

Keeping retail employees safe: New study measures customer aggression

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Researchers at QUT have developed a new tool to measure customer aggression within the retail and services sectors.

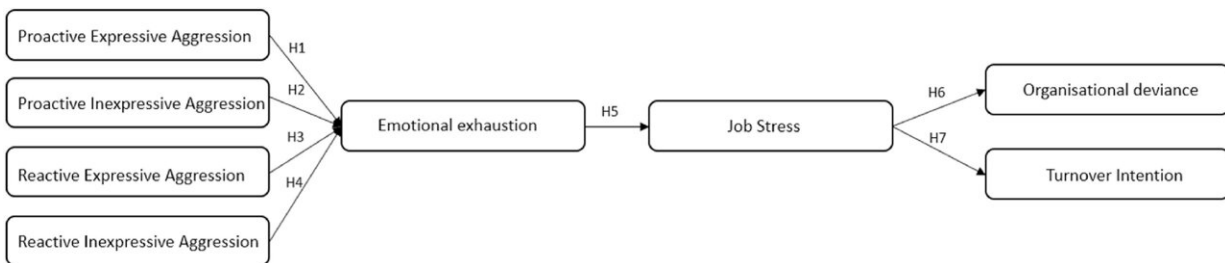
Published in *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, the study, was the first of its kind to clearly identify the types of aggressive behaviors that [employees](#) face, and how these behaviors lead to employees' emotional exhaustion, job stress and intention to leave.

The research involved five studies, including surveys of 211 [undergraduate students](#) who worked in frontline retail and service roles and surveys of over 1,000 Australian frontline retail and service employees.

Lead author Professor Gary Mortimer said while incidents such as a customer violently throwing a product at an employee or yelling to attain a discount are clearly visible, [aggression](#) could also be subtle or implied.

"Participants in the study indicated aggressive behavior with examples of being stood over, stared at, being ignored or having fake poor reviews and negative comments posted on social media," he said.

The study's findings identified a four-factor customer aggression scale that listed 19 items for managers to use to survey staff.



Outcomes of customer aggression. Credit: *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* (2023). DOI: 10.1016/j.jretconser.2023.103348

"It's an easy-to-administer measurement tool to assess the extent and type of aggression their employees face," Professor Mortimer said.

"Once employees are surveyed and the data analyzed, managers identify what types of aggression are more prevalent in their businesses, the staff who are more exposed to these hostile behaviors, and where these behaviors are more likely to occur."

"As an outcome, managers may implement [mitigation strategies](#), like increasing the number of supervisors at checkout areas or install video surveillance at refund or return counters."

"It is also important for companies to manage these types of risks to employees' safety under work, health and safety laws."

The study was co-authored by QUT's Dr. Shasha Wang and Mexico-based Professor Maria Lucila Osorio Andrade from EGADE Business School Tecnológico de Monterrey.

"Businesses that introduce targeted mitigation strategies to reduce the harm on employees eventually improve employee well-being," Dr. Wang said.

The study indicated that increasing abusive behavior was the result of 'displaced aggression' toward retail and service employees.

"The saying that the 'customer is always right' is known as 'customer sovereignty' and sovereignty relates to perceived relational 'superiority'. It has been theorized that customer aggression results when 'customer enchantment' turns to 'disillusionment'," Professor Mortimer said.

The research also coincided with recent calls from Australia's peak retail body, the Australian Retailers Association, and the Shop, Distributive

and Allied Employees Association for state and territory governments to implement tougher penalties for people who assault retail workers.

South Australia toughened its laws to a maximum penalty of five years' prison for people convicted of basic assault against a retail worker while a New South Wales Labor election promise included harsher penalties.

More information: Gary Mortimer et al, Measuring customer aggression: Scale development and validation, *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jretconser.2023.103348](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2023.103348)

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