Curbing the Spread of Customer-to-Customer Mistreatment in the Sharing Economy

The rise of the sharing economy has fundamentally transformed consumers' lives (Eckhardt et al., 2019). Uber, Airbnb, and WeWork are prominent examples of service providers offering temporary access rather than permanent ownership (Wittkowski, Moeller, & Wirtz, 2013). Until recently, public and academic debate primarily focused on the various ways how such access-based services benefit customers (e.g., Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; Schaefers, Moser, & Narayanamurthy, 2018). However, providing short-term access to resources—often with only limited or no supervision by frontline employees (FLEs)—also encourages the creation of anonymous, rather disinhibiting environments in which customers are more likely to mistreat other customers or misuse shared assets (Schaefers, Wittkowski, Benoit, & Ferraro, 2016).

Customer mistreatment can generally be understood as "low-quality interpersonal treatment that employees receive from customers" (Wang, Liao, Zhan, & Shi, 2011, p. 315). Several terms are used in the management and marketing literature to describe such behavior, including customer misbehavior (Fullerton & Punj, 2004), deviant customer behavior (Fombelle et al., 2020), or dysfunctional customer behavior (Gong, Yi, & Choi, 2014). Traditionally, prior research focuses on customer mistreatment that targets FLEs (e.g., Walker, van Jaarsveld, & Skarlicki, 2017), yet customer mistreatment can also be directed at *other customers*.

Such customer-to-customer (C2C) mistreatment is nothing new and regularly occurs across industries (e.g., Griffiths & Gilly, 2012; Grove, Pickett, Jones, & Dorsch, 2012; Shen et al., 2020). However, C2C mistreatment is particularly endemic in sharing economy settings where customers may not only suffer from *direct forms* of mistreatment such as verbal or physical abuse by other customers but also from *indirect forms* of mistreatment, for example, when customers misuse shared assets such as rental cars or public spaces. In fact, stories of e-scooter customers littering, damaging, or even burning their rented e-scooters regularly make headlines worldwide (Ho, 2018; Köhler, 2022). Similarly, customers of co-working spaces regularly complain about littered or noisy workspaces (Herhold, 2020).

Curbing C2C mistreatment is therefore of utmost managerial importance; not only because of the operational disruption, reputational damage, and the costs that it may cause for firms in the sharing economy but also because of the harm that such behavior may inflict upon customers. What is more, recent research shows that both direct and indirect forms of C2C mistreatment are *contagious* (Danatzis & Möller-Herm, forthcoming; Schaefers et al., 2016; Shen et al., 2020; Su, Cheng, Wen, Kozak, & Teo, 2022): That is, customers who experience mistreatment by other customers are more likely to mistreat customers or misuse shared resources themselves, thus exacerbating its aforementioned negative consequences.

However, little is known what service providers in the sharing economy can do to curb the spread of C2C mistreatment. Schaefers et al. (2016) provide valuable insights into how greater brand strength, decreased owner anonymity, and increased communal identification can attenuate contagion in a car-sharing context. Yet implementing such measures requires significant financial investment, their effects may take time to materialize, and they might not always align with a firm's positioning (e.g., for low-cost providers). Similarly, Danatzis and Möller-Herm (forthcoming) offer actionable guidance on what FLEs can do to curb contagion (e.g., in-person interventions, loudspeaker announcements).

However, FLE supervision and respective opportunities for FLEs to intervene are often limited in sharing economy settings. Instead, firms in the sharing economy need to rely on other measures such as signage or technology (Fombelle et al., 2020), for which empirical evidence is still lacking. What is more, understanding the psychological mechanisms that drive the spread of C2C mistreatment is key to design suitable countermeasures. Yet prior research offers mixed results as to whether social norms or service provider-directed blame attributions underlie the spread of C2C mistreatment in the sharing economy (Danatzis & Möller-Herm, forthcoming; Schaefers et al., 2016). Accordingly, this project aims to answer the following three research questions:

1) What are the dominant psychological mechanisms that underlie the spread of C2C mistreatment in the sharing economy?
2) What can service providers in the sharing economy do to effectively curb C2C mistreatment contagion across settings with varying degrees of FLE supervision?
3) How can technology be employed to prevent or curb the spread of C2C mistreatment?

Empirical Approach. To shed light on these questions, we conducted two initial online experiments in sharing economy settings with limited (i.e., shared fitness facilities; Study 1: n=578) and no FLE supervision (i.e., fully automated co-working spaces; Study 2: n=875). Both experiments investigate whether C2C mistreatment is contagious (H1), whether service provider-and perpetrator-directed blame attributions or perceived social norms drive this contagion effect (H2a-H2c), and what firms and FLEs can do to curb its spread (H3a - H3d). Figure 1 provides an overview of our conceptual model and our hypotheses.

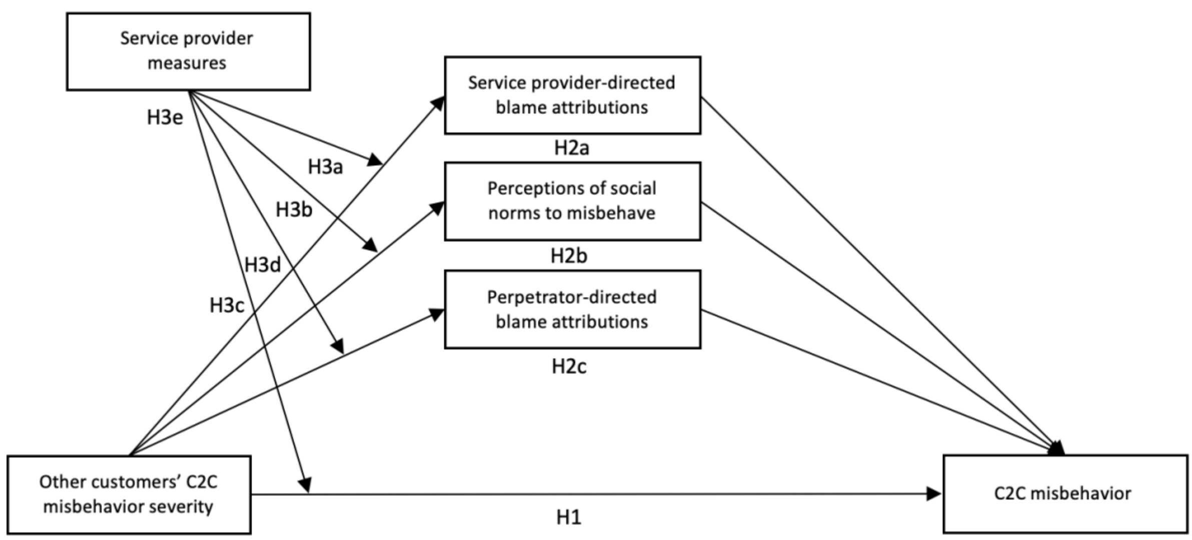
The experiments reveal that FLE supervision determines both the psychological mechanisms underlying C2C misbehavior contagion and the effectiveness of provider measures. Specifically, we find that provider-directed blame attributions drive the spread of C2C misbehavior in settings with FLE supervision and that in-person FLE interventions (but not signage) can curb it. In settings without FLE supervision, in turn, social norms to misbehave underlie contagion while smartphone-based measures (in-app messages and photo features) are most effective at halting it, yet these measures render ineffective for highseverity C2C misbehavior instances. Findings further indicate that perpetrator-directed blame attributions reverse contagion regardless of FLE supervision.

We will conduct further studies to investigate our research questions, thereby covering additional types of sharing-economy markets (Perren & Kozinets, 2018) to explore the extent and mechanisms of C2C misbehavior contagion.

Discussion. Theoretically, this research clarifies the relevance and primacy of psychological mechanisms underlying C2C misbehavior contagion by delineating the crucial role FLE supervision plays in shaping how C2C misbehavior spreads across sharing economy settings.

Managerially, this research offers firms with clear and actionable guidance on what they should do when confronted with C2C misbehavior, which measures they should prioritize across different sharing economy settings, and what they should refrain from doing to effectively tackle its spread.

Figure 1. Overview of the conceptual model and hypotheses studied in this research



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