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Postprint

This is the accepted version of a paper published in *British Journal of Management*. This paper has been peer-reviewed but does not include the final publisher proof-corrections or journal pagination.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Otterbring, T., Arsenovic, J., Samuelsson, P., Malodia, S., Dhir, A. (2024)
Going the Extra Mile, Now or After a While: The Impact of Employee Proactivity in
Retail Service Encounters on Customers' Shopping Responses
British Journal of Management, 35(3): 1425-1448
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8551.12765>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:oru:diva-120751>

Going the Extra Mile, Now or After a While: The Impact of Employee Proactivity in Retail Service Encounters on Customers' Shopping Responses

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Employee proactivity has been discussed as a key predictor of firm success and organizational performance. However, previous proactivity research has rarely focused on customers, and the few available proactivity studies from retail settings are either cross-sectional, solely based on subjective outcomes (e.g. customer satisfaction) or restricted to aggregated data of objective outcomes (e.g. profits per store). We investigate the causal effect of employee proactivity in retail service encounters on customers' actual purchase behaviour and satisfaction ratings at the fine-grained level of individual customers. By integrating theories on social perception with prior proactivity findings, we find that employee proactivity positively predicts customers' shopping responses. This finding extends from correlational to experimental designs across sample types and paradigms, is replicated in actual retail settings, and is mediated by customers' perceptions of employee warmth and competence. Furthermore, the effect generalizes across several focal outcomes, including behavioural variables (spending and purchase likelihood), and is moderated by the time to employee-initiated contact in a way that goes against customers' own beliefs. In sum, the present research quantifies the financial consequences of employee proactivity and indicates that in ordinary retail service encounters, high proactivity can compensate for delays, thus counteracting the aversive aspects of waiting.

Introduction

With the rapidly changing retail landscape, frontline employees have an increasingly important role to play in meeting the needs of demanding customers. One critical aspect of meeting such needs is employee proactivity, which is assumed to influence both individual needs and organizational performance (Crant, 2000; Payne and Holt, 2001; Walsh *et al.*, 2009).

Proactive employees are future-focused, action-oriented and change-oriented (Parker, Bindl and

Strauss, 2010; Tornau and Frese, 2013). More precisely, employee proactivity refers to self-initiated, anticipatory actions (Grant and Ashford, 2008; Li *et al.*, 2021), including behaviours such as taking charge (Morrison and Phelps, 1999; Patil and Lebel, 2019), showing personal initiative (Frese *et al.*, 1996; Griffin, Neal and Parker, 2007), making active contact with customers (Söderlund, 2018) and engaging in upward influence by, for example, complying with the 'customer is king' maxim and, hence, convincing customers to endorse and implement change (Grant, Gino and Hofmann, 2011). Moreover, proactivity involves making constructive suggestions aimed at improving a given situation (commonly referred to as *voice*), even when others might disagree (Van Dyne and LePine, 1998), and mak-

[Correction added on 9 October 2023, after first online publication: Two additional affiliations for the author Amandeep Dhir have been added in this version.]

ing active attempts to change things for the better in a way that goes beyond job requirements (Crant, 2000; Park *et al.*, 2022; Zhang, Law and Wang, 2021).

Employees who exhibit the above actions are said to be proactive or to engage in proactive work behaviour (Cai *et al.*, 2019; Parker and Collins, 2010), whereas those who do not exhibit said actions are commonly referred to as passive or reactive in the sense that they merely *react* to others' requests rather than initiating change-focused actions themselves (Grant, Gino and Hofmann, 2011; Griffin, Neal and Parker, 2007; Morrison, 2011).

Scholars have called for a construct clean-up in proactivity research (Tornau and Frese, 2013). Indeed, while many researchers conceptualize employee proactivity as a stable personality trait (Bateman and Crant, 1993; Crant, 1995), others treat it as specific behaviours linked to aspects such as personal initiative, taking charge and voice (Frese *et al.*, 1997; Morrison and Phelps, 1999; Van Dyne and LePine, 1998). The current research focuses on the latter approach for one primary reason. Meta-analytic work (Tornau and Frese, 2013) indicates that proactive employee behaviours predict work performance above and beyond personality traits, both generally and specifically for objective outcomes (e.g. sales performance), whereas the proactive personality concept does not. Therefore, the current work follows Tornau and Frese (2013) in concentrating on the behavioural indicators of employee proactivity.

Constructs related to employee proactivity, such as employee rapport-building and employee engagement, focus more on building connectedness and enjoyable experiences with customers (Gremier and Gwinner, 2008) or on showing commitment to one's organization (Saks, 2006). For example, customer–employee rapport is typically conceptualized as customers' perceptions of having an enjoyable interaction with a given employee, characterized by a personal connection (Biedenbach, Bengtsson and Wincent, 2011; Gremier and Gwinner, 2000). Similarly, employee engagement is often defined as the level of emotional and intellectual commitment that employees have to the organization and its values (Anitha, 2014; Saks, 2006), although scholars have long acknowledged the ambiguous nature of this construct (for reviews, see Saks and Gruman, 2014; Sun and Bunchapattanasakda, 2019). Importantly, an employee can both be engaged and establish rapport with customers without necessarily exhibiting proactivity, as most established definitions of employee engagement and employee rapport lack components that are deeply ingrained in employee proactivity. For example, even if an employee appears highly engaged, and customers perceive their interaction with the employee as enjoyable, it could still be that the employee has solely replied to questions posed by the customers rather than showing personal initiative and, accordingly, has simply *re-*

acted to requests (sometimes referred to as exhibiting core task proficiency; Martin, Liao and Campbell, 2013) instead of *proactively* initiating contact and providing useful suggestions (Parker and Collins, 2010; Patil and Lebel, 2019; Zhou *et al.*, 2022).

It is well established that employee proactivity is positively associated with organizational outcomes (Parker, Wang and Liao, 2019). However, prior proactivity research has taken a quite firm-focused perspective. In contrast, the aim of this research is to examine employee proactivity from a more customer-centric viewpoint by testing its influence on customers' buying responses and satisfaction levels. Such an investigation is important, as a recent review on proactivity has stressed the need to examine the impact of employee proactivity on customers, which to date has been a 'largely ignored social subject' (Cai *et al.*, 2019, p. 222), despite frontline employees' multiple service encounters with customers, particularly in retail and service settings.

Although previous studies have established a connection between employee proactivity and various profitability metrics (e.g. Grant, Gino and Hofmann, 2011), they have not shown the direct causal effect of proactivity on actual purchase behaviour at the fine-grained level of individual customers. Notably, most studies examining the proactivity–performance link, in which employee proactivity has been treated as a behavioural rather than a dispositional construct, have been cross-sectional and focused on subjective, third-person ratings of employees' performance rather than on objective performance metrics such as sales or business growth. Third-person ratings by supervisors and other actors suffer from the halo effect (Nisbett and Wilson, 1977), with ratings frequently clustered on a good–bad dichotomy without differentiation between distinct proactivity facets (Tornau and Frese, 2013). Therefore, such subjective ratings are prone to methodological issues. Moreover, despite the fact that a typical employee–customer encounter does not involve any obvious service failures or recovery situations (Grégoire and Mattila, 2021; Tax and Brown, 1998), few studies have illuminated the precise outcomes, processes and boundaries linked to employee proactivity under circumstances of ordinary interactions in the retail space. Therefore, from the perspective of 'mundane realism' (Berkowitz and Donnerstein, 1982) and in order to test the generalizability and external validity of former findings (Highhouse, 2009), it is relevant to examine whether and how different levels of employee proactivity in retail service encounters influence customers under common conditions, as proactive behaviour may reduce subsequent recovery-related actions (i.e. rather than *reacting* to service failures and customer complaints in recovery situations, *proactive* personnel may prevent such problems *before* they turn into complaints; Nazifi *et al.*, 2021).

Our research makes three central contributions. First, using a mixed-methods approach comprising structured interviews with customers upon store exit, a retail field study, controlled online experiments, and data from mystery shoppers, we demonstrate the downstream effects of employee proactivity on a series of variables linked to firm success. Importantly, our work distinguishes itself from previous studies that either rely solely on subjective outcomes, such as perceived service reliability, empathy and satisfaction, or are restricted to aggregated data of objective outcomes (e.g. profits per store). We complement such metrics with objective outcomes centred on customers' individual buying responses. Such variables are seldom considered in the strand of proactivity literature focused on retail service encounters between frontline employees and shoppers. In fact, the few studies that capture objective outcomes in retail contexts use only aggregated data (De Jong and De Ruyter, 2004; Grant, Gino and Hofmann, 2011), whereas the current research captures individual consumers' buying responses.

Second, we provide support for the psychological mechanisms behind our results by documenting that customers' perceptions of employee warmth and competence explain why higher employee proactivity positively influences customers' buying and satisfaction responses. Importantly, these universal facets of social perception have explanatory power beyond that of other potential confounds. Thus, we address calls for further research on the mechanisms mediating the link between employee proactivity and customer responses (Cai *et al.*, 2019; Söderlund, 2018).

Finally, we show that the time to employee-initiated contact (short vs. long) moderates the interplay between our studied constructs in a way that goes against customers' intuition. Specifically, our findings indicate that high employee proactivity can compensate for delays in customer service situations, thus allowing recovery from the aversive effects of waiting. In sum, our research quantifies the financial consequences of employee proactivity, leveraging actionable advice for managers regarding ways to boost organizational performance.

Conceptual background and hypotheses

Prior proactivity research

Decades of research have been devoted to understanding how managers can cultivate proactive employees (Belschak, Den Hartog and Fay, 2010; Frese and Fay, 2001; Parker, Williams and Turner, 2006), not least considering that employee proactivity has proven influential in predicting organizational performance on metrics ranging from firm goal achievement and reputation to profitability and service reliability (Baer and

Frese, 2003; Grant, Gino and Hofmann, 2011; Martin, Klimoski and Henderson, 2022). Employee proactivity is also powerful in strategic decision-making, which is essential in times of turbulence for swift and strategic changes (Grant and Parker, 2009; Lee *et al.*, 2019; Petrou, Demerouti and Schaufeli, 2018; Strauss, Griffin and Rafferty, 2009).

In retail research, proactive behaviour has been conceptualized as employees initiating face-to-face contact with customers on the floor of the store (Söderlund, 2018). It also includes aspects such as exhibiting a self-starting style, being active, showing personal initiative, and taking charge of a situation (Grant, Gino and Hofmann, 2011; Li *et al.*, 2021; Parker, Wang and Liao, 2019). Interestingly, despite the wide range of favourable firm-related consequences linked to employee proactivity (Kim, Cable and Kim, 2005; Rank *et al.*, 2007; Strauss, Griffin and Rafferty, 2009), this construct has rarely been studied under more mundane conditions, such as regular employee–customer interactions in retail stores (Cai *et al.*, 2019; Söderlund, 2018). This may seem startling, as scholars have long assumed that proactive employees have a significant positive impact on several focal metrics, including customer loyalty, sales performance and other short- and long-term profitability factors (Mallin, Ragland and Finkle, 2014; Nguyen *et al.*, 2017; Pitt, Ewing and Berthon, 2002; Van der Borgh, de Jong and Nijssen, 2017).

We conducted a systematic literature search for studies that focused explicitly on employee proactivity, with the aim of synthesizing the existing research from retail and service settings; for details regarding the inclusion and exclusion criteria, see Appendix 1(A1). Despite the large number of initial search hits (302 publications), we only identified five papers that met our inclusion criteria (see Table 1).

Three of these papers (Martin, Klimoski and Henderson, 2022; Raub and Liao, 2012; Söderlund, 2018) focused solely on subjective outcomes linked to different facets of customer satisfaction, perceived empathy and service reliability, with employee proactivity being positively associated with these variables. The remaining two papers (De Jong and De Ruyter, 2004; Grant, Gino and Hofmann, 2011) combined aggregated data of objective outcomes (weekly store profits, service revenues and the number of services purchased by customers) with certain subjective outcomes (loyalty intentions, service recovery satisfaction and perceptions of receptivity). These latter papers indicate that employee proactivity, under certain circumstances, is positively associated with store profits (Grant, Gino and Hofmann, 2011) and the number of services purchased by customers (De Jong and De Ruyter, 2004). Only two of the papers (Grant, Gino and Hofmann, 2011, Study 2; Söderlund, 2018, Study 2) used experimental manipulations of proactivity, with Söderlund (2018) represent-

Table 1. Literature on the link between employee proactivity and key customer outcomes from retail and service settings

| Paper | Conceptualization of employee proactivity | Sample(s) ^a | Lab study/ Survey | Field Exp. ^b | Objective outcomes | Moderation ^c | Mediation ^d | Individual-level data ^e | Proactivity manipulated | Relevant findings |
|--------------------------------|--|--|----------------------|-------------------------|--|-------------------------|------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------|---|
| De Jong and De Ruyter (2004) | Detecting and correcting causes of concern, challenging existing routines and exhibiting behavioural initiative aimed at improving or changing the current work circumstances to prevent customer complaints | N = 61 | ✓ | | ✓ Number of services sold and service revenues | | | | | Proactive recovery behaviour by frontline employees predicts a higher share of customer rates (i.e. customers purchasing more services from frontline employees) but not service recovery satisfaction, loyalty intentions or service revenues. |
| Grant, Gino and Hofmann (2011) | Anticipatory actions that employees take to create change, including voice, taking charge and upward influence | N _{S1} = 57 N _{S2} = 56 | ✓ | | ✓ Weekly profits | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | Employee proactivity moderates the link between leader extraversion and group performance, such that proactive employees increase (decrease) group performance, including profits, when leaders score low (high) in extraversion. Employees' perceptions of leader receptivity mediate the moderating effect of employee proactivity on the link between leader extraversion and group performance. |

Table 1. (Continued)

| Paper | Conceptualization of employee proactivity | Sample(s) ^a | Lab study/ Survey | Field Exp. ^b | Objective outcomes | Moderation ^c | Mediation ^d | Individual-level data ^e | Proactivity manipulated | Relevant findings |
|---------------------------------------|--|--|----------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------|--|
| Martin, Klimoski and Henderson (2022) | Independent, future-oriented actions to change oneself or the environment, including thinking ahead to identify potential problems or opportunities and then taking the initiative to plan and act accordingly | N = 400 | ✓ | | | | | ✓ | | Employee proactivity predicts customers' perceptions of empathy and is a key variable in predicting service reliability, while also being positively associated with assurance. |
| Raub and Liao (2012) | Self-starting, long-term-oriented and forward-thinking approach to service delivery, including reliance on one's own initiative and doing the right thing without being told | N = 74 | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ | | | High degrees of initiative climate at the organizational level are positively and indirectly associated with customers' service quality satisfaction through the mediating role of proactive customer service performance. |
| Söderlund (2018) | Face-to-face contact initiated by employees in the store | N _{S1} = 739 N _{S2} = 187 | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | Employee proactivity has a positive impact on customer satisfaction. Employee effort and perceived employee performance serially mediate the link between employee proactivity and customer satisfaction. |

Table 1. (Continued)

| Paper | Conceptualization of employee proactivity | Sample(s) ^a | Lab study/ Survey | Field Exp. ^b | Objective outcomes | Moderation ^c | Mediation ^d | Individual-level data ^e | Proactivity manipulated | Relevant findings |
|----------------------|---|---|----------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------|---|
| The present research | Self-initiated, anticipatory actions, including taking charge, showing personal initiative, making active contact and making constructive suggestions aimed at changing things for the better | N _{S1A} = 3258 N _{S1B} = 189 N _{S2} = 189 N _{S3A} = 391 N _{S3B} = 375 N _{S4} = 501 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ Money spent and purchase likelihood | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | Employee proactivity is positively linked to customers' buying responses and satisfaction levels. Customers' perceptions of employee warmth and competence mediate the impact of employee proactivity on buying responses and customer satisfaction. Time to employee-initiated contact moderates the link between employee proactivity and perceived employee warmth and competence, with downstream effects on customer satisfaction. Contrary to consumer lay beliefs, high employee proactivity is particularly powerful under conditions of long (vs. short) time to contact. |

The literature originates from a Scopus title/abstract/keyword search on peer-reviewed journal papers published in English in the domains of 'Business, Management, and Accounting' and 'Psychology' (as of June 14, 2023); see Appendix 1 for details. The search procedure resulted in a total of 302 papers that were independently screened for suitability by the first three authors. Papers based on quantitative empirical evidence with a focus on employee–customer interactions in retail or service settings were selected for inclusion, resulting in a final sample of five empirical papers. Interrater reliability, as assessed by Fleiss' kappa, was indicative of substantial or excellent agreement between raters (Cicchetti, 1994), with the obtained coefficient of $\kappa = 0.75$ being comparable with or higher than that in other related studies from marketing and management using the same metric (e.g. Daouk-Oyry, Sahakian and van de Vijver, 2021; Malodia, Gupta and Jaiswal, 2020). Disagreements were resolved through discussion between the first three authors.

^a Denotes final sample sizes used in the analyses for customer outcomes in the main studies, excluding pretests and pilot studies. The studies based on aggregated data had the following individual sample characteristics: 809 employees and 1724 customers aggregated across 61 service teams (De Jong and De Ruyter, 2004); 57 store leaders and 374 employees aggregated across 57 pizza restaurants in Study 1 and 163 college students aggregated across 56 groups in Study 2 (Grant, Gino and Hofmann, 2011); and 900 matched employee–supervisor questionnaires aggregated across 74 hotel establishments in Raub and Liao (2012). The study by Martin relied on 142 manager–service provider pairs in addition to the 400 customers.

^b Denotes field experiments or quasi-experimental field studies.

^c Denotes hypothesized and empirically validated moderation.

^d Denotes hypothesized and empirically validated mediation.

^e Denotes cases in which the statistical analyses were based on individual-level data.

ing the only field experiment on employee proactivity. However, neither of these experiments included objective outcomes linked to sales performance or purchase behaviour.

In sum, prior retail-related work has not examined behavioural outcomes at the level of individual customers and has rarely relied on experimental manipulations of employee proactivity. Such knowledge gaps make organizational decision-making more challenging, as it is difficult for managers to confidently conclude when, why and under what circumstances having proactive employees will causally translate to profitability and improved firm performance.

The present work captures objective outcomes using data from individual customers, documents theoretically derived mechanisms explaining why employee proactivity affects both buying responses and customer satisfaction, and establishes a managerially relevant moderator. Additionally, while we present a series of experiments, including a field experiment, as evidence of the causal nature and ecological validity of our proactivity findings, such experimental investigations are rare in the retail-related proactivity literature.

Proactivity effects on buying responses and customer satisfaction

Employee proactivity has previously been studied under suboptimal conditions, typically in the context of service or product failures and various recovery-related circumstances (Miller, Craighead and Karwan, 2000; Smith, Bolton and Wagner, 1999), including critical incidents at the ‘moment of truth’ (Wels-Lips, van der Ven and Pieters, 1998). Such work conceptualizes employee proactivity as a form of behavioural initiative that increases, for example, the number of services a customer purchases from an employee under critical conditions (De Jong and De Ruyter, 2004).

There are also indications that employee proactivity matters to customers outside of critical incidents, such as those following service failures and recovery situations (Söderlund, 2018). Accordingly, we posit that proactivity should be equally important under normal conditions, where there is no obvious distress or discomfort to the customer. We base this reasoning on the anticipatory and action-oriented aspects of proactivity, with proactive employees more effectively identifying customer needs and preferences before unmet needs are transformed into problems (Griffin, Neal and Parker, 2007; Parker, Bindl and Strauss, 2010). Indeed, employees who show initiative and other acts of proactivity have been found to positively influence customer satisfaction (Raub and Liao, 2012; Söderlund, 2018) and service performance (Rank *et al.*, 2007; Schneider, White and Paul, 1998) as well as weekly store profits (Grant, Gino and Hofmann, 2011) and other objec-

tive outcomes (Tornau and Frese, 2013). Therefore, as proactive employees are solution-oriented in their interactions with customers and typically provide tailored recommendations (De Jong and De Ruyter, 2004; Morrison and Phelps, 1999), employee proactivity should reasonably be positively associated with customers’ buying responses and satisfaction levels, even in the absence of service failures and recovery situations; see hypotheses 1–2 (H1–2) in Table 2.

Mediation through employee warmth and competence

In service encounters between a customer and an employee behaving proactively, it is plausible that proactive behaviours will influence the customer’s perceptions of employee warmth and competence, considering that anticipatory actions aimed at initiating positive change should be interpreted as the employee being interested in addressing the customer’s unique needs and providing high-quality service (Martin, Klimoski and Henderson, 2022). According to the stereotype content model (Cuddy, Fiske and Glick, 2008; Fiske *et al.*, 2002), warmth and competence represent two fundamental dimensions of social perception, with warmth comprising friendliness, kindness and helpfulness (Abele *et al.*, 2008; Fiske, 2018) and competence consisting mainly of characteristics linked to skills, assertiveness and ability aspects (Fiske, Cuddy and Glick, 2007; Judd *et al.*, 2005).

Proactivity covers a range of actions related to warmth and competence, from taking charge and making suitable suggestions to showing personal initiative and meeting customers’ unique needs (Crant, 2000; Frese *et al.*, 1996; Morrison and Phelps, 1999). First, customers should perceive proactive employees as more competent, as these employees behave in ways that convey authority and expertise, such as engaging in anticipatory actions, having a self-starting style and taking charge of the situation while actively seeking to achieve constructive change (Grant and Ashford, 2008; Park *et al.*, 2022; Zhang, Law and Wang, 2021). Second, proactive employees should be perceived as warmer owing to their interpersonal orientation, characterized by showing personal initiative and having the customer’s best interests at heart (Griffin, Neal and Parker, 2007; Parker, Williams and Turner, 2006; Patil and Lebel, 2019).

Given this, we posit that employees who behave proactively should be more favourably evaluated in terms of their perceived warmth and competence (Clegg and Spencer, 2007; Grant and Parker, 2009). Moreover, warmth and competence are antecedents of customer satisfaction (Bolton and Mattila, 2015; Gao and Mattila, 2014) and customers’ buying responses (Aaker, Vohs and Mogilner, 2010; Wang *et al.*, 2016), implying that the effects of employee proactivity on customers’

Table 2. Summary of research hypotheses.

| Hypothesis no. |
|--|
| H1: High (vs. low) employee proactivity positively influences customers' buying responses. |
| H2: High (vs. low) employee proactivity positively influences customer satisfaction. |
| H3: Customers' perceptions of a) employee warmth and b) employee competence mediate the link between employee proactivity and customers' buying responses. |
| H4: Customers' perceptions of a) employee warmth and b) employee competence mediate the link between employee proactivity and customer satisfaction. |
| H5: Time to employee-initiated contact moderates the impact of employee proactivity on a) employee warmth and b) employee competence, with downstream effects on customer satisfaction, such that high (vs. low) employee proactivity has a more pronounced positive impact on customers' perceptions of employee warmth and competence under conditions of long (vs. short) time to contact. |

buying responses and satisfaction levels should be mediated by customers' perceptions of employee warmth and competence; see H3a–4b in Table 2.

Moderation through time to employee-initiated contact

One variable that may partially determine the effectiveness of employee proactivity is the time it takes for an employee to initiate contact with a customer. Minimizing the time to contact is crucial for retailers' financial success; this temporal aspect plays an important role in shaping customer satisfaction and influencing sales effectiveness (Dahm *et al.*, 2018; Katz and Larson and Larson, 1991; Taylor, 1994). Longer waiting times are typically seen as service failures (Baker and Cameron, 1996) and can result in considerable reputational costs for retailers (Arsenovic *et al.*, 2023). For example, a large-scale field study found that waiting time was associated with customers being more inclined to abstain from purchasing and less inclined to return to the shopping setting in a timely manner, with total revenues dropping an estimated 15% compared with optimal conditions (De Vries, Roy and De Koster, 2018). Thus, while an extended waiting time can signal quality in certain product and service contexts (Giebelhausen, Robinson and Cronin, 2011), it is often the core reason for customers choosing competing offerings (Kumar, 2005): 75% of retailers report losing customers owing to waiting issues (TimeTrade, 2013). Accordingly, the 'need for speed' is a major concern for retail firms (KPMG Global Retail Trends, 2018), and most retailers fear that customers will only wait for about 5 minutes before leaving a store (TimeTrade, 2013).

However, it can be problematic for employees to always offer timely service, particularly as workforce capacity limitations are a reality for many retailers (Otterbring and Lu, 2018). Employees are often occupied with serving other customers, taking calls or sorting products, and may be unable to initiate contact and behave proactively immediately upon a customer entering the store. Consequently, much research has been devoted to identifying factors that can distract customers from the impediment of waiting (Baker and Cameron, 1996; Gre-

wal *et al.*, 2003; Hui and Tse, 1996). Some studies suggest that proactive behaviours can serve this purpose. Indeed, employees' contact skills are paramount in predicting how they are perceived by the customers with whom they interact (Bitran and Hoech, 1990).

If customers wait for a long (vs. short) time but eventually manage to get into contact with an employee, we posit that proactivity should be more influential in guiding the customers' subsequent judgements, not only regarding the employee in terms of warmth and competence inferences, but also with respect to their own satisfaction levels. Thus, although longer waiting times are generally perceived negatively by customers (Baker and Cameron, 1996; De Vries, Roy and De Koster, 2018; Taylor, 1994), the difference between interacting with a more (vs. less) proactive employee should arguably be particularly pronounced if customers have waited for a longer (vs. shorter) time before the beginning of a service encounter. Stated differently, customers who get hold of an employee immediately following their store entry are likely to use the short waiting time more than the employee's precise behaviour as a way to draw inferences about the employee and their own satisfaction levels. In contrast, customers who have waited for a long time but are finally approached by a more (vs. less) proactive employee should be increasingly inclined to use the employee's level of proactivity to decide whether it can compensate for the waiting. Thus, we predict that employee proactivity after a delay should counteract negative waiting-related effects, resulting in more favourable perceptions of employee warmth and competence and, in turn, in more satisfied customers (Sarel and Marmorstein, 1998); see H5a–b in Table 2 and Figure 1.

Studies 1A–B: Measured employee proactivity in the field

Studies 1A–B test our initial hypothesis that higher levels of employee proactivity would be positively associated with customers' buying responses (H1) by means of spending. Further, Study 1B documents the unique

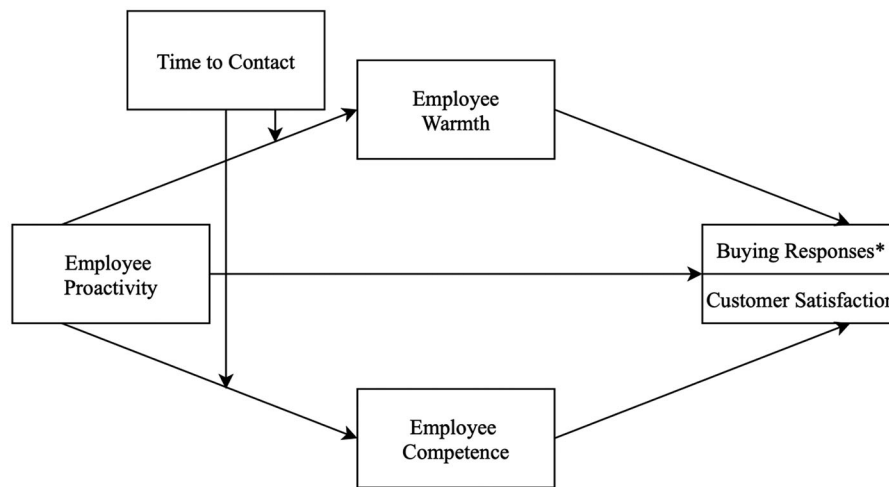


Figure 1. Conceptual model (* Denotes Consumer Spending and Purchase Likelihood)

explanatory power of employee proactivity in shaping customers' buying responses above and beyond that of related constructs, such as employee rapport and employee engagement. Therefore, in Study 1B, we capture these related constructs in addition to employee proactivity.

We collaborated with a Swedish retail consultancy agency to obtain interview data from customers about to exit various retail stores. Such sampling procedures are common in the retail literature (e.g. Söderlund, 2018; Sweeney, Soutar and Johnson, 1999). Our final sample in Study 1A consisted of 3258 store visits in which customers provided complete data on all our key measures. In Study 1B, our final sample consisted of responses from 189 customers who indicated that they had had a service encounter with an employee in a home electronics and telecommunications context; see Appendix 1–2 for details.

Upon exiting the store, customers indicated how much money they had spent in the store, if applicable, and replied to four proactivity measures; see Table 3 for information about key measures, scale formats, reliabilities and scale references. To increase rigour and control and to demonstrate the convergent validity of our proactivity construct, Study 1B also included four established items of employee rapport from Gremler and Gwinner (2000) and three employee engagement items adapted from Thomas (2007). Across studies, we examined the link between employee proactivity and consumer spending, even when employee rapport and employee engagement were accounted for in the same model (Study 1B).

Results and discussion

In Study 1A, there was a positive correlation between employee proactivity and consumer spending ($r = 0.23$,



Figure 2. Number of proactive employee behaviours and consumer spending. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Spending expressed in Euros (€)

$p < 0.001$). Supporting H1, customers who indicated that the employee had displayed higher (vs. lower) levels of proactivity spent more money. Separate analyses for each proactivity measure viewed in isolation consistently revealed that customers spent significantly more money if they indicated that the employee had exhibited the given behaviour. Interestingly, moderate employee proactivity (i.e. one to two proactive behaviours) had no greater effect on spending than the complete absence of proactivity; see Figure 2. However, high proactivity (i.e. three to four proactive behaviours) was associated with a considerable increase in spending, especially when all four proactive behaviours were displayed.

In Study 1B, employee proactivity was strongly correlated with employee rapport ($r = 0.56$, $p < 0.001$) and employee engagement ($r = 0.63$, $p < 0.001$). The strength of these correlations indicates that employee proactivity is related to, but qualitatively different from, these other employee-related factors, thus demonstrating the convergent validity of our focal construct. Importantly, our multiple linear regression with employee

Table 3. Key measures, response formats, and reliability coefficients across studies

| Construct | Items | Response format | Reliability |
|---|---|--|-----------------|
| Study 1A Employee proactivity (author-constructed but congruent with Frese <i>et al.</i> , 1996; Morrison and Phelps, 1999; Parker, Williams and Turner, 2006; Söderlund, 2018) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Did the employee make active contact with you? - Did you get support or advice from the employee? - Were you offered an opportunity to test the product suggested by the employee? - Did the employee find the right solution for you? - How much money did you spend in the store? | Binary: Yes/No | $\alpha = 0.77$ |
| Spending (adapted from Otterbring <i>et al.</i> , 2018) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The employee made active contact with me - The employee provided support or advice - The employee offered me an opportunity to test a product. - The employee found the right solution for me - In thinking about my relationship with this person, I enjoyed interacting with this employee - This employee related well to me. - This employee created a feeling of 'warmth' in our relationship - I was comfortable interacting with this employee - The employee was enthusiastic about providing high-quality service - The employee conveyed a form of personal pride in his/her job - The employee was ready to put heart and soul into his/her work - How much money did you spend in the store? | Free response format | N/A |
| Study 1B Employee proactivity (author-constructed but congruent with Frese <i>et al.</i> , 1996; Morrison and Phelps, 1999; Parker, Williams and Turner, 2006; Söderlund, 2018) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The employee made active contact with me - The employee provided support or advice - The employee offered me an opportunity to test a product. - The employee found the right solution for me - In thinking about my relationship with this person, I enjoyed interacting with this employee - This employee related well to me. - This employee created a feeling of 'warmth' in our relationship - I was comfortable interacting with this employee - The employee was enthusiastic about providing high-quality service - The employee conveyed a form of personal pride in his/her job - The employee was ready to put heart and soul into his/her work - How much money did you spend in the store? | 1 = Strongly disagree; 9 = Strongly agree | $\alpha = 0.80$ |
| Employee rapport (adapted from Gremler and Gwinner, 2000) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In thinking about my relationship with this person, I enjoyed interacting with this employee - This employee related well to me. - This employee created a feeling of 'warmth' in our relationship - I was comfortable interacting with this employee - The employee was enthusiastic about providing high-quality service - The employee conveyed a form of personal pride in his/her job - The employee was ready to put heart and soul into his/her work - How much money did you spend in the store? | 1 = Strongly disagree; 9 = Strongly agree | $\alpha = 0.96$ |
| Employee engagement (adapted from Thomas, 2007) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The employee was enthusiastic about providing high-quality service - The employee conveyed a form of personal pride in his/her job - The employee was ready to put heart and soul into his/her work - How much money did you spend in the store? | 1 = Strongly disagree; 9 = Strongly agree | $\alpha = 0.95$ |
| Spending (adapted from Otterbring <i>et al.</i> , 2018) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To what extent did you perceive the employees in the store as proactive? - How much money did you spend in the store? Very dissatisfied – Very satisfied | Free response format | N/A |
| Study 2 Employee proactivity (manipulated; author-constructed) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To what extent did you perceive the employees in the store as proactive? - How much money did you spend in the store? Very dissatisfied – Very satisfied | 1 = Not at all; 7 = Very much (manipulation check) | N/A |
| Spending* (adapted from Otterbring <i>et al.</i> , 2018) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How much money did you spend in the store? Very dissatisfied – Very satisfied | Free response format | N/A |
| Customer satisfaction (adapted from Oliver and Bearden, 1983) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How much money did you spend in the store? Very dissatisfied – Very satisfied | 7-point semantic differentials (1 to 7) | N/A |

Table 3. (Continued)

| Construct | Items | Response format | Reliability |
|---|--|--|-----------------|
| Need for help (adapted from Grandey, Goldberg and Pugh, 2011) *Purchase likelihood inferred through spending Study 3A | Did you need help in the store today? | Binary: Yes/No | N/A |
| Employee proactivity (manipulated; author-constructed) | - To what extent did you perceive the employee in the store as proactive? | 1 = Not at all; 7 = Very much (manipulation check) | N/A |
| Employee warmth (adapted from Söderlund, 2020) | Cold – Warm Unfriendly – Friendly Impolite – Polite | 7-point semantic differentials (1 to 7) | $\alpha = 0.93$ |
| Employee competence (adapted from Söderlund, 2020) | Incompetent – Competent Unprofessional – Professional Inexperienced – Experienced | 7-point semantic differentials (1 to 7) | $\alpha = 0.87$ |
| Customer satisfaction (adapted from Wirtz and Lee, 2003) | Very dissatisfied – Very satisfied Unfavourable – Favourable Miserable – Contented Uncomfortable – Comfortable Terrible – Delighted | 7-point semantic differentials (1 to 7) | $\alpha = 0.89$ |
| Employee rapport (adapted from Gremler and Gwinner, 2000) | - In thinking about my relationship with this person, I enjoyed interacting with this employee - This employee related well to me. - This employee created a feeling of 'warmth' in our relationship. - I was comfortable interacting with this employee | 1 = Strongly disagree; 9 = Strongly agree | $\alpha = 0.92$ |
| Employee engagement (adapted from Thomas, 2007) | - The employee was enthusiastic about providing high-quality service - The employee conveyed a form of personal pride in his/her job - The employee was ready to put heart and soul into his/her work | 1 = Strongly disagree; 9 = Strongly agree | $\alpha = 0.94$ |
| Purchase likelihood (adapted from Otterbring, Wu and Kristensson, 2021) Study 3B | How likely are you to make a purchase? | 1 = Not at all; 7 = Very likely | N/A |
| Employee proactivity (manipulated; adapted from Frese <i>et al.</i> , 1996; Grant, Gino and Hofmann, 2011; Morrison and Phelps, 1999; Söderlund, 2018; Van Dyne and LePine, 1998) | - The employee shows personal initiative - The employee gives useful suggestions - The employee takes charge of the situation - The employee makes active attempts to convince customers to endorse and implement change - The employee initiates contact with customers | 1 = Not at all; 7 = Very much (manipulation check) | $\alpha = 0.96$ |
| Employee warmth (adapted from Söderlund, 2020) | Cold – Warm Unfriendly – Friendly Impolite – Polite | 7-point semantic differentials (1 to 7) | $\alpha = 0.95$ |

Table 3. (Continued)

| Construct | Items | Response format | Reliability |
|---|---|--|-----------------|
| Employee competence (adapted from Söderlund, 2020) | Incompetent – Competent Unprofessional – Professional Inexperienced – Experienced | 7-point semantic differentials (1 to 7) | $\alpha = 0.93$ |
| Customer satisfaction (adapted from Wirtz and Lee, 2003) | Very dissatisfied – Very satisfied Unfavourable – Favourable Miserable – Contented Uncomfortable – Comfortable Terrible – Delighted | 7-point semantic differentials (1 to 7) | $\alpha = 0.95$ |
| Employee rapport (adapted from Gremler and Gwinner, 2000) | – In thinking about my relationship with this person, I enjoy interacting with this employee – This employee creates a feeling of ‘warmth’ in our relationship – This employee relates well to me | 1 = Strongly disagree; 9 = Strongly agree | $\alpha = 0.96$ |
| Enjoyable interaction | – In thinking about my relationship, I have a harmonious relationship with this person – This employee has a good sense of humour – I am comfortable interacting with this employee – I feel like there is a ‘bond’ between this employee and myself – I look forward to seeing this person when I visit the store – I strongly care about this employee | | $\alpha = 0.95$ |
| Personal connection | – This person has taken a personal interest in me – I have a close relationship with this person – The employee was willing to really push himself/herself to reach challenging work goals | | $\alpha = 0.93$ |
| Employee engagement (adapted from Thomas, 2007) | – The employee was fully devoted in performing his/her job duties – The employee was effective in doing his/her job – The employee was enthusiastic about providing a high-quality service – The employee was willing to ‘go the extra mile’ in order to do his/her job well – The employee tries to constantly improve his/her job performance – The employee conveyed a form of personal pride in his/her job – The employee was determined to be complete and thorough in his/her job duties – The employee was ready to put heart and soul into his/her work | 1 = Strongly disagree; 9 = Strongly agree | $\alpha = 0.98$ |

Table 3. (Continued)

| Construct | Items | Response format | Reliability |
|--|---|---|-----------------|
| Study 4 Employee proactivity (author-constructed but congruent with Frese <i>et al.</i> , 1996; Morrison and Phelps, 1999; Parker, Williams and Turner, 2006; Söderlund, 2018) Employee warmth (adapted from Fiske, Cuddy and Glick, 2007; Halkias and Diamantopoulos, 2020) Employee competence (adapted from Fiske <i>et al.</i> , 2007; Halkias & Diamantopoulos, 2020) Customer satisfaction (adapted from Söderlund, 2016) Time to contact (author-constructed) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Did the employee make active contact with you? - Did you get support or advice from the employee? - Were you offered to test the product suggested by the employee? - Did the employee find the right solution for you? - To what extent did you perceive the employee constituting your primary in-store interaction as friendly? - To what extent did you perceive the employee constituting your primary in-store interaction as knowledgeable? - How satisfied are you with your store visit? <p>Less than 1 minute 1–2 minutes 2–3 minutes 3–4 minutes 4–5 minutes More than 5 minutes/I contacted an employee myself.</p> | Binary: Yes/No | $\alpha = 0.67$ |
| Employee gender | What was the gender of the employee constituting your primary in-store interaction? | Male/Female | N/A |
| Employee age | Which age category best describes the employee constituting your primary in-store interaction? | 18–20 years; 21–29 years; 30–49 years; 50 years and above | N/A |
| Employee height | How would you describe the employee in terms of appearance and physical attributes (e.g. height, hair style, hair colour, beard, uniform, name tag, etc.)? | Free response format in cm | N/A |
| Employee acknowledgement | Were you acknowledged by an employee through a greeting, smile, nod or eye contact? | Binary: Yes/No | N/A |

proactivity, employee rapport, and employee engagement as predictors and spending as the outcome variable found that only employee proactivity ($\beta_{\text{proactivity}} = 0.18$, $t = 1.97$, $p = 0.05$) and not the other constructs ($\beta_{\text{rapport}} = 0.07$, $t = 0.43$, $p = 0.666$; $\beta_{\text{engagement}} = -0.01$, $t = -0.05$, $p = 0.962$) significantly predicted spending, providing additional support for H1 and demonstrating the unique predictive validity of employee proactivity. Further, analyses for each proactivity measure separately showed that customers consistently spent more money if they indicated that the employee had exhibited the given proactive behaviour; see Appendix 2 for supplementary results and Table 4 for means, standard deviations, and the zero-order correlations between our key variables.

Given the effect sizes obtained—which are practically relevant in the short run and even more consequential from a long-term perspective (Funder and Ozer, 2019)—our initial results pinpoint the relevance of employee proactivity for retail practice. However, the correlational nature of Studies 1A–B excludes explicit claims of causality. Further, whereas our initial studies demonstrate a robust positive link between employee proactivity and customers' buying responses, it is unclear whether such proactivity will have a positive impact on variables linked to long-term profitability. Therefore, in Study 2, employee proactivity is experimentally induced in a real retail store to document that our hypothesized effects apply to manipulated rather than measured proactivity with respect to both immediate buying responses (H1) and customer satisfaction (H2).

Study 2: Manipulated employee proactivity in the field

Study 2 had two main objectives. First, we aimed to replicate the findings from Studies 1A–B regarding customers' actual purchase behaviour (H1) while simultaneously extending our outcomes to customer satisfaction (H2). Second, we sought to manipulate employee proactivity in a retail setting to causally demonstrate the real-world impact of this focal construct on customers' purchase likelihood, spending and satisfaction ratings.

The final sample included 189 customers at a sporting goods store in Sweden, with missing values replaced by group means. Prior to the study, the employees working in the store were trained to behave in accordance with the proactivity manipulation. In the high-proactivity condition, they were told to take the initiative, do a little extra, and show genuine care for the customer. In the low-proactivity condition, employees were instructed to minimize all forms of communication that were not customer-initiated, meaning that no support would be offered unless explicitly requested (i.e. behaving *reactively* rather than *proactively*).

The study randomized the order of conditions over a series of comparable weekdays. On some days, *all* employees were instructed to behave proactively before lunch, followed by a break for lunch during which no data were collected. After lunch, *all* employees were requested to avoid acting proactively. On other days, the order of the proactivity conditions was reversed. As such, there was little to no possibility that the proactivity levels of employees differed dramatically within each data collection period.

Customers were subjected to the proactivity treatment by one of the employees and continued with their normal shopping or browsing, not knowing that a research study was taking place. The proactivity manipulation was consistently performed by the first employee with whom the customer had contact. When the customer was about to leave the store, one of the authors asked if they were willing to complete a survey about their overall in-store experience. Customers who agreed filled out a survey with items linked to customer satisfaction, consumer spending and an employee-proactivity manipulation check as well as a series of additional items; see Table 3 for key measures and Appendix 1 for further methodological details. All manipulations were effective across studies and were verified by our manipulation checks. For brevity, we report the manipulation checks and supplementary analyses in Appendix 2.

Results and discussion

We first tested whether our proactivity manipulation influenced customers' purchase likelihood. Supporting H1, a chi-square test yielded a significant association ($\chi^2(1, N = 189) = 10.83$, $p = 0.001$, $V = 0.24$), indicating that the proportion of customers who made a purchase was higher in the high- versus the low-proactivity condition. Similarly, further corroborating H1, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) on consumer spending also found that customers spent significantly more money in the high- versus low-proactivity condition ($F(1, 187) = 5.12$, $p = 0.025$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$). However, looking solely at customers who made a purchase, we found no difference in consumer spending between the high- and low-proactivity conditions ($F < 1$). Thus, those in the high-proactivity condition did not spend more money *per se* but were rather more inclined to make a purchase, with the larger proportion of customers making a purchase in this condition explaining the difference between groups in average consumer spending.

A similar analysis also showed a significant effect of employee proactivity on customer satisfaction ($F(1, 187) = 7.71$, $p = 0.006$, $\eta^2 = 0.04$). Consistent with H2, customers were more satisfied in the high- than in the low-proactivity condition; see Table 4 for means, standard deviations and purchase probabilities, and Appendix 2 for additional results.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations between key variables across Studies 1–4

| | Descriptive statistics | | | | | | | |
|-----------------------|------------------------|----------------|-----------------|---------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| | Means | SDs | Employee warmth | Employee competence | Customer satisfaction | Customer spending | Purchase likelihood | Time to contact |
| Study 1A | | | | | | | | |
| Employee proactivity | 2.66 | 1.39 | – | – | – | 0.23** | – | – |
| Study 1B | | | | | | | | |
| Employee proactivity | 5.04 | 2.49 | – | – | – | .21** | – | – |
| Study 2 | | | | | | | | |
| Employee proactivity | 4.15/5.29 | 2.14/1.90 | – | – | 0.20** | 0.16* | 0.24** | – |
| Customer satisfaction | 5.40/5.89 | 1.21/1.21 | – | – | 1 | 0.35** | 0.38** | – |
| Consumer spending | €14.53/€23.29 | 27.37/25.79 | – | – | – | 1 | 0.68** | – |
| Purchase likelihood | 39.8%/63.7% | 0.49/0.48 | – | – | – | – | 1 | – |
| Study 3A | | | | | | | | |
| Employee proactivity | 1.60/4.64 | 1.10/1.57 | 0.63** | 0.61** | 0.45** | – | 0.33** | – |
| Employee warmth | 3.58/4.77 | 0.74/0.71 | 1 | 0.83** | 0.71** | – | 0.57** | – |
| Employee competence | 3.77/4.90 | 0.76/0.74 | – | 1 | 0.69** | – | 0.58** | – |
| Customer satisfaction | 4.08/5.08 | 1.14/0.84 | – | – | 1 | – | 0.58** | – |
| Purchase likelihood | 3.81/4.75 | 1.34/1.35 | – | – | – | – | 1 | – |
| Study 3B | | | | | | | | |
| Employee proactivity | 2.19/4.38/5.13 | 1.16/1.36/1.37 | 0.62** | 0.60** | 0.47** | – | – | – |
| Employee warmth | 3.41/5.15/5.68 | 1.07/1.16/1.14 | 1 | 0.89** | 0.80** | – | – | – |
| Employee competence | 3.78/5.39/5.83 | 1.16/1.08/1.03 | – | 1 | 0.84** | – | – | – |
| Customer satisfaction | 4.30/5.36/5.74 | 1.34/1.04/0.88 | – | – | 1 | – | – | – |
| Study 4 | | | | | | | | |
| Employee proactivity | 2.37 | 1.33 | 0.40** | 0.46** | 0.52** | – | – | –0.53** |
| Employee warmth | 8.83 | 1.50 | 1 | 0.78** | 0.74** | – | – | –0.30** |
| Employee competence | 8.81 | 1.57 | – | 1 | 0.73** | – | – | –0.31** |
| Customer satisfaction | 8.08 | 1.57 | – | – | 1 | – | – | –0.39** |
| Time to contact | 3.50 | 2.13 | – | – | – | – | – | 1 |

Notes: Studies 1A–B and Study 4 measured employee proactivity and thus include grand means with corresponding standard deviations (SDs). Study 2 and Studies 3A–B manipulated employee proactivity, so means, SDs, and likelihood outputs represent each proactivity condition, including the manipulation checks. In the zero-order correlations for Study 2 and Studies 3A–B, employee proactivity represents the group factor.

* p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01.

The findings from Study 2 provide converging evidence that manipulated employee proactivity has downstream effects on consumer behaviour, with customers being significantly more inclined to purchase something under conditions of high (vs. low) proactivity. Apart from such positive short-term effects and the increase in average consumer spending, employee proactivity exerted a significant effect on customer satisfaction. However, to provide more compelling evidence for our theorizing, in Studies 3A–B we sought to demonstrate the mechanisms driving our results, while ruling out alternative accounts.

Studies 3A–B: Process evidence

In Studies 3A–B, we aimed to test the applicability and external validity of our theorizing by recruiting US participants rather than Scandinavian shoppers. Additionally, in Study 3A, we sought to show that high (vs. low) levels of employee proactivity would causally increase purchase likelihood and customer satisfaction (H1–2), with these effects mediated by our proposed psychological mechanisms of perceived employee warmth and competence (H3a–4b). Next, in Study 3B, we revisited the hypotheses linked to customer satisfaction (H4a–b) with an improved experimental design, while consistently ruling out the alternative accounts of employee engagement and employee rapport. To this end, we conducted two vignette-based experiments using a single-factor design, with proactivity as the between-subjects factor. Given the rarity of studies that have manipulated employee proactivity (for three notable exceptions, see Grant, Gino and Hofmann, 2011; Söderlund, 2018; Zhang, Law and Wang, 2021), we designed our own vignettes.

Study 3A included a final sample of 391 US participants from the crowdsourced online platform Prolific, whereas Study 3B included a final sample of 375 US participants from the same platform. Prolific data are characterized by superior quality on critical aspects related to attention, comprehension, honesty and reliability; in fact, recent research (Peer *et al.*, 2022) indicates that the average data quality on Prolific is considerably higher than that of many other crowdsourced platforms (e.g., Amazon Mechanical Turk).

In Study 3A, participants read one of two vignettes adapted from Söderlund (2016). Each vignette instructed participants to think of themselves as waiting for a friend in the city centre and deciding to enter a clothing store in the meantime. The vignette informs participants that, after passing the store entrance and checking out the jeans department, they walk to the jacket department and notice an employee who is putting jackets on hangers. Depending on the condition, the employee is described as either taking initiative by

approaching the participant to ask whether they need assistance (proactive) or as not taking the initiative and hence not approaching the participant to ask whether they need assistance (reactive). The vignette ends with the participant trying on a jacket that fits well but deciding not to buy it immediately owing to the meeting with their friend; see Appendix 1–2 for details.

To address different levels of proactivity and counter concerns with the scenarios used in Study 3A, Study 3B relied on the same vignettes but added a third one, which conveyed employee proactivity according to a more theoretically stringent description of this central construct; see Appendix 1–2 for details. Specifically, rather than just communicating that the employee took initiative by approaching participants to ask whether they needed assistance, which could possibly be interpreted as only moderate levels of employee proactivity linked to fulfilling one's job requirements and to meeting, rather than exceeding, customers' expectations, the third vignette emphasized that the employee sought active contact with participants in a way that signalled personal initiative, with the employee showing a willingness to change things for the better in a way that went beyond job requirements to improve the participants' unique situation. Accordingly, Study 3B manipulated employee proactivity through three levels (low, moderate, high), with the manipulation inspired by Grant, Gino and Hofmann (2011) in the sense that we sought to include several facets of employee proactivity in the 'high-proactivity' vignette (i.e. elements pertaining to active contact, personal initiative, voice, taking charge and upward influence). Once participants had read their assigned vignette, they responded to the measures summarized in Table 3.

Results and discussion

In Study 3A, a one-way ANOVA revealed that participants were significantly more likely to make a purchase in the high- versus low-proactivity condition ($F(1, 389) = 48.32, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.11$), providing additional support for H1. Further, consistent with H2, customer satisfaction ratings were significantly higher in the high- versus the low-proactivity condition ($F(1, 389) = 97.52, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.20$); see Table 4 for means and standard deviations. We then examined our mediation hypotheses—that the link between employee proactivity and consumer responses (i.e. purchase likelihood and customer satisfaction) would be indirect through customers' perceptions of employee warmth and competence (H3a–4b)—through two simple mediation analyses (PROCESS Model 4; Hayes, 2013). In the first analysis, employee proactivity (higher = 1; lower = 0) was the predictor, employee warmth and competence (continuous) served as two parallel mediators, and purchase likelihood (continuous) was the dependent variable. To

increase internal validity and hence isolate the effects of our focal constructs in the tested models, we also included our index variables of employee rapport and employee engagement as controls. Supporting H3a–b, the impact of employee proactivity on purchase likelihood was indirect through the mediating role of employee warmth (95% CI = [0.02, 0.29]) and competence (95% CI = [0.03, 0.26]). Moreover, consistent with H4a–b, a similar analysis on customer satisfaction revealed that the effect of employee proactivity on this latter construct was also indirect through employee warmth (95% CI = [0.12, 0.32]) and competence (95% CI = [0.06, 0.22]).

In Study 3B, a one-way ANOVA found a significant effect of the proactivity condition on customer satisfaction ($F(2, 372) = 56.52, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.23$). In further support of H2, follow-up planned contrasts revealed that the moderate- and high-proactivity conditions generated significantly higher satisfaction ratings than the low-proactivity condition ($t(372) = 10.26, p < 0.001$), and that the high-proactivity condition generated significantly higher satisfaction ratings than the moderate-proactivity condition ($t(372) = 2.72, p = 0.007$). Importantly, mediation analyses with employee proactivity as the predictor, employee warmth and competence (continuous) as parallel mediators, customer satisfaction (continuous) as the outcome variable, and employee engagement and rapport, respectively, as controls consistently revealed significant indirect effects of employee warmth and competence, both when comparing low and moderate employee proactivity, similar to Study 3A (95% CI_{warmth} = [0.04, 0.29]; 95% CI_{competence} = [0.21, 0.51]), and when comparing low and high proactivity (95% CI_{warmth} = [0.04, 0.16]; 95% CI_{competence} = [0.03, 0.20]). These results provide compelling evidence for H4a–b and, if anything, imply that the former findings from Study 3A should be a conservative estimate of the true effects, given that we previously compared moderate with low employee proactivity rather than high with low.

Study 4: Moderation through time to contact

Study 4 attempted to test our proposed moderator of the time from store entry to employee-initiated contact (H5a–b). That is, we investigated whether the presumed proactivity–customer satisfaction link through customers' perceptions of employee warmth and competence is contingent on employee-initiated time to contact, such that employee proactivity would be particularly powerful in shaping favourable perceptions of employee warmth and competence under conditions of long (vs. short) time to contact, thereby driving customer satisfaction. To achieve this main objective, we used responses from mystery shoppers, as accessed

through a service provider. Mystery shopper data have gained increased attention in recent research (Jacob, Schiffino and Biard, 2018; Porter and Heyman, 2018; Söderlund, 2016), primarily because such data have been shown to be as accurate as real customer data (Finn and Kayandé, 1999), at least for situations involving interactions with store employees (Finn, 2001; but see Blessing and Natter, 2019).

The final sample comprised data from 501 mystery shoppers who indicated having had a service encounter with an employee while visiting one of several possible retail stores. As such, all employee–customer interactions were the result of naturally occurring service encounters, meaning that no random assignment into high- or low-proactivity conditions was used. Instead, as in Studies 1A–B, we relied on measured employee proactivity.

Shoppers indicated their responses to items measuring employee proactivity, perceptions of employee warmth and competence, customer satisfaction, and the time it took for an employee to initiate contact inside the store; see Table 3 for details. The survey also contained a series of other predetermined measures that were selected by the service provider. These included the type of store visited (e.g. clothes, optics, electronics, shoes), whether the shoppers were acknowledged by an employee in connection with entering the store, free-text questions about the employee with whom the shoppers mainly interacted, and some employee-specific questions. Given that we could not choose the precise items that were included in the mystery shopper survey, we had to rely on those measures that most closely matched the ones used in our former studies.

To increase the internal validity of the study, the shoppers indicated the gender of the employee with whom they mainly interacted. Additionally, shoppers estimated the age of the employee as belonging to one of four predefined age categories, indicated whether they were acknowledged by an employee through a greeting, nod, smile, or eye contact (yes vs. no), and were encouraged to briefly describe the employee in terms of appearance and key characteristics; see Appendix 1–2 for details.

Employee acknowledgement was deemed to be an important control variable, considering previous research, which has documented that acknowledgement cues can influence customer satisfaction, spending and similar outcomes (e.g. Shaw Brown and Sulzer-Azaroff, 1994; Tsai and Huang, 2002). Moreover, given that a large number of shoppers described the employee in terms of height estimates ($N = 328; n_{\text{female}} = 126; n_{\text{male}} = 202$), we used employee height in centimetres as a proxy for physical dominance, considering former research in which the physical dominance of frontline employees was found to influence consumer responses (Otterbring *et al.*, 2018). The height estimates provided by the shoppers (M_{female}

= 167.39 cm, SD = 5.58, range: 150–180 cm; M_{male} = 179.44 cm, SD = 7.09, range: 160–198 cm) are very close to the sex-specific population means in the country where the study took place (women: 166 cm; men: 180 cm; Statistics Sweden, 2018), suggesting that these measures are valid. We used employee gender, age, height and acknowledgement as covariates in a series of robustness tests to ensure that our findings were not confounded by these factors, but the results did not change by dropping these controls.

Results and discussion

To examine whether the employee proactivity–customer satisfaction link would be mediated by employee warmth and competence and whether this presumed interplay would be moderated by the time to employee-initiated contact (H5a–b), we conducted a moderated mediation analysis using the PROCESS computational tool (Model 7). Employee proactivity (continuous) was the predictor, employee warmth and competence (continuous) served as two parallel mediators, time to contact (continuous) was the moderator, and customer satisfaction (continuous) acted as the dependent variable.

The impact of proactivity on employee warmth ($b = 0.09$, $t = 3.45$, $p < 0.001$) and employee competence ($b = 0.10$, $t = 4.05$, $p < 0.001$) was moderated by time to contact. Thus, the effect of employee proactivity on perceptions of employee warmth and competence substantially increased as a function of time to employee-initiated contact, such that shoppers perceived the employee constituting their primary in-store interaction as warmer and more competent if the employee was more rather than less proactive after a delay (vs. right away). Crucially, a bootstrap procedure that generated a sample size of 5000 showed that the indirect effects between employee proactivity and customer satisfaction through employee warmth and competence were substantially stronger (about three times as strong) for shoppers for whom the time to contact was long rather than short (i.e. 1 SD above rather than below the mean). Supporting H5a, the link between employee proactivity and customer satisfaction through employee warmth was materially stronger for shoppers whose time to contact was long (95% CI = [0.16, 0.35]) rather than short (95% CI = [0.03, 0.14]), and the index of moderated mediation was statistically significant (Index: 0.04, 95% CI = [0.02, 0.06]).

Similarly, and consistent with H5b, the link between employee proactivity and customer satisfaction through employee competence was much stronger for shoppers whose time to contact was long (95% CI = [0.13, 0.32]) rather than short (95% CI = [0.04, 0.13]), and the index of moderated mediation was again significant (Index: 0.03, 95% CI = [0.01, 0.05]). Controlling for em-

ployee acknowledgement, gender, age and height did not change the nature or significance of these results.

In sum, the findings from Study 4 replicate those from Studies 3A–B, but with employee proactivity measured rather than manipulated, again indicating that our findings apply regardless of whether proactivity is experimentally induced or subjectively stated. In addition, we find that the links between proactivity and customer satisfaction through perceptions of employee warmth and competence are moderated by time to employee-initiated contact.

Interestingly, we conducted an intuition study in which we manipulated time-to-contact under conditions of high employee proactivity; see Appendix 1 for methodological details and Appendix 2 for full results. The results revealed that participants ($N = 200$) thought retail shoppers would rate an employee as significantly warmer and more competent if the employee acted proactively within one minute rather than five minutes or more after the shoppers' store entry ($ps < 0.001$). This suggests that the findings from our main study—in which time to contact exerted the opposite effect on perceptions of employee warmth and competence under conditions of high employee proactivity—run contrary to customers' own intuition.

General discussion

In a series of six main studies with a total sample of more than 4900 customers, the current work investigated the impact of employee proactivity in retail service encounters on several key customer outcomes. Our two initial field studies found a moderate association between employee proactivity and customers' buying responses, with proactive personnel linked to customers spending more money, even after accounting for other related constructs. Next, we manipulated employee proactivity in a real retail store and found high (vs. low) employee proactivity to increase customers' purchase likelihood and satisfaction. These results were confirmed across two controlled online experiments, which also demonstrated that the psychological mechanisms responsible for the positive proactivity effects on purchase likelihood and satisfaction levels were customers' higher perceptions of employee warmth and competence. Finally, using a sample of mystery shoppers, we replicated the mediating roles of employee warmth and competence in the relationship between employee proactivity and customer satisfaction, with the time to employee-initiated contact (short vs. long) moderating this chain of events. Although the time to contact was negatively associated with customers' perceptions of employee warmth and competence in general, high employee proactivity had a particularly positive impact on these universal dimensions of social percep-

tion under conditions of long (vs. short) time to contact, thereby increasing customer satisfaction.

Theoretical and managerial implications

Our research makes three central contributions. First, our work reveals the powerful impact of employee proactivity both on commonly captured subjective outcomes (customer satisfaction) and on otherwise seldom studied objective metrics (purchase likelihood and spending) using individual-level data (per customer) rather than aggregated data (e.g. per store), with the latter applied in previous related research (De Jong and De Ruyter, 2004; Grant, Gino and Hofmann, 2011). Thus, our findings quantify the financial consequences of employee proactivity at the level of individual customers, with our field studies indicating that the effect size for the relationship between proactive personnel and consumer spending is approximately $r = 0.20$ across studies, irrespective of whether proactivity is subjectively stated (measured) or experimentally induced (manipulated). The magnitude of this effect size is comparable with meta-analytic estimates for the link between employee proactivity and objective performance metrics (e.g. company success and business growth) from contexts other than retailing (Tornau and Frese, 2013).

Interestingly, and despite these positive effects, we find that high (vs. low) employee proactivity does not increase spending *per se*. Rather, customers are more likely to make a purchase under conditions of high (vs. low) employee proactivity, thereby driving spending upwards. Customers' increased purchase likelihood under conditions of employee proactivity may reflect action-orientation more than signs of gratitude, considering that the reactive aspect of reciprocity is incongruent with the self-starting facets of proactivity (Cai *et al.*, 2019; Spitzmuller and Van Dyne, 2013). From a retail strategy perspective, this finding indicates that proactive employees can effectively increase customers' purchase probability in a way that creates positive spillover effects on spending, given that fewer customers abstain from making a purchase when employees act proactively. However, having proactive employees may not necessarily be beneficial if the goal is to make customers buy more expensive products. For retailers who mainly wish to increase the proportion of customers buying pricey items and prestigious products, other sales tactics—based more on dominance than on signs of proactivity—may be superior (Otterbring *et al.*, 2018).

As a second key contribution, we find that customers' perceptions of employee warmth and competence constitute the psychological mechanisms that explain why high (vs. low) employee proactivity produces positive effects on customers' buying responses and satisfaction levels. These findings are managerially relevant, considering that non-living entities such as machines, service

robots and artificial intelligence agents (the existence of which implies a reduction of the human workforce in the marketplace) can swiftly signal competence but cannot easily communicate warmth (Borau *et al.*, 2021; Chang and Kim, 2022), thus making the co-occurrence of warmth *and* competence a uniquely human characteristic (Bigman and Gray, 2018; Chu and Martin, 2021; Frank and Otterbring, 2023). Importantly, we find that these mechanisms hold even after controlling for several alternative accounts.

Third, we demonstrate a boundary condition for our proactivity findings, as we show that the time to employee-initiated contact moderates the interplay between employee proactivity, perceptions of employee warmth and competence, and customer satisfaction in a way that runs contrary to customers' intuition. This has important practical implications for mitigating the harm of customers having to wait for an employee to initiate contact. Our results show that, contrary to commonly held beliefs, high employee proactivity results in more favourable perceptions of employee warmth and competence when an employee initiates contact several minutes after the customer enters the store rather than more immediately, with positive downstream effects on customer satisfaction. Consequently, our results imply that high employee proactivity can minimize negative consumer responses due to delays in service situations, thereby counteracting the aversive aspects of waiting.

Limitations and future research

Although our results are robust to the inclusion of multiple control variables, we did not control for the physical attractiveness of the employees, despite previous research indicating that physical attractiveness impacts variables linked to buying responses and customer satisfaction (Ahearne, Gruen and Jarvis, 1999; Keh *et al.*, 2013). Our field studies necessitated a relatively small number of measures. Accordingly, we could not control for all possible confounds while simultaneously maximizing participation and minimizing dropout rates. People in field settings are often unwilling to respond to long survey instruments and typically do not feel obliged to respond to help scholars distinguish between different models or rule out alternative accounts (Cialdini, 2009). Nevertheless, Keh *et al.* (2013) found that various proactivity proxies had a substantially more powerful impact on customer satisfaction than the effect of physical attractiveness, although this latter employee attribute did contribute to more satisfied customers. As such, physical attractiveness should not have had a material impact on our results, but future studies are needed to verify this tentative claim.

As we did not monitor the proportion of customers who agreed to take part in the field studies, selection bias cannot be ruled out as a source of error. However, we

believe selection bias to be unlikely, considering that we had a large degree of variability in proactivity levels and satisfaction ratings, indicating that not only extremely satisfied or dissatisfied customers decided to participate in our studies but also those who were relatively neutral or indifferent. Nevertheless, future field studies in this area should keep track of the proportion of customers who did (vs. did not) volunteer to participate. Moreover, our field study on manipulated employee proactivity was restricted to customers' self-reported amount of money spent after instructing them to look at their receipts, if applicable. Although recent research (Peetz, Davydenko and Wohl, 2021) has found such self-report responses to correlate almost perfectly with customer receipt data ($r = 0.96$), future research should optimally rely on actual transactions rather than on self-reporting.

Our work is inspired by the conceptual replication approach, as our multi-methods package sometimes dictated different dependent variables across studies. This can be perceived as a strength, given that conceptual replications are often claimed to be superior to direct replications owing to their greater ability to progress and test theory across methods (Crandall and Sherman, 2016). Further, as contextual cues can act both as predictors of employee proactivity and as moderators between other factors and proactive behaviour (Cai *et al.*, 2019), our mixed-methods approach arguably provides more compelling evidence of generalizability and external validity. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that our work can also be criticized for not using identical dependent variables across all studies; in particular, the way we measured buying responses varied between spending and purchase likelihood. Although we are confident in the overall proactivity pattern—which is robust to multiple potential confounds, holds for different sample types, replicates in real-world settings and applies regardless of whether employee proactivity is measured or manipulated—we expect that our findings on customer satisfaction and similar subjective outcomes will be stronger than those on purchase likelihood, spending and other objective outcomes (Tornau and Frese, 2013) and that scenario-based experiments will yield larger effect sizes than field studies (Simons, Shoda and Lindsay, 2017). Future research, preferably using meta-analytic techniques, should test these possibilities.

Author Contributions

Tobias Otterbring: Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Project administration. Jasenko Arsenovic: Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Peter Samuelsson: Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization, Writing – orig-

inal draft, Writing – review & editing. Suresh Malodia: Investigation, Data curation, Writing – review & editing. Amandeep Dhir: Investigation, Data curation, Writing – review & editing.

Acknowledgement

This research was supported by a grant from the Aarhus University Research Foundation (AUFF), awarded to the first author. The authors are grateful to Jacob Dalgaard Christensen for help with visualizations.

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