker during rush hour. While she was completing transactions with customers, a boy (approximately 9 to 12 years old) came up to the counter, took her tips and ran out the door. Afterwards, she reported feeling defeated and as if she could do nothing, because she had other customers to attend to. These different ways in which cashiers are taken advantage of exhibit how cashiers are vulnerable when restricted by workplace expectations.

*Sub-finding 1.5: People who have cashier experience have friendlier interactions when they are customers.*

Once people have shared experience and the potential feeling of fellowship with cashiers, the dehumanizing effect during transactions with cashiers is sometimes eliminated. Sixteen survey respondents elaborated on how they tip cashiers more due to their own cashier experience. Correspondingly, 80% survey respondents who tip “Always” and 82.4% respondents who tip “Often” had cashier experience. Some respondents explained how they began tipping after personally experiencing how important and appreciated tips are. These people experienced a shift from distancing themselves from cashiers’ humanity to relating to them on a more personal level which ultimately affected their behaviors. In contrast, many respondents without cashier experience do not think cashiers deserve tips, making statements such as “I do not they dont do anything besides ring me up”. This statement overlooks the often-long hours and mentally strenuous conditions of being a cashier which are mentioned in other sub-findings. HC elaborated on her attempts to “either be neutral, or make [the cashier’s] day, or make it not as bad as another person did.” GS also does not project her negative emotions on cashiers, because she “knows what it’s like to be in that setting.” These quotes and previous examples illustrate how customers with cashier experience have shared experience and, thus, a more empathetic perspective when interacting with cashiers, leading to more personable interactions.

***Main Finding 2:* Interactions are more positive and personable for both customers and cashiers at local establishments compared to commercial enterprises.**

Note: ‘Local establishments’ and ‘commercial enterprises’ are defined according to the distinctions described in the “Field Sites” section.

*Sub-finding 2.1: Local establishments exhibit environments with more positive interactions for customers and cashiers.*

Many local establishments provide welcoming environments which improve the overall energy of interactions. HC elaborated on why she likes her cashier job at a local establishment. One of the traits she appreciates is that she can form a connection with her supervisor, co-workers, and customers. She enjoys being able to “make that connection with customers” and has made friends by doing so. Due to her sound repertoire with her supervisors, HC feels confident standing up to rude customers. She explained this was never a possibility when she worked at Kohl’s (a commercial enterprise), as the managers operated under the “The customer is always right rule.” HC’s example illustrates how local establishments foster a more “laid-back” and comfortable work environment which benefits everyone. One man gave a five-star Yelp review to Northtown Coffee because of his “great conversations with nearly ever [cashier],” suggesting the “atmosphere must do them well.” This supports the idea that local establishments offer enjoyable atmospheres, leading to pleased cashiers *and* customers (“Northtown Coffee”). Part of local establishments’ appealing atmosphere often lies in physical aspects of the environment. For example, Northtown Coffee has warm colors, regularly rotating local artwork, free Wi-Fi, comfortable seating areas, and windows adding natural light. Furthermore, Northtown Coffee stages many events, including open mic nights and music performances, which foster a more communal and fun environment. Also, the cashiers have an area to walk around, make food and drinks, and socialize. These appealing factors appear to contribute to two thirds of the interactions at Northtown Coffee involving friendly conversations and occasional joking. Overall, these factors found in local establishments create a more positive environment, leading to better experiences and interactions for cashiers and customers alike.

*Sub-finding 2.2: Commercial enterprises foster an unfit work environment which can lead to dull and/or negative interactions between customers and cashiers.*

Many aspects of commercial enterprises, including physical conditions and corporate standards, foster an environment that is inadequate for most positive interactions between customers and cashiers. In Walmart (Eureka, CA), 9% observations included customers having instances of irritability. Some of those customers became aggressive. Overall, 81.9% had no dialogue outside of what was necessary to complete the interaction. Neither irritability nor lack of dialogue foster positive experiences for cashiers or customers. This could explain why Eureka’s Walmart has a Yelp rating of two out of five stars (“Walmart”). Walmart (Eureka, CA) is representative of many commercial enterprises. The physical environment of commercial enterprises may also contribute to the pervasiveness of neutral-to-negative interactions. For example, Safeway stores have one employee at every cash register. The transactions are typically fast paced as many people shop at once. As a result, the cashiers rush and do not normally break out of the ‘customer service persona.’ There are no windows and only artificial lighting. On top of this, the colors are dull. Aesthetics change people’s perceptions, and these environmental factors (common in commercial enterprises) likely influence customers’ and cashiers’ experiences. Evidenced by low ratings, low or irritable moods, and dull atmospherics, commercial enterprises are not an ideal environment for positive interactions between customers and cashiers. In fact, features of commercial enterprises may *negatively* influence interactions.

**Conclusion**

**Future Research**

Multiple future research directions are relevant to this study. Firstly, the nature of interactions could be compared across demographics. Firstly, research could be conducted about how being a female, gender non-conforming, and/or transgender cashier (compared to a cisgender male) affects the cashier experience. This is a relevant topic as females and people who are not cisgender males are objectified, taken advantage of, and discriminated against on a regular basis. Research could also be conducted about racial influences on the treatment of cashiers. This is a similar topic as racism, another form of oppression, likely interacts with the restricted cashier position. Both research directions could be combined, thus, taking an intersectional approach to explore the cashier experiences of people of all different races and genders.

Another potential research direction is to explore how cashier and customer interactions differ in urban, rural, and suburban environments. Interviewees and survey respondents noted that the nature of interactions likely vary widely across different types of locations. In addition, studying customer-cashier interactions outside of the United States could provide a more global approach, leading to multicultural findings.

**Limitations**

Some research barriers existed in this study. Firstly, hearing and recording interactions was occasionally difficult. Also, no funding was provided for this study which limited advertisement of survey and interview opportunities and the purchase of research materials and products at field sites. Another problem was that most of the data was about females. Males could have different experiences as cashiers and different attitudes about cashiers. In future research, a better effort should be made to exhibit more societally representative subject populations. This study also mainly focused on the cashier’s perspective. A wider point of view could be obtained if more data is gathered about people who are solely customers. Lastly, the large majority of survey respondents were under the age of 26 years old. In the future, an abundance of information for all age ranges should be gathered. Subsequently, ages and genders and attitudes in observations were assumed and, most often, not verified. Also, statistics could have been skewed if the same customers and cashiers were counted more than once in separate observational periods. However, short descriptions of each person was recorded in an effort to avoid this possible error. Overall, each shortcoming was compensated for as best as possible given the restraints of this research.

**Implications**

America is an extremely materialistic society. Interacting with cashiers is an activity most engage in to survive. This study adds to the currently small body of literature on such a commonplace activity for those in the developed world. This ethnography included the examination of the humanity at the core of transactions. The results exhibit the importance of paying attention to one’s own attitudes and behaviors toward workers. Cashiers are human, and attempting to look beyond their “customer service personas” is important to foster positive socialization and environments. This study provides an analysis of a commonly overlooked activity. Hopefully, the results will promote positive change through awareness of social attitudes and their implications.

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