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Customer is king (?): A qualitative study categorizing service workers' role, customer types and (dysfunctional) customer behaviour in mutual encounters in German grocery stores during the COVID-19 pandemic



## MASTER THESIS of

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## Abstract

**Background:** The COVID-19 pandemic provided a special challenge for service workers in German grocery stores as the newly developed health protective measures were not always desired and understood by the customers leading to challenging service worker-customer encounters.

**Objective:** This thesis aims at providing a new theoretical perspective on service worker-customer encounters in a health emergency context enlightening service workers' perception of themselves and of their customers, and at supporting grocery store managers in developing facilitating measures for future health emergencies.

**Theory:** Reviewing scientific literature on service worker-customer encounters encouraged the formulation of four sub-research questions focussing on the role of the service workers in encounters before and during the pandemic, on various types of customers and on forms of dysfunctional customer behaviour.

**Method:** 37 service workers working in ten branches of a grocery store chain in Central Germany were interviewed using the critical incident technique to exploratively collect descriptions of encounters with customers related to the pandemic. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and inductively coded.

**Results:** Before the COVID-19 pandemic, service workers perceive themselves as being responsible for answering questions, proving a service and interacting friendly with customers. During the pandemic, they are controllers of protective measures, protectors of customers, medical aid providers and bull's eyes of customers' frustration. Different customer types each characterized by performing various forms of dysfunctional behaviour were revealed in three encounter themes. The theme appreciation reveals the appreciators. The theme health protective measures exposes uncomplicated conformists (2 forms), challenging conformists (2 forms), uncomplicated rule-breakers (2 forms) and challenging rule-breakers (5 forms). The theme hoarding includes non-hoarders (2 forms), irritating hoarders (2 forms) and challenging hoarders (3 forms).

**Discussion/Conclusion:** The service workers' role is more wide-ranging and challenging during a health pandemic compared to before. The various types of customers and forms of (dysfunctional) behaviour determine the complicity for service workers to deal with each of them. Grocery store managers must prepare service workers for their new tasks and challenges with customers.

**Keywords:** Service worker-customer encounters, customer typology, dysfunctional customer behaviour, customer service, grocery store, supermarket, COVID-19, coronavirus, health protective measures, hoarding

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## 1. Introduction & Research Proposition

24<sup>th</sup> March 2020, BUNTE:

*“Customers did not keep minimum distance: Supermarket has to close down”*

27<sup>th</sup> April 2020, DER SPIEGEL:

*“Dispute over Corona rules in Bavaria: Customer attacks cashier with cucumber”*

7<sup>th</sup> May 2020, Kreiszeitung:

*“Dispute over missing shopping cart: Unreasonable man hits, insults and threatens”*

What sounds like bad comedy became regular news headlines describing the everyday working life of service workers in German grocery stores in the year 2020. The outbreak of the novel and deadly coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19), which the World Health Organisation declared a pandemic and a global health emergency on 30<sup>th</sup> January 2020, provided a special challenge for all service providing businesses and their employees in Germany and around the whole world, as the known kind of encounters with customers was no longer possible.

Some background information: In Germany, more and more restricting measures were taken by the German Federal Ministry of Health to reduce the spreading of the deadly COVID-19 pandemic that is triggered by physical closeness between infected and non-infected persons. These started with the request to all German citizens to reduce physical closeness to other people in public and to intensify hygienic measures like washing hands and using disinfectants (Press & Information Office of the Federal Government, 2020). Then, all non-vital businesses were closed, but grocery stores were still allowed to be visited as they provide the public with vital products. So contradictorily to the recommendations of the government, service workers in grocery stores could not switch to home office and stay self-isolated, but they were forced to encounter customers on a daily basis. Still, there were specific health protective measures taken by the government to reduce the infection risk for service workers and customers in stores. These include access controls, the prevention of dense queues by the maintained use of a shopping cart and special hygiene rules such as wearing face masks. To guarantee that the health protective measures were applied, the customers' compliance of the new protection regulations must be controlled by the service workers which was not always desired and understood by the customers as the news headlines imply. In brief, the COVID-19 pandemic determined new shopping conditions for customers, new working conditions and tasks for service workers and especially new challenges for service worker-customer encounters in grocery stores.

These forced new ways and challenges of service worker-customer encounters in grocery stores constitute an interesting and novel research issue for the customer service communication

science as by now, centralizing the customer according to the principle of “customer is king” is a common orientation of grocery stores and other service providing businesses (e.g. Bolton & Houlian, 2005; du Gay, 1992; Malvini Redden, 2012). Even more than 60 years ago, Drucker (1954) and Levitt (1960) argued that customers are the main reason for any company to exist and that their needs must be the focus of corporate attention in order to be successful. The service workers’ role in the encounter is to offer care and attention to the customers in their specific context of customer service (e.g. Bolton & Houlian, 2005; du Gay, 1992). But what if customers misbehave and thereby even endanger their fellow men such as in the novel COVID-19 context? What types of customers perform such a behaviour and thereby challenge encounters in grocery stores? And what is the role of the service worker then?

Malvini Redden (2012) examined the relationship of customers and service workers in an airport security line context, in which the roles of the service workers and the passengers changed similarly to the grocery store context during the COVID-19 pandemic. Here, the service workers must provide a service, but also stay on guard to avoid dangerous situations for the public (Malvini Redden, 2012) and, at the same time, the passengers move from their authoritarian and dominant position as “customer is king” to “customer as a suspect”. As the consequences for not following the instructions of the airport service worker are serious, most people act friendly and avoid trouble (Malvini Redden, 2012).

But in the grocery store context, there are no serious consequences defined for customers not following the protection regulations, what makes dysfunctional behaviour of customers more likely (Malvini Redden, 2012). As already the news headlines imply that service worker-customer encounters undergo new challenges and as they have never been investigated in health emergency contexts before, a novel study examining service workers’ perceptions of their own role as well as their experiences encountering various types of customers and customer behaviour is of high theoretical relevance as it fills a research gap by presenting a new perspective on service encounters in grocery stores.

Additionally, the study is practically relevant as it provides grocery store managers with structured insights about service workers’ own role perceptions and various types of customers and forms of customer behaviours their employees are confronted with during a health emergency. These insights can be used to develop appropriate knowledge and skills for future public health emergencies similar to the COVID-19 pandemic in order to guarantee safe working conditions for the employees as well as a good service quality for the customers. According to Simns (2003), the success of such educational initiatives relies on the involvement of employees at early stage of the designing process as they interact with customers and need to be empowered to address their concerns promptly. By already listening to and learning from the employees’ personal experiences, the newly developed

measures address the roots of the challenges of service worker-customer encounters during future public health emergencies.

Consequently, this study is an explorative research conducted to enlighten service workers' experiences and challenges while encountering customers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research question *"How do service workers in German grocery stores perceive themselves and their customers in mutual encounters during the COVID-19 pandemic?"* is the thread of the study. By answering this question, the study aims at extending scientific knowledge in service communication science by providing a new theoretical perspective on service worker-customer encounters in a health emergency context, and at supporting grocery store managers in developing measures for future health emergencies by giving relevant, practical and deep insights in service workers' experiences and challenges with customers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This thesis contains a theoretical framework that defines the most important concepts linked to the issue and presents the outcomes of earlier conducted studies that lead to four sub-research questions added to the study. Furthermore, the used method is introduced by describing the research design, population and participants, used research instrument, applied procedure and data analysis. Subsequently, the results are shown. The discussion contains the critical reflection of the results as well as its theoretical and practical implications. Then, the limitations and suggestions for further research are provided. Lastly, the conclusion summarizes the outcomes of this study.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Scientific literature is reviewed and analysed to provide an overview of scientific knowledge concerning the main actors of this study who are the service workers and the customers. Scientific literature does not provide enough knowledge about the two actors and their mutual encounters in the grocery store context. Therefore, also other service providing contexts are considered in the theoretical framework to provide a global basis for the understanding of service workers and customers in mutual encounters. The role of the service worker is only briefly described as the main focus of this study lies on the customers and their behaviour in encounters. Therefore, prior scientifically defined customer roles and various types of dysfunctional customer behaviour referring to encounters with service workers are reviewed. Still, it is to be underlined that the known roles and types are not crucial for the conduct of the study as it exploratively investigates the new COVID-19 context.

The theoretical framework is also developed to formulate sub-research questions to this study which investigate the self-perceived role of service workers as well as the types of customers in COVID-19-related encounters with service workers and potential forms of dysfunctional customer behaviour.

### 2.1 The role of service workers

In customer service literature, service workers in general are often portrayed as docile servants of an organisation's customers (e.g. du Gay & Salaman, 1992). Likewise, Bolton and Houlian (2004) state that there is a dominant perception of service workers being docile and offering (de)personalized attention and support to customers of an organisation. Wouters (1989) even describes a service worker as a "perfect company robot". Perceptions like these create the image that the role and tasks of a service worker are only focussed on satisfying the customer and that they are limited as they only perform tasks which are means to an end.

Contradictorily, Callaghan and Thompson (2002) and Wray-Bliss (2001) found out that if service workers are directly asked to describe their work, they often re-interpret their role of being docile by displaying a moral commitment to the customer as a person. That fits to the findings of Judge & Bretz (1992) who state that many service workers apply for their jobs because of their social motives and values. Collaborating with costumers, solving their problems and fulfilling their desires can even be perceived as valuable interactions by the service workers (Dormann & Zapf, 2004; Hobfoll, 1989). So, many service workers also see themselves as morally committed to their customers and even profit from the interactions.

In a different service context, namely an airport security queue, service workers have more intricate power dynamics. They have to provide a service for the passengers, but they also function as a guard who guarantees the safety of all passengers (Malvini Redden, 2012). As safety also plays a role

in grocery stores during the COVID-19 pandemic, this framing of service workers might also play a role for this study.

Overall, the scientific literature provides various role descriptions of service workers in different contexts. Service workers are presented as docile company workers, as workers who are morally committed to their customers or as guards who are responsible for the safety of all customers. It is notable that the context in which the service worker-customer encounter takes place influences the role description. As the COVID-19 pandemic and the health protective measures form a new context and confront the service workers with new working conditions for themselves and new shopping conditions for the customers, it is likely that service workers describe their role and tasks in encounters with customers differently to what it was before the health emergency. To investigate how service workers perceive their role in service worker-customer encounters during the COVID-19 pandemic, the following sub-research questions are added to this study:

*S1: How do service workers describe their own role in encounters with customers under COVID-19 conditions?*

*S2: Does their role under COVID-19 conditions differ from their self-defined role under normal conditions?*

## 2.2 The role of customers

In economic and rational perspectives, the customer plays the central role in service providing businesses as they are “sovereign consumers” representing the totalizing rationality of the whole market (Bolton & Houlian, 2005). They are the sweeping force for restructuring companies and changing the behaviour of employees (du Gay, 1996; du Gay & Salaman, 1992; Rose, 1999). Therefore, customers are valued over service workers by the organisation as they are the great source of revenue generation (Kashif & Zarkada, 2015). According to Ku, Kuo and Chen (2013), the customers are less to blame as organisations always aim at raising their expectations and frame them as “extremely important” for the service firm.

Focussing on service worker-customer-encounters, the accounts of customers come in many forms. There are studies that describe that during exchange, customers behave in a compliant and functional manner (Du Gay & Salaman, 1992; Zeithaml, Berry & Parasuraman, 1996). In contradiction, more recent studies detected deviant behaviour towards the service workers, for example because of undesired organisational policies (Berry & Seiders, 2008) which is also expected to be found in the COVID-19 context as the new health protective measures require special attention and unusual actions from the customers.

If research examines multiple forms of customer behaviour, it often offers classifications or typologies that distinguish the varying forms (Berry & Seiders, 2008). These typologies are useful for



explaining ways of doing something and with some “interpretive creativity” it can provide insight into complex environments (Tracy, 2013; p.211). A prominent typology of customers in service worker-customer encounters is the typology re-representing customer service by Bolton and Houlian (2005) framing three different behavioural patterns of costumers.

### *2.2.1 Three types of customers in employee-customer encounters*

Bolton and Houlian (2005) state that a customer is more than the source of economic revenue, but also a social actor. Therefore, they developed a new typology to re-represent the customers’ role in service worker-customer-encounters. They describe their behaviour in three different types of customers: the moral agents, the functional transactants and the mythical sovereigns. Before describing the three types, it is important to underline that Bolton and Houlian (2005) state that a customer can be more than one type at once, as customers are complex, many-sided and sophisticated actors. Table 1 gives an overview of the customer types described by Bolton and Houlian (2005) using type descriptions and example quotes from their study interviewing service workers from call centres and their customers.

Moral agents understand that service workers are social and economic actors and they recognise that interaction in an encounter is of social relevance (Bolton & Houlian, 2005). That fits to the statement of Sayer (2005) and Wray-Bliss (2001) who describe customers and service workers as people who socially and morally relate to each other. Therefore, the moral agents fully engage with the service providers and ignore their proposed superior role (Sayer, 2005). By expressing social niceties towards the service worker, they create and sustain a new moral order (Bolton & Houlian, 2005).

Functional transactants carry out the employee-customer-encounter as simple as possible and are not emotionally involved in the interaction with the service workers. They are not willing to engage in a friendly conversation rather than in a discussion with their counterparts, but they “are happy to complete the transaction in the simplest, most straightforward manner possible” (Boulton & Houlian, 2005; p.696). Therefore, functional transactants do not extend the work load of service workers.

Mythical sovereigns seek to exercise their perceived right to demand not only service, but they demand servitude of the employees, always being aware of and referring to their supposed status of customer is king. Still, Bolton and Houlian (2005) argue that some customers are aware of the fact that this status is only mythical as they also have to familiarize themselves with various routines during a service encounter which puts them into a de-personalized, target-driven service. Whether they are aware of their mythical role or not, the mythical sovereign customers are known for dysfunctional behaviour such as being aggressive and frustrated and venting their negative emotions by harassing service workers (Deery, Iverson, & Walsh, 2002; Korczynski, 2003; Lankshear et al., 2001). That fits to

**Table 1.** A new typology: Re-representing customer service by Bolton and Houlian (2005).

Customer type	Description	Example
Moral agents	Customers who recognize that interaction with service workers is of social relevance and fully engage in conversations expressing social niceties.	“When you are being nice to people, and they are happy and they’ll say ‘oh, thank you very much for that Anna you’ve explained a lot to me and I’ve learned more about insurance speaking to you ...’, which I’ve had, you know, I think ‘well I’ve done something there, I’m not wasting my time’ – because I’m a human being as well.”
Functional transactants	Customers who carry out the employee-customer encounter as simple is possible without being emotionally involved in the interaction.	“It’s nice to be nice and I appreciate the people on the other end of the phone being pleasant but I don’t want to enter into a conversation I just want to do what I have rung up to do.”
Mythical sovereigns	Customers who perceive to have the right to not only demand service, but servitude of the employees referring to their supposed status of customer is king, whether they are aware of the fact that this status is only mythical as they also have to familiarize themselves with organisational routines which puts them into a de-personalized, target-driven service or not.	“Well, service to me means that when I ask for something, I get it, I get it when I ask for it and not when some stropgy girl on the other end of the phone gets around to it and I also expect her to be pleasant with it. I am the customer, after all, and isn’t the customer always right?”

the findings of Kashif and Zarkada (2015) who state that the customers’ underlined superiority makes them feel as if they are “superior human beings with a “licence” to verbally or even physically abuse [service workers] who deem to be inferior” (p. 676) while the service workers must work hard to allure the face of service and maintain the calm while coping with those rude and demanding customers (Bolton & Houlian, 2005).

The three types of customers differ in their perception of the service workers’ role and in their behaviour during service worker-customer encounters. The types were detected under normal service conditions. To find out which types of customers service workers encounter in grocery stores during the COVID-19 pandemic, so under the conditions of a public health emergency, the prior detected types are not used as categories as the study is explorative and types in the COVID-19 context are developed inductively. Therefore, the following sub-research question is formulated for this study:

*S3: With what types of customers are service workers confronted in service worker-customer-encounters during the COVID-19 pandemic?*

### 2.2.2 Dysfunctional customer behaviour

As Bolton and Houlian (2005) describe in their frame of mythical sovereigns, there are customer who behave inappropriately or even aggressively towards the service workers. The question for this study

is if this also occurs in the COVID-19 context, as the health protective measures required in grocery stores are not always pleasant and not desired by everybody. That form of behaviour would refer to dysfunctional behaviour which is a phenomenon observed frequently in various industries (Harris & Daunt, 2013). It is described as the intentional “behaviour in exchange settings which violates the generally accepted norms of conduct in such situations and which is therefore held in disrepute by marketers and by most customers” (Fullerton & Punj, 1993; p. 570). Echeverri, Salomonson and Aberg (2012) state that such misbehaviour is performed by customers who act in a dysfunctional, thoughtless or even abusive manner and therefore cause problems for the organisation, its employees and other customers. Such customers are captured under various labels such as “jay customers” (Lovelock, 1994), “customer misbehaviour” (Fullerton & Punj, 2004) or “problem customers” (Bitner, Booms & Mohr, 1994). In this study, the term dysfunctional customer behaviour as it refers to norm-breaking behaviour which happens if people do not adhere to the prescribed measures due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In fact, there are also various forms of customer misbehaviour described in existing scientific literature which range from “thieves” to “vandals” (Lovelock, 2001) or “physical abusers” to “compensation letter writers” (Harris & Reynolds, 2004). As this study focusses on the direct encounters between service workers and customers, only forms of dysfunctional behaviour related to employee-customer encounters are theoretically relevant for the framework of this study. Before describing scientifically investigated forms of dysfunctional behaviour in direct encounters, the consequences of dysfunctional customer behaviour are presented in order to underline the gravity of its influence and therefore its importance to be considered.

### *2.2.3 Consequences of dysfunctional customer behaviour*

Scientific literature shows that dysfunctional customer behaviour may have devastating consequences for the organisation as a whole, for the service workers who have to deal with the problem customers and for fellow customers who are present during the incident (Harris & Reynolds, 2003). Therefore, Berry and Seiders (2008) argue that organisations cannot afford ignoring dysfunctional customer behaviour as it weakens the organisation’s overall service quality and reputation. For service workers, it significantly influences their mood and ability to perform their daily tasks at work (Kashif & Zarkada, 2015). It leads to stress and emotional exhaustion of the service workers which again triggers occupational and organisational turnover (Harris & Daunt, 2013; Poddar & Madupalli, 2012). Fellow customers are influenced by dysfunctional customer behaviour as it affects their behaviour and value perception and as it is the primary source of dissatisfaction (Kashif & Tarkada, 2015). Due to the consequences for the organisation, its employees and other customers, it is of high importance for managers of grocery stores to know the various forms of dysfunctional customer behaviour and to be

able to train and prepare service workers to cope with them, because they are the direct interaction partners and very important in influencing the customer-employee interaction outcomes (Seymour & Sandiford, 2005).

#### *2.2.4 Dysfunctional customer behaviour in service worker-customer encounters*

Focussing on dysfunctional customer behaviour service workers may be confronted with during service worker-customer encounters, there are many studies classifying customer behaviours into various categories. An often-used example is the categorisation of Berry and Seiders (2008) who analysed problem customers based on unfair behaviour. They define unfair customer behaviour as an action that creates inequity and causes harm for the organisation, its employees and fellow customers. Berry and Seiders (2008) identified five different forms of unfair customer behaviour in encounters with service workers which are: verbal abusers, blamers, rule-breakers, opportunists and returnaholics. Table 2 presents an overview of the five forms including descriptions and an example from the study conducted by Berry and Seiders (2008).

Verbal abusers refer to customers who behave in a disrespectful and offensive manner towards the organisational service worker. They capitalise on the imbalance of power in service encounters which states that the customer is king. Verbal abusers bully service workers who do not have the possibility to defend themselves as they are expected to not react to such treatments (Berry & Seiders, 2008).

In contrast to the verbal abusers who directly offend the service workers they encounter, the blamers indict the organisation's products, policies and people in general for the perceived shortfall. The blamers never see themselves as responsible for the miserable situation and according to them, the perceived problem is always controllable (Sheppard, Lewicki & Minton, 1992).

The rule-breakers are customers who knowingly overlook procedures and organisational policies which they consider to be undesirable. They are not concerned with equity and "demonstrate unfairness to other customers who are behaving according to norms and convention (Berry & Seiders, 2008; p. 33).

Opportunists are described to be up for personal (financial) gain and only care about themselves. They either demand compensation by exaggerating or fabricating problems of a service or product or they show distasteful behaviour by not giving adequate tip to service workers because they do not have to (Berry & Seiders, 2008).

The returnaholics represent customers who purchase products with the intention to return them at a later date. They exploit the return policies of an organisation and keep the product as long as they need it to return it afterwards to get the refund (Berry & Seiders, 2005).

**Table 2.** Five categories of customer unfairness by Berry and Seiders (2008).

Form of unfair behaviour	Description	Example
Verbal abusers	Customers who behave disrespectfully and offensively towards service workers. They bully service workers as they do not have the possibility to defend themselves.	“A father was picking up a repaired bicycle for his daughter, who, without telling him, had approved the recommended replacement of both tires (a \$40 service). Although the employee patiently and repeatedly explained that the purchase was approved and offered to further verify it, the customer made accusatory remarks and yelled at her angrily, saying at one point, “Either you think I’m stupid or you’re stupid. You’re trying to rip me off.”
Blamers	Customers who indict organisation’s people, policies and products in general for a perceived shortfall.	“A tennis coach had been working with an adult student for about six months when the student learned that an opponent in an upcoming match had worked briefly with the same coach in the past. The student asked for and received specific advice from the coach on how to win the match by attacking the opponent’s greatest weaknesses. However, the opponent had corrected these weaknesses and much to the student’s chagrin, she could find no way to beat her. In the clubhouse immediately after the match, she raged at her coach for not preparing her well, giving her poor information and lousy lessons, and causing her to lose the match.”
Rule-breakers	Customers who knowingly overlook organisational policies which they consider to be undesirable. They are not concerned with equity and behave unfairly towards other customers.	“The damage done by rule breakers varies, of course, based on the nature of the rules and policies that are being broken. A restaurant that offers “all you can eat” shrimp entrees encounters some patrons who share with their tablemates, even though the menu clearly states that the price is per person. Managers are not quick to put servers in the awkward position of having to remind guests they are breaking the rule, but will do so if the ‘sharing’ gets out of hand.”
Opportunists	Customer who are up for personal financial gain and only care about themselves.	“The customer contacted the company’s customer relations office, complained about the state of the restroom, and requested a refund for his party’s \$80 meal. In response, the company sent \$30 in gift certificates, in addition to an \$80 check and an apology. “
Returnaholics	Customers who purchase products with the intention to return them at a later date.	“Some situational returners use an item until it is damaged or worn out and then return it for a full refund or new item, claiming it is defective because it ‘should have held up better.”

For the current study it is also of interest to classify the forms of dysfunctional customer behaviour in service worker-customer encounters within the COVID-19 context independently of the presented findings. As already touched in the introduction, it is obvious to find forms of dysfunctional customer behaviour in the new COVID-19 context in grocery stores as the required health protective measures set new shopping conditions for customers which they do not always adhere to and therefore show new reactions towards service workers. To investigate these forms another sub-research question is added to the study:

*S4: What are the forms of dysfunctional customer behaviour in service worker-customer encounters under COVID-19 conditions?*

The findings of earlier studies show that service worker-customer encounters have been investigated in various contexts that determine the role perceptions of service workers. Furthermore, types of customers and their forms of dysfunctional behaviour in encounters with service workers can be categorised under normal conditions. To find out whether the perceived role of service worker during public health pandemics differs from their role perception under normal condition and whether it is possible to categorize various types of customers and their forms of dysfunctional behaviour service workers perceive in mutual encounters, the present study is conducted focussing on service worker-customer encounters independently of the earlier studies.

### *3. Method*

The development of the method, including the chosen research design, the selection of appropriate samples, the creation of the research instrument and the form of data collection, was coordinated in cooperation with the regional sales manager of the grocery store chain in which the research was conducted. This approach was used since the research results shall have practical value in the setting in which they are applied (Potter, et al., 2006).

#### **3.1 Research Design**

A qualitative research design was used, because the study aims at gaining deep insights in the personal experiences of service workers. The critical incident technique was applied to conduct the inductive study. This method is defined as “a qualitative interview procedure which facilitates the investigation of significant occurrences (events, incidents, processes or issues) identified by the participant, the way they are managed, and the outcomes in terms of perceived effects. The objective is to gain understanding of the incident from the perspective of the individual, taking into account cognitive, affective and behavioral elements” (Chell, 1998, p. 56). According to Bitner, Booms & Tretault (1990) an incident is an observable human activity complete enough to make predictions about the actor. A critical incident provokes a significant positive or negative feeling about an activity or a phenomenon (Grove & Fisk, 1997).

The critical incident technique is suitable for the study as it is a method of exploration and discovery rather than of clear measurement (Meyer, 2002). Therefore, it does not need any hypothesis, because inferences are developed from the responses which allows researchers to generate concepts and theories (Olsen & Thomasson, 1992). This inductive procedure of the study matches the aim of this study to detect role descriptions of service workers, customer types and forms of (dysfunctional) customer behaviour in encounters during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, generating personal experiences of the service workers provides powerful and vivid insights into the issue of interest (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2003). Structuring these events from the past also provides a framework for predicting and interpreting future events as the personal stories function as “scripts and staging instructions for future performances” (Czarniawska, 1998, p.20), especially if more service workers experience the same critical incident and interpret it in the same way (Zwijze-Koning, De Jong & Van Vuuren, 2015). This supports the practical relevance of the study as it can create a strong memorable impression on the management leading to more effective and rooted educational measures for the service workers of grocery stores (Gramer, 2004).

To use this method successfully, it is important to determine what a critical incident is defined as (Gramer, 2004). In this study, a critical incident is defined as a service worker-customer encounter that influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes customers adhering to and not adhering to

the health protective measures such as wearing a face mask, using a shopping cart and keeping physical distance in waiting queues.

### 3.2 Population and research sample

The population of the research conducted are all service workers of regional branches belonging to a big grocery store chain located in Göttingen, Kassel and the surrounding areas. As the stores are located in different regions including bigger cities and smaller villages, the study outcomes may be transferred to the wider population of Germany as well. In agreement with the regional sales manager of the grocery store chain, the population is represented by a quota sample in this study. In total, 37 employees of ten different regional branches situated in and around Kassel and Göttingen were invited to take part in semi-structured face-to-face interviews. The sample population was heterogenous including 19 female and 18 male participants from various age groups. The youngest participant was 19 years old whereas the oldest participant was 56. The research sample included full-time as well as part-time employees to provide a general picture of service workers' experiences during the pandemic. More detailed information about the participants of this study can be found in enclosure A.

The participants were recruited during their working time in the grocery stores. To prevent misunderstandings, the participants received an information sheet concerning the research method, their role and the general aim of the research one week in advance. This sheet can be found in enclosure B.

### 3.3 Procedure

The interviews were conducted in June 2020. During the three days, the ten different branches in Göttingen, Kassel and the surrounding areas were visited by the researcher. Here, the present service workers were one by one invited to join the interview setting in a private and quiet environment. Only the participant and the researcher were present in this room.

The following interview steps were conducted following the prior developed research instrument, an interview scheme which can be found in enclosure C. The interview started with an explanation to the participants that they were randomly chosen due to their job position and their anonymity within this study was ensured. Additionally, their permission was asked for recording the interview for further analysis. As Dunn & Hamilton (1986) found that it was counterproductive to start an interview by directly asking for a critical incident, the participants were firstly asked to explain how long they already worked for the grocery store and what their job encompassed. To become more specific, the participants were asked to describe their daily working routine and the general role of the customer before as well as during the COVID-19 pandemic including all health protective measures that were taken within the grocery store. Subsequently to these introductory questions, the



interviewer asked the participants to recall and describe a remarkable encounter with a customer they had recently experienced due to the COVID-19 pandemic and with which they connected strong positive or negative feelings. The participants were encouraged to describe the event in detail. According to Gremler (2004), story-triggering questions help participants to recall details of the event, so some follow-up questions including four questions adopted from Zwijze-Koning et al. (2015) and two newly developed questions related to the research context were asked to systematically explore the event. These questions addressed the following topics:

- What actually happened?
- Who was involved?
- What caused the event?
- How did the customer behave? (newly developed)
- What was challenging during the event? (newly developed)
- What were the consequences of the event?

After the participants had described the remarkable encounter, the interviewer summarized the information given and asked for their confirmation. Then, the interviewer asked for further incidents they had experienced and subsequently asked the same series of questions. The process was repeated until there were no more incidents the participants wanted to mention.

To round up the interview session, the participants were asked for any further comments on the topic of interest and the further data processing was explained. The participants got the opportunity to submit their e-mail addresses if they were interested in a summary of the study. Finally, the participants were thanked for their participation. All interviews were recorded and had a duration of about 20 minutes per participant.

### 3.4 Data analysis

The recorded interview data was processed by means of transcription leading to 83 pages of single-spaced text. The transcripts of the 37 interviews do not contain personal information such as names or birth dates of the participants in order to ensure their anonymity. The transcripts were saved on the personal computer of the researcher and further analysed with the programme ATLAS.ti.

Before describing the coding process of the data, it is again emphasized that the new codes are developed independently of the typologies described in the theoretical framework to guarantee an open, explorative and unbiased analysis of the present situation which is the aim of the study as it investigates a situation that has never been there before and does not primarily compare it (except for the role of the service worker in encounters with customers before and during the COVID-19 pandemic). Therefore, through theoretically sensitive coding a codebook was developed during the first round of coding including five core categories, namely (1) any service workers' role description

before COVID-19, (2) any service workers' role description under COVID-19 conditions, (3) any encounter related to the theme appreciation, (4) any encounter related to the theme health protective measures and (5) any encounter related to the theme hoarding, whereas the categories (1), (2) and (4) were expected due to prior knowledge that was discussed in the introduction and the theoretical framework of this study, whereas the categories (3) and (5) emerged from pure inductive coding. In a second round of coding, the categories were coded more specifically focussing on concrete role descriptions of service workers before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as "answering questions concerning products", as well as on customer types, such as "the appreciators" who are thankful for the service workers' commitment, "the uncomplicated conformists" referring to customers who adhere to the health protective measures without challenging the service workers or such as "the challenging rule-breakers" who are customers who do not adhere to the health protective measures and provoke an extra work load for service workers as they perform a form of dysfunctional behaviour and are challenging to deal with. The types of customers that were experienced by the service workers in encounters can be related to the themes of appreciation, health protective measures or hoarding. Within the types, the customers were identified by their performed forms of (dysfunctional) behaviour which made it possible to define subcategories of customers types based on the behaviour. As an example, "the challenging rule-breakers" can be subcategorized in forms of dysfunctional behaviour such as "the creative excuses" or "the impulsive offenders". The researcher coded 10% of the data and developed the codebook of 19 unique codes. Then, it was tested and refined to establish reliable codes for the analysis of the interview data. This process included the establishment of inter-coder reliability which is the degree of agreement between several coders in classifying data according to the same criteria at a particular time (Monette, Sullivan & De Jong, 2013). After coding 10% of the transcripts, another communication scientist coded the transcripts with the developed codebook as well. The attached codes were compared for consistency. Inconsistencies were discussed and remedied, so that every code reached a Cohen's Kappa of 1 after the discussion which means that the codes of this study are reliable. The intercoder reliability of the different codes can be found in enclosure D. While coding the other transcripts, seven codes were added to the codebook. These codes were also discussed with the second coder to guarantee a clear formulation and understanding of the added codes. The whole codebook containing all codes, a description and example for every code and the total number of mentions per code is attached in the enclosure E.

## 4. Results

The result section is structured in two sections. In the first section, the outcomes concerning the self-perceived role of the service workers under COVID-19 conditions are presented. In the second section, the outcomes referring to the different types of customers and their forms of (dysfunctional) behaviour in service worker-customer-encounters during the COVID-19 pandemic are shown. To give clear insights into the results found, each category is introduced with a table presenting the used codes, the number of comments referring to the codes and example quotes of the participants from the interviews.

### 4.1 Service workers' perception of their role in encounters with customers in the grocery store before and during the COVID-19 pandemic

When describing their own role in encounters with customers within the grocery store before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, the participants actually described their actions which were always focussing on the customers visiting the grocery store. The descriptions of their perceived role before and during the COVID-19 are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Service workers' perception of their role in encounters with customers before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Service workers' role before the COVID-19 pandemic		
Category	Definition	Sample comments
Answer questions concerning products <i>9 comments</i>	The service worker is there to answer customers' questions concerning products.	"It often happens that we get questions concerning the special offers. Where are they? And sometimes it happens that somebody doesn't find a product. Then we help him out."
Create positive customer experience as service provider <i>6 comments</i>	The service worker is there to provide a service and to create a positive customer experience.	"We have to ask ourselves: Is it attractive for the customer?"
Interact friendly with customers <i>6 comments</i>	The service worker is there to interact friendly with the customers.	"Many customers want to small talk at the cash desk, about how they feel today. So, of course we are friendly and talk to them, as much as possible."
Service workers' role during the COVID-19 pandemic		
Category	Definition	Sample Comments
Controller of protective measures – kindergartener <i>26 comments</i>	The service worker controls if customers take a shopping cart, wear a face mask and keep distance.	"It's our task to remind the customers of the protective measures." "That was a huge kindergarten. A kindergarten is nothing compared to that, that was really exhausting."
Protector of customers <i>3 comments</i>	The service worker protects customers by reminding them of protective measures.	"By reminding them, I want to protect the customers."
Medical aid provider <i>2 comments</i>	The service worker provides medical aid for accidents due to face mask.	"His glasses slipped because of the face mask and he fell. We had to provide first aid."
Bull's eye of customers' frustration <i>12 comments</i>	The service worker must catch the frustration of customers.	"It was all our fault, we are the bad ones."

Referring to their role before the pandemic, nine participants stated that their main task is answering the questions of customers who are looking for the products presented in the special offers or of customers who do not find a certain product as participant 13 described: *“It is very important to be present for the customers if they have questions, because then you have to answer them and help them to find what they are looking for”*. Furthermore, six participants described their role as being a service provider who must create a positive customer experience. Participant 29 explained: *“We are there to prepare the store in such a way that the customer likes to come here to buy his groceries for the week, from bread to meat and vegetables”*. Another six participants focussed on their role as friendly interaction partner for customers while the conversations must not necessarily relate to the grocery store context as participant 19 explained: *“I think that the customers expect that we talk to them. And if they start talking about their family, mostly regular customers, then of course we are friendly and answer. Small talks are part of our job, and that’s why I like it”*.

Also when describing their own role encounters in the grocery store under COVID-19 conditions, the service workers always related their tasks to the customers. But in contradiction to their role description before the COVID-19 pandemic, their main task is not to help the customers, but to control their behaviour concerning the health protective measures such as taking a shopping cart, wearing a face mask and keeping distance which are obligated to adhere to in order to reduce the infection risk for both customers and service workers. 26 participants stated that controlling if all costumers adhere to the protective measures is their main and most time-intensive task during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participant 2 explained: *“We have to control that all measures are met. Because now we must not only pay attention to collecting the payment, but also that the customers come in with face masks, and with a shopping cart”*. Participant 10 concretises the problem: *“We don’t have time anymore to stock the deliveries, because we have to look after the customers”*. Some service workers even described this controlling task as comparable to the task of a kindergartener such as participant 24 stated: *“We are like in a kindergarten, we have to watch that the people behave themselves”*. Three participants see their role as protector of the customers’ health: *“I watch out for that, especially if there are old customers. It is about protecting the people”*, as participant 13 explained.

Two participants reported that they had to function as medical aid provider due to accidents happening because of the protective measures. Participant 28 recounted: *“It’s terrible with the face masks. There was a customer who started gasping between the cash desks. She tried to hold on to the cart and then she laid on the ground. And we had to help her breathing normally again”*.

Finally, the service workers see themselves as bull’s eye for the customers’ frustration which means that the service workers’ role is to be shouted at, blamed or to log complaints as the customers are frustrated of the whole situation and the new shopping conditions due to COVID-19. This is also

one of the most perceived roles as 12 customers mentioned it while describing their tasks. Participant 5 speculated: *“I don’t know whether they think it’s funny or if they are bored. (...) They are looking for a compensation by blaming us and starting weird discussions we have to handle”*.

#### 4.2 Types of customers in service worker-customer-encounters during the COVID-19 pandemic

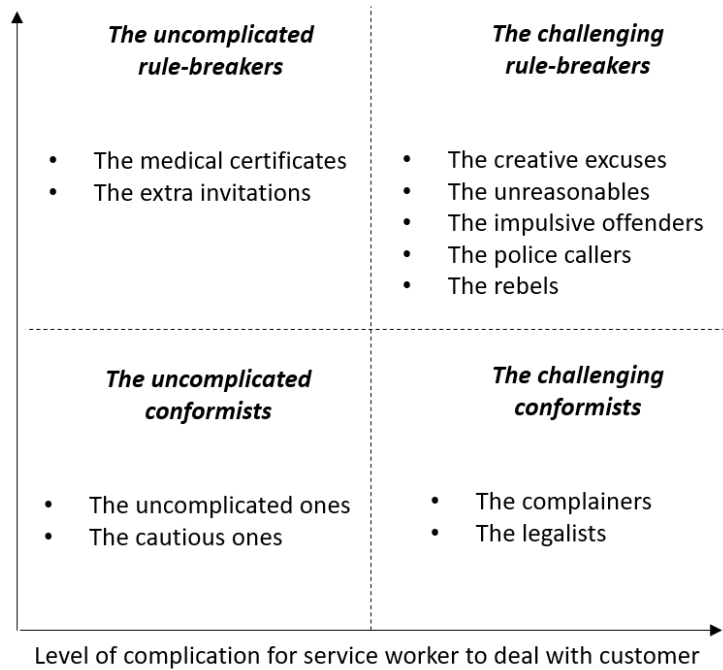
When focussing on the customers in service worker-customer encounters during the COVID-19 pandemic, the participants described various incidents with customers that can be categorized in three different themes: appreciation, health protective measures and hoarding. Each of these theme-related encounters revealed various types of customers and forms of customer behaviour. The theme appreciation revealed one type of customer, the theme health protective measures revealed four types of customers and the theme hoarding revealed three different types of customers who are each characterized by specific forms of (dysfunctional) behaviour.

##### 4.2.1 Type of customer related to appreciation: The appreciators

It is noticeable that 33 of 37 participants described customers who appreciated the service workers for working during the COVID-19 pandemic. They understand that the working conditions are harder due to the pandemic and they are thankful that the service workers still provide them with groceries. They express their appreciation either verbally towards the service workers or they even have gifts for them as a sign of gratitude. Participant 6 passed those moments in review as follows: *“The customers understand that it is hard to work here at the moment. (...) We got a lot of chocolate, we got tip for our Kaffeekasse, we got so many presents. Before, we didn’t experience that. It’s really great how the people reacted. And that our work is appreciated”*.

##### 4.2.2 Types of customers related to protective measures

During the interviews, the participants described many positive and negative incidents in encounters with customers that refer to the health protective measures taking a shopping cart, wearing a face mask, keeping distance and more disinfection. These descriptions included several forms of (dysfunctional) behaviours which each can be assigned to one of four different types of customers: (1) the uncomplicated conformists, (2) the challenging conformists, (3) the uncomplicated rule-breakers and (4) the challenging rule-breakers. Conformists do adhere to the health protective measures whereas rule-breakers do not adhere to them. Challenging in this context means that a lot of time and attention is required from the service workers to deal with them whereas uncomplicated means that the additional work load for the service workers is rather low or not existent. The four detected customer types and their forms of (dysfunctional) behaviour are arranged in Figure 1 according to the customers’ handling of the health protective measures (conform or rule-breaking) and to their level of



**Figure 1.** Customer types and forms of dysfunctional customer behaviour related to health protective measures.

complication for the service worker to deal with this type of customer (uncomplicated or challenging) and further described in the following sections.

*The uncomplicated conformists*

The first type of customers in encounters related to the health protective measures described by the participants are the uncomplicated conformists. As their name suggests, they go conform with the protective measures and are uncomplicated to handle for the service workers. This type contains two different forms of customer behaviour which are presented in Table 4: The uncomplicated ones and the cautious ones.

First, the uncomplicated ones were described by 18 participants and are recognized by adhering to the protective measures without any direct contact to or request of a service worker. Participant 13 reported: “We had a lot of customers who adapted to the new situation and simply

**Table 4.** The uncomplicated conformists.

Category	Definition	Sample comments
The uncomplicated ones <i>18 comments</i>	Customers who adhere the health protective measures without direct contact to a service worker.	“It’s good that many people show respect and come in wearing a face mask.”
The cautious ones <i>9 comments</i>	Customers who ask a service worker for the applicable protective measures before they enter the store to avoid misbehaviour.	“Many people ask if they have to take a shopping cart before they come in, because we taught them how to behave.”

*adhered to everything. There were no problems at all*". Second, 9 participants told about the cautious ones who are customers asking a service worker for the applicable protective measures in the store before they enter in order to make sure that they behave correctly. This way, they only require a short answer of a service worker before they adhere to the protective measures. *"Now they are more cautious. They also want to protect themselves. They even ask if they have to enter with a shopping cart or with a face mask. Because the regulations changed, but they solved this problem well by asking"*, participant 16 explained.

#### *The challenging conformists*

The second type of customers are the challenging conformists and also contain two forms of customer behaviour. They do adhere to the health protective measures, but they also show a form of dysfunctional customer behaviour what makes them more challenging to deal with and therefore cause a higher work load for the service worker. The forms of dysfunctional behaviour are presented in Table 5. The first form of dysfunctional behaviour are the complainers. The complainers adhere to the protective measures, but they perceive them as undesired and address their complaints to a service worker in the grocery store who has to deal with those complaints and engage in a discussion with the customers. Participant 12 described: *"Of course you recognise if the customers are tensed. (...) We also had the shopping carts, then they come to us and complain because they are not used to it. And we have to calm them"*. The second form of dysfunctional behaviour performed by challenging conformists are the legalists who were encountered by eleven participants. In contrast to the complainers who do actually do not want to adhere to the protective measures, but still do it, the legalists are really afraid of a COVID-19 infection and over-demand the implementation of the protective measures of the service worker as participant 18 experienced: *"There was this one lady in front of the store who wanted me to disinfect the shopping cart again because there would still be bacteria and she really freaked out. She would go to the media and so on"*.

**Table 5.** The challenging conformists.

Category	Definition	Sample comments
The complainers <i>7 comments</i>	Customers who adhere to the protective measures, but complain about them.	"They do complain about the face masks, but I don't make the rules."
The legalists <i>11 comments</i>	Customers who adhere to the protective measures, but hysterically demand the (over) correct implementation of the measures.	"We had one customer at the cash desk who wanted my colleague to disinfect her hands before giving the change because she touched the bank note of the other customer as well."

### *The uncomplicated rule-breakers*

The third type of customers described by the participants are the uncomplicated rule-breakers. Although they do not directly adhere to the health protective measures in the grocery store, it does not take much effort of the service workers to convince them to do so. The forms of behaviour belonging to this type are the medical certificates and the extra invitations. The medical certificates are customers who are exempted from wearing a face mask due to medical reasons and were encountered by three participants. If they carry a medical certificate as confirmation, they must not wear a face mask in the grocery store. Therefore, they are uncomplicated rule-breakers as the service worker does not have to put much effort into a discussion. Participant 16 reported about an incident with a medical certificate: *“There was one person without a face mask. I told him that we have the face mask measure. He showed me his medical certificate, that he doesn’t have to wear a face mask for medical reason. Then the matter is done”*. The extra invitations combine all customers who do not directly adhere to the protective measures, but who need an extra invitation and must be shortly reminded by the service worker to for example take a shopping cart, wear a face mask or to keep distance. They were encountered by 17 participants and are described to be uncomplicated as it is easy to teach them the appropriate behaviour. Sometimes the participants also reported about the reasons why the customers did not adhere to the protective measures such as *“Some people forget it out of habit”* as participant 5 reported, or *“Some people want a special treatment. Maybe he didn’t get enough attention at home”* as participant 2 speculated. Still, only one reminder or request is needed to change their behaviour. Participant 19 summarized: *“Many come without shopping cart. We say: Please go out and take one. And that works”*.

**Table 6.** The uncomplicated rule-breakers.

Category	Definition	Sample comments
The medical certificates <i>3 comments</i>	Customers who have a medical certificate that exempts them from adhering to the protective measures.	<i>“She had a certificate that she doesn’t have to wear a face mask for medical reasons.”</i>
The extra invitations <i>17 comments</i>	Customers who adhere to the protective measures after being reminded by a service worker.	<i>“I told him that it is not allowed to enter the store without a shopping cart, so he has do go out and take one. But he was reasonable and then it is not so complicated anymore.”</i>

### *The challenging rule-breakers*

The most diverse type of customers encountered by the participants are the challenging rule-breakers who do not adhere to the protective measures. Their five forms of dysfunctional behaviour present a high additional work load and makes it challenging for the service workers to handle the encounter. Table 7 gives an overview of the forms described.



**Table 7.** The challenging rule-breakers.

Category	Definition	Sample comments
The creative excuses <i>19 comments</i>	Customers who have a creative excuse for not adhering to the protective measures instead of complying with the reminder of the service worker.	"I don't need a shopping cart, I only want to buy one product: That's what many people used as excuse."
The unreasonables <i>18 comments</i>	Customers who are strictly refusing to adhere to the protective measures.	"Some people refuse to understand it. They insist to their point of view."
The impulsive offenders <i>15 comments</i>	Customers who offend the service worker after being reminded of adhering to the protective measures.	"I was offended as asshole, because I asked him to take a shopping cart."
The police callers <i>2 comments</i>	Customers who call the police because they do not want to adhere to the protective measures.	"In the end he called the police because he felt offended."
The rebels <i>2 comments</i>	Customers who protest against the protective measures physically.	"She went out and destroyed our shopping cart poster."

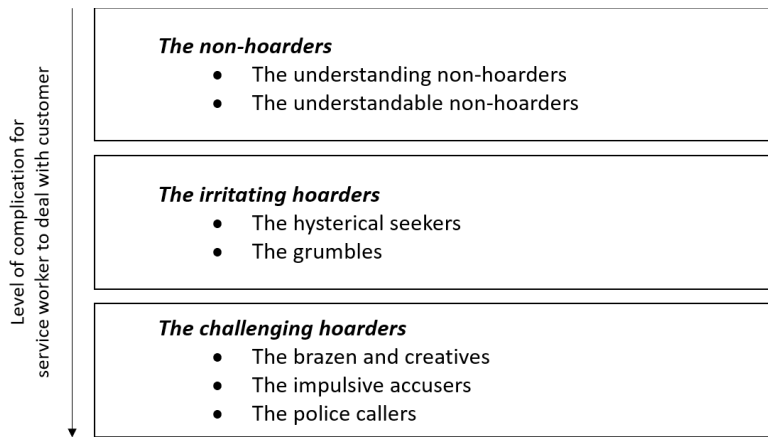
The first form of dysfunctional customer behaviour are the creative excuses who were mentioned by nineteen participants. Those customers do not adhere to the protective measures and explain their behaviour to the service worker using a creative excuse such as they only want to buy one product, that they are not infected by COVID-19 or that *"the customer is king"*, as participant 1 cited a customer excusing for not taking a shopping cart instead of complying with his request which made the encounter more time-intensive. The most creative excuse was described by participant 2 who encountered a customer excusing for not wearing a face mask by being a Jew: *"He accused us of being Anti-Jewish, because wearing a face mask is against his rights and we should learn more about his religion to understand that he cannot wear a face mask"*. The second form of dysfunctional customer behaviour performed by the challenging rule-breakers are the unreasonables. 18 participants described customers who were strictly refusing to adhering to the protective measures although they were reminded to do so. Participant 12 outlined the following situation: *"There was a woman entering the store without face mask, intentionally. Another customer reminded her to put it on and then I came. She said I should call the regulatory agency, she doesn't give a \*\*\*"*. The third form of dysfunctional customer behaviour are the impulsive offenders who directly offend the service workers after being reminded of adhering to the protective measures. This type was encountered by fifteen participants. Participant 8 was offended with the message *"I'll spit in your face, then you get Corona"*. Participant 30 described how he and his colleague were accused of applying Nazi-methods: *"She said we are controlling them and dictating a certain behaviour and denouncing her. That would be Nazi-methods. That was the most striking thing I experienced"*. Fourth, also police callers belong to the type of challenging rule-breakers. Two participants experienced customers who refused to adhere to the

protective measures and called the police to assert themselves. Their success was modest as participant 1 remembered: *“He said he doesn’t need a shopping cart. (...) Then he called the police saying it was personal injury. I had to laugh, but then the police really came, but they didn’t even comment that. Because he has to take a cart, otherwise he cannot enter”*. The fifth type of dysfunctional customer behaviour are the rebels who physically protest against the protective measures. They were described by the participants in two situations. One woman destroyed a poster showing the one-shopping-cart-per-person-measure, and another customer destroyed the barrier tape fixing the shopping carts which were not allowed to use as participant 25 experienced: *“We have this barrier tape for the shopping carts. That was cut through by a customer. Probably because he wanted to have a shopping cart although the amount is regulated”*.

#### 4.2.3 Types of customers related to hoarding

Next to incidents related to the health protective measures almost all participants reported about incidents in service worker-customer encounters that referred to the period of hoarding. In the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, many shops had to close to reduce physical closeness of people. Many customers were afraid that grocery stores also have to close which would mean that people cannot buy groceries for their daily needs anymore. Then, the period of hoarding began when many people bought durable products in high amounts for their personal stock. That was a challenge for service workers in grocery stores as participant 8 reported: *“We had a period of hoarding. Quasi overnight all shelves were empty, that was very hard for us to refill them that quickly. And also for our logistics centre to procure all the products. (...) Toilet paper was a luxury good, flour, sugar, basic foodstuffs. You could order what you want, we didn’t get anything because our central warehouses were empty. (...) At one point we had to regulate the amount, so we only sold two packages of toilet paper per household “*. As described in this example, some grocery stores introduced amount regulations for certain products, so that customers were only allowed to buy a certain amount of a product.

As the interviews showed, the rare or missing products and the amount regulations provoked customer reactions in service worker-customer-encounters that have never been there before. In these encounters, the participants experienced various incidents with different forms of customer behaviour which assigned to three types of customers: the non-hoarders, the irritating hoarders and the challenging hoarders. These types referring to hoarding are to be considered separately from the types relating to the health protective measures although they have identical or similar names as the encounters handle different themes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Figure 2 visualises the three types and their forms of dysfunctional customer behaviour.



**Figure 2.** Customer types and forms of dysfunctional customer behaviour related to hoarding.

### *The non-hoarders*

The customer type the non-hoarders in the context of hoarding are described as customers who understand that products are rare and adhere to the amount regulations, either by themselves or on request. This type contains the customer behaviour forms the understanding non-hoarders and the understandable non-hoarders presented in Table 8. The understanding non-hoarders were described by five participants as customers who keep calm if products are sold out and who accept the amount regulations of rare products. The service workers do not have to take action to make them adhere to the regulations and they also do not comment the missing products. Participant 13 reported about the time of rare products: *“In the beginning, many customers showed great forbearance if some products were sold out”*. And participant 8 focussed on the amount regulations stating that they *“had to regulate the amount, so [they] only sold two packages of toilet paper per household. Many customers adhered to it.”*

The second form of customer behaviour belonging to the type of the non-hoarders are the understandable non-hoarders. In contrast to the understanding non-hoarders, they talk to the service worker and ask for the rare products or ask for the sense of the amount regulations. Still, they understand the situation and the introduction of the amount regulations after hearing the explanation of the service worker. Participant 31 described: *“We got the question: When do you have this product again? (...) Then you answer the question that we also hope to get in during this week. But they also understood it and they also knew that it was not our fault.”*

**Table 8.** The non-hoarders.

Category	Definition	Sample comments
The understanding non-hoarders <i>5 comments</i>	Customers who understand that products are rare and adhere to the amount regulations.	<i>“Many customers adhered to it. And only bought the amount allowed.”</i>
The understandable non-hoarders <i>4 comments</i>	Customers who understand the amount regulations after getting an explanation of a service worker.	<i>“We had to explain that they can’t buy that much. But then they were understandable.”</i>

### *The irritating hoarders*

The participants also described customers who address the service worker in an irritating way instead of asking friendly such as the understandable non-hoarders. The customer type the irritating hoarders contains two forms of dysfunctional customer behaviour: the hysterical seekers and the grumbles. They are described in Table 9. The hysterical seekers were encountered by five participants and are characterized by hysterically addressing service workers while looking for rare products. Participant 21 reported about an incident in front of the grocery store: *“The customer came at the parking shouting: Yeast! Yeast! He didn’t even formulate a whole sentence, only: Yeast! That is really irritating. The customer can at least make the effort to ask: Do you have yeast today?”*.

The grumbles were encountered by 11 participants and address the service worker in another irritating way by grumbling about the products that are sold out or about the amount regulations. Participant 37 encountered an old lady grumbling because the bread was sold out: *“Then she complained that the shelve was empty, but I also can’t do more than working, I always try my best.”*

**Table 9.** The irritating hoarders.

Category	Definition	Sample comments
The hysterical seekers 5 comments	Customers who hysterically look for rare products.	“One came at 7 in the morning, shouted: Where is the toilet paper? And rushed out again, because it was empty again.”
The grumbles 11 comments	Customers who grumble at a service worker about missing products or the amount regulations.	“There are customers who grumble at us because some things aren’t there. Because of the hoarding.”

### *The challenging hoarders*

As a third type of customers, the participants encountered various difficult customers who had no understanding for the delivery problems of rare products rather than for the amount regulations. The challenging hoarders can be categorized by three forms of dysfunctional customer behaviour: The brazen and creatives, the impulsive accusers and the police callers. Table 11 gives an overview of these forms. Eleven participants encountered brazen and creative customers who make a (creative) attempt to evade the amount regulations and who are egoistic as they do not show any consideration towards other customers which requires a disciplining action of the service worker. Participant 29 remembered: *“And if the products were available again, they wanted to buy three, four, five packages, but that is not possible of course. They weren’t very cooperative towards other people: My benefit is most important”*.

Even more challenging were the impulsive accusers described by twelve participants. They directly accuse the service worker or the grocery store being responsible for the missing products or the necessity of amount regulations. Participant 28 summarized: *“It was all our fault. We are the bad ones. We don’t order new products and so on.”*

**Table 10.** The challenging hoarders.

Category	Definition	Sample comments
The brazen and creatives <i>11 comments</i>	Customers who make (creative) attempts to buy more than allowed by the amount regulations.	"They went to our truck drivers (...) and asked if they could also pay there."
The impulsive accusers <i>12 comments</i>	Customers who accuse a service worker/grocery store being responsible for missing products or the amount regulations.	"We have to hear things such as we are not able, we can't perform our job, we can't order products correctly."
The police callers <i>1 comment</i>	Customers who call the police because of the amount regulations.	"One man threatened me with a lawyer, the other one wanted to call the police to report me. His reasoning was that it's not legal to sell only three packages per person".

The third form of behaviour performed by challenging customers are the police callers who was encountered twice by participant 34. She met a customer who wanted to buy more packages of disinfectant that allowed according to the amount regulations. Instead of accepting the amount regulations, the customer wanted to threaten her with the police or a lawyer: *"One man threatened me with a lawyer, the other one wanted to call the police to report me. His reasoning was that it's not legal to sell only three packages per person"*.

## 5. Discussion

In this section the results concerning the perceived role of service workers in encounters with customers and the types and forms of (dysfunctional) behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic are related to prior scientific knowledge outlined in the theoretical framework. Also the answer to the main research question *“How do service workers in German grocery stores perceive themselves and their customers in mutual encounters during the COVID-19 pandemic?”* is given by addressing the four sub-research questions of the study. Furthermore, the relevance of this study is discussed by addressing its theoretical contribution to the existing scientific literature concerning customer service. Also its practical implications for actors in the grocery store context during health emergencies are presented. Lastly, the limitations of the study are addressed including recommendations on how to improve a similar study and the possibilities for future research emerging from the outcomes of this study.

### 5.1 Discussion of the results

#### 5.1.1 *The role of the service workers during a health emergency*

To create a basis for the comparison, this study shortly touched on the service workers' role perception under normal conditions. As described in section 4.1.1, service workers describe their role focussing on three customer-related actions (1) answering questions about products, (2) creating positive customer experiences as service providers and (3) interacting friendly with customers. That supports the different viewpoints of prior scientific studies as the first two actions answering products and creating a positive customer experience also depict service workers as (de)personalised supporters of customers which was found by Bolton and Houlian (2004) and du Gay and Salaman (1992). Also the third action interacting friendly with customers confirms prior findings of e.g. Dormann and Zapf (2004) who assumed that interacting and collaborating with customers belongs to the tasks of service workers and are even interpreted as valuable interactions.

In the newly investigated context during a health emergency, service workers describe their role more diversified. It is strongly notable that service workers do not longer focus on tasks relating to providing a service although this usually is the biggest part of their job. The study detected five different role descriptions: (1) controller of protective measures, (2) protector of customers, (3) medical aid provider and (4) bull's eye of customers' frustration. It is important to know that the service workers are responsible for the customers' adherence to the health protective measures in order to minimize the COVID-19 infection risk of both service workers and customers in grocery stores which lets their role become a controlling one. That can be compared to the service worker description of Malvini Redden (2012) who found out that service workers in airport security lines provide a service, but also function as a guard to guarantee the safety of all passengers. Both contexts have in common

that the service workers must control regulations in order to avoid danger for all actors present. Therefore, it is assumed that the role of service workers is extended by a controlling function if a potential danger for people must be prevented. That some service workers also feel responsible to protect their customers shows their moral commitment to the customers which supports the findings of Callaghan and Thompson (2002) and Wray-Bliss (2001) who included social values in their role description of service workers.

Further, the study detected two new role descriptions of service workers which are closely related to the current health emergency. Service workers have to function as medical aid providers if customers have accidents caused by physical restrictions due to the protective measures such as poor sight or breathing difficulties under the face mask. And finally, service workers are the bull's eye of customers' frustration related to the COVID-19 conditions implicating that they must cope with dysfunctional behaviour of customers which is easily provoked due to the new shopping conditions.

To summarize and to answer the first sub-research question of the study *S1 "How do service workers describe their own role in encounters with customers under COVID-19 conditions?"*, one can say that service workers describe their role as very diversified relating to their functions of controller of protective measures, protector of customers, first contact to reduce shopping time, medical aid provider and bull's eye of customers' frustration. Comparing that to their functions before COVID-19 and answering the second sub-research question of the study *S2 "Does their role under COVID-19 conditions differ from their self-defined role under normal conditions?"*, it becomes clear that the service workers' role is more wide-ranging than under normal conditions. The new shopping conditions for customers including the obligated health protective measures implicate new tasks for the service workers. The controlling and protecting roles are assumed to be taken by the service workers to minimize the infection risk of all people present. Additionally, their role becomes more challenging as they must act as medical aid providers in accidents due to the protective measures and as they are more often confronted with dysfunctional customer behaviour that is not even related to the service worker-customer encounter, but also provoked by the health emergency.

#### *5.1.2 Types of customers and forms of (dysfunctional) customer behaviour in service worker-customer encounters during a health emergency*

Next to detecting the role of service workers, this study aimed at enlightening the various types of customers and forms of customer (dysfunctional) behaviour service workers have to deal with during a health emergency. The study reveals that each customer type can be identified by specific forms of behaviour. Therefore, the concepts customer types and forms of (dysfunctional) behaviour are discussed together. As the COVID-19 health emergency provoked new tasks for service workers and new shopping conditions for service workers, three main themes within service worker-customer

encounters were found: (1) appreciation, (2) health protective measures and (3) hoarding. The types of customers and their forms of (dysfunctional) behaviour occurring in encounters referring to the three themes are explained in the following sections and are related to prior scientific findings.

*Customer types and forms of behaviour related to appreciation*

Encounters related to the first theme appreciation revealed one type of customers: *The appreciators* are characterized by being thankful for the service workers' commitment while working under COVID-19 conditions and their behaviour can be described as they express their appreciation verbally or by making physical presents. They can be compared to the moral agents described in the typology representing customer service by Bolton and Houlian (2005) who express social niceties towards the service workers in order to create and sustain a moral order. Also Gutek, Groth and Cherry (2002) state that service workers and customers have a mini-relationship with a personal touch which is recognized in the present study. Still, it is remarkable that the action of customers making presents to service workers cannot be found in prior scientific literature. As in this study the appreciators were mentioned by nearly all participants, it can be assumed that it is likely for service workers to encounter the appreciators, a form of moral agents, in grocery stores during a health emergency.

*Customer types and forms of behaviour related to health protective measures*

Further, the study detected four different types of customers in encounters with service workers that are related to the health protective measures: (1) The uncomplicated conformists, (2) the challenging conformists, (3) the uncomplicated rule-breakers and (4) the challenging rule-breakers. The uncomplicated and challenging conformists directly adhere to the protective measures whereas the uncomplicated and challenging rule-breakers do not and thereby perform a form of dysfunctional behaviour as it causes inequity and harm for service workers and fellow customers due to the higher COVID-19 infection risk (Berry & Seiders, 2008). Both types of rule-breakers also refer to the rule-breakers described in the typology of Berry and Seiders (2008) they are described as customers who "demonstrate unfairness to other customers who are behaving according to norms and convention" (p.33). Uncomplicated means that it is easy to deal with or to conform the types of customers whereas challenging means that the customers perform another or an additional form of dysfunctional behaviour than not adhering to the protective measures.

Applying the typology of Bolton and Houlian (2005) one can describe the customer type the uncomplicated conformists as functional transactants as their behaviour comes in two different forms. Either as (a) the uncomplicated ones who simply adhere to the protective measures or as (b) the cautious ones who shortly ask for the applied protective measures in the grocery store before entering. By performing one of those behaviours the uncomplicated conformists carry out the service worker-



customer encounter as simple as possible which is typical for the functional transactants described by Bolton and Houlian (2005).

The other three types each perform at least one form of dysfunctional behaviour which excludes them from the type of functional transactants. The challenging conformists do adhere to the rules, but also challenge the service workers performing two forms of dysfunctional behaviour which are (a) the complainers who adhere to the protective measures, but still complain about them towards the service workers or (b) the legalists who hysterically demand the (over)correct implementation of the protective measures from the service workers. Both forms of dysfunctional customer behaviour can be assigned to the verbal abusers who are defined by Berry and Seiders (2008) as customers who behave disrespectfully and offensively towards the service workers, which they do as they complain, and capitalizing the imbalance of power in service encounters, which they also do by (over)demanding the implementation of protective measures of the service workers. Looking at prior scientific literature, it is remarkable that the complainers were also detected in a study by Reynolds and Harris (2005) who state that illegitimate complaining may occur due to undesirable regulations.

The uncomplicated rule-breakers do not adhere to the protective measures which is a form of dysfunctional behaviour in this study context, but it is relatively easy for the service workers to deal with them as their form of dysfunctional behaviour is either reasoned or easy conformable. The forms of behaviour are (a) the medical certificates, so customers who have a medical confirmation that exempts them from adhering to the measures and (b) the extra invitations, so customers who directly adhere to the measures after being reminded by a service worker. The type medical certificates have to be viewed as an exception as their behaviour is medically reasoned. The dysfunctional behaviour of the extra invitations only refers to the rule-breakers defined by Berry and Seiders (2008) as they demonstrate unfairness to other customers by not adhering to the protective measures.

In contrast to the uncomplicated rule-breakers, the challenging rule-breakers perform more than the one rule-breaking form of dysfunctional behaviour as they also behave dysfunctionally after being asked to adhere to the protective measures. Their five forms of dysfunctional behaviour are (a) the creative excuses, (b) the unreasonables, (c) the impulsive offenders, (d) the police callers and (e) the rebels. The creative excuses try to evade from adhering to the protective measures by finding a creative excuse for why they cannot adhere to them, while the unreasonables are strictly refusing to adhere to the measures. Both makes the encounter challenging for the service workers. The impulsive offenders even directly offend the service workers which is recognisable from the dysfunctional behaviour of verbal abusers identified by Berry and Seiders (2008) as behaving disrespectfully and offensively towards the service worker. Lastly, the police callers as well as the rebels are newly identified forms of dysfunctional behaviour performed by the challenging rule-breakers as they try to

prevail over the service workers and not adhere to the protective measures by calling the police or protest against the measures physically by for example destroying the attention-grabbing signs.

*Customer types and forms of behaviour related to hoarding*

The within the study investigated service worker-customer encounters related to hoarding revealed three types of customers: (1) The non-hoarders, (2) the irritating hoarders (3) the challenging hoarders. The non-hoarders understand that products are rare and only buy products in an amount that meets the amount regulations. Just like the uncomplicated conformists detected in this study, they can also be compared to the functional transactants described by Bolton and Houlian (2005) as they encounter the service workers in the simplest and most straightforward manner possible. The non-hoarders can be identified by two forms of customer behaviour (a) the understanding non-hoarders who only buy the allowed amount of rare products and do not complain about products that are sold out and (b) the understandable non-hoarders who show understanding for that after hearing an explanation of a service worker.

The irritating hoarders and the challenging hoarders are two types of customers performing forms of dysfunctional behaviour in service worker-customer encounters related to hoarding. Therefore, they also cannot be compared to the functional transactants. The irritating hoarders are customers who are annoying for the service workers, but their form of dysfunctional behaviour does not really harm them or the organisation. The forms are (a) the hysterical seekers who hysterically address and ask service workers for rare products and (b) the grumbles who express their displeasure about the missing products towards a service worker. Still, no real form of intervention by the service worker is needed to calm the situation. Only the grumbles can be related to the verbal abusers whose unfair customer behaviour was defined by Berry and Seiders (2008).

Lastly, the study detected the challenging hoarders as the third customer type related to hoarding. The challenging hoarders perform at least one of three forms of dysfunctional behaviour that challenges the service workers to solve the situation. The first form is (a) the brazen and creatives who make (creative) attempts to buy more than allowed which is can be related to the rule-breakers as they behave unfairly towards other customers and knowingly overlook the organisational policies (Berry & Seiders, 2008). This form was also recognized and ironically used by Sterman and Dogan (2015) who demonstrated the hoarding behaviour during the Second World War with the customer quote "I'm not hoarding, I'm just stocking up before the hoarders get here" (p.6). ; The second and the third form of dysfunctional behaviour are (b) the impulsive accusers who accuse a service worker or the grocery store being responsible for the missing products which also supports the findings of Berry and Seiders (2008) who detected that blamers are one form of dysfunctional behaviour who blame the

employee or the organisation for the perceived shortfall; and (c) the police callers, so customers who call the police because they want to evade from the amount regulations while buying rare products.

Summarizing the results of the study conducted and answering the third sub-research question of the study *S3* “*With what types of customers are service workers confronted in service worker-customer encounters during the COVID-19 pandemic?*” one can say that the types of customers depend on the theme the encounter of service workers and customer is about. Is the encounter about appreciation of work, the service workers may encounter the appreciators. If it relates to the health protective measures, the service workers may be confronted with the uncomplicated conformists, the challenging conformists, the uncomplicated rule-breakers and the challenging rule-breakers. And if the service worker-customer encounter relates to hoarding, service workers may encounter the non-hoarders, the irritating hoarders and the challenging hoarders.

Relating the results to the fourth sub-research question of the study *S4*: “*What forms of dysfunctional customer behaviour occur in service worker-customer encounters under COVID-19 conditions?*” one can say this is also dependent on the theme of the service worker-customer encounter. Dysfunctional behaviour concerning health protective measures may come in the forms of the complainers, the legalists, the medical certificates, the extra invitations, the creative excuses, the unreasonables, the impulsive offenders, the police callers and the rebels. Related to hoarding, dysfunctional customer behaviour may have the forms of hysterical seekers, the grumbles, the brazen and creatives, the impulsive accusers and the police callers.

## 5.2 Theoretical implications

This study is of high theoretical relevance for the customer service science as it gives insight into the self-perceived role of service workers in encounters with customers in the COVID-19 context, a health emergency context in which service worker-customer encounters in grocery stores have never been investigated before, and into how it changes in comparison to normal conditions.

Looking at customer typologies from prior scientific knowledge (e.g. Berry & Seiders, 2008; Bolton & Houlian, 2005) and relating them to the newly developed customer typology referring to appreciation, health protective measures and hoarding during a health emergency such as the COVID-19 pandemic also emphasizes the novelty of the study as one can say that the earlier typologies can only partially be applied. The typology re-representing customer service (Bolton & Houlian, 2005) consists of moral agents, functional transactants and mythical sovereigns. In this study context, the appreciators from the theme appreciation have characteristics of moral agents. The uncomplicated conformists from the theme health protective measures and the simple ones from the theme hoarding can be identified as functional transactants. The other detected customer types cannot be related to

the typology of Bolton and Houlian (2005) although their dysfunctional behaviour may be comparable to the mythical sovereigns. Still, it is not clear if the customer types base their behaviour on their assumed superior role as customer is king within service worker-customer encounters during the health pandemic. Therefore, the creation of new types emphasizes the diversity of customers in various contexts which contributes to the existing theoretical knowledge.

Focussing on the (dysfunctional) customer behaviour, it is remarkable that positive and negative forms of behaviour come back in the newly developed customer typology. And looking at the dysfunctional or unfair behaviour is noticeable that there are more diverse forms than described in the typology of Berry and Seiders (2008). All forms of dysfunctional behaviour from the uncomplicated and challenging rule-breakers from the theme health protective measures and the behaviour of the brazen and creatives from the theme hoarding fit to the rule-breakers described by Berry and Seiders (2008). Verbal abusers can be found in the dysfunctional behaviour forms of the impulsive offenders, the complainers and the hysterics from the theme health protective measures and the grumbles from the theme hoarding. And blamers can be found in the impulsive accusers from the theme hoarding. Forms of behaviour such as hysterical seekers, police callers or medical certificates cannot be placed in the typology of unfair behaviour by Berry and Seiders (2008) at all. Overall, their constructs are far too general to describe the forms of customer behaviour service workers have to deal with during the health emergency.

Concluding, the newly developed customer typology including types and relating forms of (dysfunctional) customer behaviour within three different themes is of high theoretical relevance as it extends the knowledge about customers in grocery stores during health emergencies and as it underlines the importance of creating different typologies for different research contexts as simply applying an existing typology may undermine important characteristics of the actors examined. Still, it is to be reminded that customers can be more than one type at once and therefore may perform more than one form of (dysfunctional) behaviour as they are many-sided, complex and sophisticated actors (Bolton & Houlian, 2005).

### 5.3 Practical implications

Based on this study several practical suggestions can be made for managers of grocery stores in order to support service workers in encounters with customers during health emergencies similar to the current COVID-19 pandemic. Broadly speaking, it is most important to develop knowledge and skills that are necessary during the health emergency.

First, as service workers see their own role as controller of the health protective measures, it is of high relevance to make sure that all service workers know which protective measures are applied in what way in the specific grocery store they work in. Such internal organisational clarity is important

as it directly affects employee behaviours and as it influences the customers' perception of organisational policies based on their interactions with service workers (Vella, Gountas & Walker, 2009).

Second, the study revealed that due to the health protective measures it is possible that customers have accidents as for example the face mask may lead to poor sight or shortness of breath. In such situations, service workers also feel themselves responsible for providing medical aid. Therefore, it is important for them to develop appropriate skills. Letting the service workers attend a first-aid-course could prepare them for medical emergencies.

Third, it is noticeable that service workers see their role as bull's eye of customers' frustration during the health emergency as they are confronted with various types of problem customers and form of dysfunctional customer behaviour. The newly developed typology considering two themes provoking dysfunctional customer behaviour during health emergencies, namely the health protective measures and hoarding, the different types of customers and forms of dysfunctional behaviour constitute a good basis to develop measures managing the customers to standard behaviour and to prepare the service workers for dealing with challenging forms of customer behaviour (Seiders & Berry, 1998). According to Vella, Gountas and Walker (2009) it is useful to provide more training and resources to service workers to help them manage customer increased workloads effectively. Berry and Seiders (2008) concretize this idea by stating that it involves investing in education and training on how to prevent and manage the most likely types of incidents. During health emergencies, emphasis should be placed on the customer types the challenging rule-breakers and their forms of dysfunctional behaviour related to the health protective measures as they do not only challenge the service workers, but also harm the health of the service workers, fellow customers and themselves, and on the difficult ones related to hoarding as they perform forms of dysfunctional behaviour that requires good communication skills of the service workers to deal with them.

Lastly, the study revealed that service workers are not only confronted with problem customers, but also with customers who appreciate their work. Also managers of grocery stores should recognise that the role of service workers is far more extensive and value their flexibility with a verbal or physical form of appreciation in order to keep them motivated during the health emergency.

#### 5.4 Limitations and future research

Like all studies, this research has some limitations. A qualitative research was the most suitable method for this study as it generates deep insights in the concrete ideas of the respondents (White & Marsh, 2006). Still, qualitative analysis is intensive and time-consuming (Macnamara, 2005). Therefore, just a relatively small sample of participants was interrogated during the interviews. The low number of respondents may lead to a lower validity and generalizability of the research outcomes (White &

Marsh, 2006). Also the fact that only one grocery store chain was examined lowers the generalizability of the outcomes. Still, the study is highly practically relevant for the grocery store chain in which the study was conducted as the implications are directly related to incidents that occurred to their service workers.

Furthermore, used research instrument of this study was developed to measure the qualitative ideas experiences of the participants. This purpose was served as many critical incidents in the form of remarkable encounters with customers during the COVID-19 pandemic were described by the participants. Still, the interview questions could have been more specifically formulated related to the customers' behaviour as sometimes their descriptions were very general instead of related to a single customer they encountered.

Additionally, it is to be noted that qualitative research methods in general lack generalizability and face issues of replicability (Finn, Elliot-White & Walton, 2000). Therefore, a systematic codebook was developed and used for the analysis of the qualitative data. According to Neuman (1999), a codebook maximises the replicability of the study. Concerning the development of the codebook and the following creation of the new typology of customers and their (dysfunctional) behaviour, one can say that qualitative analysis is dependent on the interpretations of the researcher which may result in more biases and less reliability (Macnamera, 2005). Reminding that, another strength of the research conduction is the fact that the interviewer who directly talked to the participants also analysed and interpreted the data (Polit & Beck, 2010). For the whole process it was considered that according to Graneham and Lundham (2004) the understanding of the context of a study is essential for interpreting qualitative data. Therefore, the regional sales manager of the grocery store chain was involved in the study from the beginning to brief the researcher about the current situation in grocery stores during the COVID-19 pandemic. This guided the researcher during the whole study and improved his understanding of the setting of service worker-customer encounters in grocery stores (Potter et al., 2006). This is also considered as a criterion for the credibility of this research (Shenton, 2004).

Considering future research in customer service science indicated by this study, the role of the service workers in encounters with customers is a construct that can be further enlightened from a different perspective in the specific context. Instead of asking service workers how they describe their own role, the customers' perception of the service workers' role during a health pandemic should be investigated to create a clearer picture of service worker-customer encounters.

Looking at future research possibilities examining customers, the typology can be verified by examining service worker-customer encounters in different grocery stores in different parts of Germany or even in an international context as the COVID-19 pandemic has a worldwide effect on the population. But also here, it has to be reminded that customers are many-sided, complex and sophisticated actors (Bolton & Houlian, 2005). Therefore, a single customer can be more than one type

at once and may perform more than one form of (dysfunctional) behaviour. Additionally, the participants of this study were the service workers describing customers. To create a more detailed picture of service worker-customer encounters during a health pandemic, it is advised to also interview customers concerning their perceptions of encounters with service workers and also concerning their motives for a certain form of (dysfunctional) behaviour. Subsequently to this study, it would be interesting to investigate whether the described type of mythical sovereigns, referring to customers demanding servitude of the service workers due to their perceived superior status whether they are aware of the fact that their status is only mythical as they also have to familiarize themselves with organisational routines which puts them into a de-personalized, target-driven service or not (Bolton & Houlian, 2005), is applicable for customers performing dysfunctional behaviour or whether other motives influence them to perform dysfunctional forms of behaviour.

## 5.5 Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic provided new conditions and themes for service worker-customer encounters in grocery stores as this health emergency situation has never been there before. Accordingly, it was an unresearched context in customer service literature, and also posed new challenges for service workers in their daily working life. To fill this research gap and to provide actors in grocery stores with practical implications for facilitating measures, this study aimed at enlightening the experiences and challenges of service workers in encounters with customers during the pandemic. On the theoretical side, the comparison between service workers' self-perceived role in encounters before and during the COVID-19 pandemic shows that during a health emergency it is more diverse and challenging than before. The new customer typology presents types of customers and forms of (dysfunctional) customer behaviour related to the themes appreciation, health protective measures and hoarding and indicates the perceived level of complicity for service workers to deal with them. That emphasizes the importance of identifying customer types in specific contexts rather than simply applying existing typologies as that may undermine decisive characteristics. On the practical side and as managerial implications, the study highlights the importance of appreciating the commitment of the service workers and preparing them for performing their new roles and to deal with various customer types, especially with the challenging rule-breakers and the challenging hoarders as they may harm the wider public and are complicated to deal with. A further study examining encounters in the same context, but from the customers' point of view focussing on their motives of performing dysfunctional customer behaviour would be of high contribution for understanding service worker-customer encounters in health emergencies.

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## APPENDIX A Participants of the interviews

Grocery Store Branch	Participant Number	Sex	Age	Job	Working for company since...
A	1	F	39	Part-time	2006
	2	F	35	Part-time	2014
	3	F	33	Full-time	2010
	4	M	42	Branch Manager	2005
B	5	M	19	Dual student	2019
	6	M	28	Part-time	2013
	7	F	42	Branch manager	1997
C	8	M	33	Branch manager	2009
	9	F	26	Deputy manager	2015
	10	M	28	Full-time (resigned)	2015
D	11	F	45	Part-time	2003
	12	M	20	Full-time	2016
	13	M	20	Dual student	2019
E	14	M	34	Part-time	2011
	15	F	29	Part-time	2011
	16	F	45	Branch manager	2007
F	17	M	38	Deputy manager	2001
	18	M	30	Part-time	2009
	19	F	55	Part-time	1981
	20	M	34	Branch manager	1998
G	21	M	54	Part-time	2000
	22	F	43	Deputy Manager	2013
	23	F	25	Part-time	2019
	24	F	52	Part-time	2007
H	25	F	29	Part-time	2010
	26	M	43	Deputy manager	1997
	27	F	44	Part-time	1999
I	28	M	38	Branch manager	?
	29	F	56	Part-time	1994
	30	M	40	Part-time	2016
	31	F	38	Part-time	2016
J	32	F	28	Part-time	2016
	33	M	35	Part-time	2016
	34	F	36	Part-time	2008
	35	M	26	Future branch manager	2016
	36	M	22	Part-time	?
	37	F	29	Part-time	2013

## APPENDIX B Information sheet for participants

### UNIVERSITY OF TWENTE.

Liebe Mitarbeiterinnen und Mitarbeiter,

**für meinen Studienabschluss im Bereich Unternehmenskommunikation benötige ich Ihre Hilfe!**

Weil ich mir vorstellen kann, dass die Corona-Krise, bzw. der Umgang mit den Kunden, eine besondere Herausforderung für Ihren Arbeitsalltag darstellt, möchte ich in meiner Masterarbeit die verschiedenen Verhaltensweisen von Kunden in Bezug auf die Corona-Vorschriften thematisieren.

Mit den Corona-Vorschriften meine ich beispielsweise Schutzmaßnahmen, wie die Abstandsregelung oder das Tragen von Mund-Nasen-Bedeckungen, aber auch maximale Verkaufsmengen von Produkten pro Person, um „Hamster-Käufen“ vorzubeugen.

Jeder Kunde geht mit solchen Vorschriften anders um. Manche verhalten sich vorbildlich, andere halten sie vielleicht für unnötig und ignorieren sie – und bringen Sie damit nicht nur in Ansteckungsgefahr, sondern auch in eine unbehagliche Situation, in der Sie auf das sture, vielleicht sogar aggressive Verhalten der Kunden reagieren müssen.

Wenn Ihnen jetzt schon ein Corona-bezogener Kunde oder eine Corona-bezogene Situation einfällt, die Ihnen sicher in Erinnerung bleiben wird, dann sind Sie genau die Person, die ich suche. Denn ich möchte gern ein Interview mit Ihnen führen, in dem Sie kürzlich erlebte Situationen mit Kunden schildern, die Ihnen besonders positiv, negativ oder herausfordernd in Erinnerung geblieben sind. Mit diesen Schilderungen möchte ich eine *Kunden-Typologie* mit unterschiedlichen Verhaltensweisen von Kunden während der Corona-Krise entwickeln.

**Sowohl Sie als auch das Geschäft und die Kunden bleiben garantiert anonym und lassen sich NICHT zurückverfolgen.**

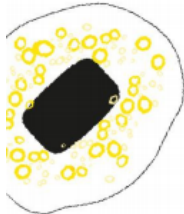
**Was müssen Sie tun?**

Um mich zu unterstützen, reicht es aus, wenn Sie sich für das Interview ca. 30 Minuten Zeit nehmen. Sie müssen sich nicht vorbereiten, sondern einfach auf meine offenen Fragen antworten und mir erzählen, was Ihnen gerade in den Sinn kommt.

Ich freue mich sehr auf unser Interview und bin gespannt darauf, zu erfahren, was Sie schon während der Corona-Krise mit Ihren Kunden erlebt haben!

Vielen Dank für Ihre Unterstützung & herzliche Grüße

*Signature has been removed.*



## APPENDIX C Interview Script

## APPENDIX D Intercoder-reliability of first 10% of transcripts after discussion

Code	Coder 1	Coder 2	Cohen's Kappa
<u>Service workers' role before COVID-19 pandemic</u>			
Answer questions concerning products	2	2	1
Create positive customer experience as service provider	1	1	1
Interact friendly with customers	1	1	1
<u>Service workers' role during the COVID-19 pandemic</u>			
Bull's eye of customers' frustration	3	3	1
Controller of protective measures – kindergartener	5	5	1
Medical aid provider			Code added and discussed afterwards
Protector of customers	1	1	1
<u>The appreciators</u>	7	7	1
<u>The uncomplicated conformists</u>			
The cautious ones	2	2	1
The uncomplicated ones	3	3	1
<u>The complicated conformists</u>			
The complainers	2	2	1
The legalists	4	4	1
<u>The uncomplicated rule-breakers</u>			
The extra invitations	6	6	1
The medical certificates			Code added and discussed afterwards
<u>The complicated rule-breakers</u>			
The creative excuses	5	5	1
The impulsive offenders	5	5	1
The police callers	2	2	1
The rebels			Code added and discussed afterwards
The unreasonables	7	7	1
<u>The non-hoarders</u>			
The understandable non-hoarders			Code added and discussed afterwards
The understanding non-hoarders			Code added and discussed afterwards
<u>The irritating hoarders</u>			
The grumbles	2	2	1
The hysterical seekers	1	1	1
<u>The challenging hoarders</u>			
The brazen and creatives			Code added and discussed afterwards
The impulsive accusers	3	3	1
The police callers			Code added and discussed afterwards



## APPENDIX E Codebook

Code	Description	Example	No of mentions
<u>Service workers' role before COVID-19 pandemic</u>	Ways how service workers describe their own role in service worker-customer encounters before the pandemic.		21
Answer questions concerning products	The service worker is there to answer customers' questions concerning products.	"It often happens that we get questions concerning the special offers. Where are they? And sometimes it happens that somebody doesn't find a product. Then we help him out."	9
Create positive customer experience as service provider	The service worker is there to provide a service and to create a positive customer experience.	"We have to ask ourselves: Is it attractive for the customer?"	6
Interact friendly with customers	The service worker is there to interact friendly with the customers.	"Many customers want to small talk at the cash desk, about how they feel today. So, of course we are friendly and talk to them, as much as possible."	6
<u>Service workers' role during the COVID-19 pandemic</u>	Ways how service workers describe their own role in service worker-customer encounters during the pandemic.		44
Bull's eye of customers' frustration	The service worker must catch the frustration of customers.	"It was all our fault, we are the bad ones."	12
Controller of protective measures – kindergartener	The service worker controls if customers take a shopping cart, wear a face mask and keep distance.	"It's our task to remind the customers of the protective measures." "That was a huge kindergarten. A kindergarten is nothing compared to that, that was really exhausting."	26
Medical aid provider	The service worker provides medical aid for accidents due to face mask.	"His glasses slipped because of the face mask and he fell. We had to provide first aid."	2
Protector of customers	The service worker protects customers by reminding them of protective measures.	"By reminding them, I want to protect the customers."	3
<u>The appreciators</u>	Customers who appreciated the service workers for working during the COVID-19 pandemic.	"The customers understand that it is hard to work here at the moment. (...) We got a lot of chocolate, we got tip for our Kaffeekasse, we got so many presents. Before, we didn't experience that. It's really great how the people reacted. And that our work is appreciated".	33
<u>The uncomplicated conformists</u>	Customers who go conform with the protective measures and		27

	are uncomplicated to handle for the service workers.		
The cautious ones	Customers who ask a service worker for the applicable protective measures before they enter the store to avoid misbehaviour.	“Many people ask if they have to take a shopping cart before they come in, because we taught them how to behave.”	9
The uncomplicated ones	Customers who adhere the health protective measures without direct contact to a service worker.	“It’s good that many people show respect and come in wearing a face mask.”	18
<u>The challenging conformists</u>	Customers who do adhere to the protective measures, but also show a form of dysfunctional customer behaviour what makes them more challenging to deal with and cause a higher work load for the service worker.		18
The complainers <i>7 comments</i>	Customers who adhere to the protective measures, but complain about them.	“They do complain about the face masks, but I don’t make the rules.”	7
The legalists <i>11 comments</i>	Customers who adhere to the protective measures, but hysterically demand the (over) correct implementation of the measures.	“We had one customer at the cash desk who wanted my colleague to disinfect her hands before giving the change because she touched the bank note of the other customer as well.”	11
<u>The uncomplicated rule-breakers</u>	Customers who do not directly adhere to the protective measures, but it does not take much effort of the service workers to convince them to do so		20
The extra invitations <i>17 comments</i>	Customers who adhere to the protective measures after being reminded by a service worker.	“I told him that it is not allowed to enter the store without a shopping cart, so he has do go out and take one. But he was reasonable and then it is not so complicated anymore.”	17
The medical certificates <i>3 comments</i>	Customers who have a medical certificate that exempts them from adhering to the protective measures.	“She had a certificate that she doesn’t have to wear a face mask for medical reasons.”	3
<u>The challenging rule-breakers</u>	Customers who do not adhere to the protective measures, are challenging to handle and are extra work load for the service workers.		56

The creative excuses <i>19 comments</i>	Customers who have a creative excuse for not adhering to the protective measures instead of complying with the reminder of the service worker.	"I don't need a shopping cart, I only want to buy one product: That's what many people used as excuse."	19
The impulsive offenders <i>15 comments</i>	Customers who offend the service worker after being reminded of adhering to the protective measures.	"I was offended as asshole, because I asked him to take a shopping cart."	15
The police callers <i>2 comments</i>	Customers who call the police because they do not want to adhere to the protective measures.	"In the end he called the police because he felt offended."	2
The rebels <i>2 comments</i>	Customers who protest against the protective measures physically.	"She went out and destroyed our shopping cart poster."	2
The unreasonables <i>18 comments</i>	Customers who are strictly refusing to adhere to the protective measures.	"Some people refuse to understand it. They insist to their point of view."	18
<u>The non-hoarders</u>	Customers who understand that products are rare and adhere to the amount regulations, either by themselves or on request.		9
The understandable non-hoarders <i>4 comments</i>	Customers who understand the amount regulations after getting an explanation of a service worker.	"We had to explain that they can't buy that much. But then they were understandable."	4
The understanding non-hoarders <i>5 comments</i>	Customers who understand that products are rare and adhere to the amount regulations.	"Many customers adhered to it. And only bought the amount allowed."	5
<u>The irritating hoarders</u>	Customers who address the service worker in an irritating way concerning amount regulations and rare products.		16
The grumbles <i>11 comments</i>	Customers who grumble at a service worker about missing products or the amount regulations.	"There are customers who grumble at us because some things aren't there. Because of the hoarding."	11
The hysterical seekers <i>5 comments</i>	Customers who hysterically look for rare products.	"One came at 7 in the morning, shouted: Where is the toilet paper? And rushed out again, because it was empty again."	5
<u>The challenging hoarders</u>	Customers who have no understanding for rare products and amount regulations and are challenging to handle for service workers.		34

The brazen and creatives <i>11 comments</i>	Customers who make (creative) attempts to buy more than allowed by the amount regulations.	“They went to our truck drivers (...) and asked if they could also pay there.”	11
The impulsive accusers <i>12 comments</i>	Customers who accuse a service worker/grocery store being responsible for missing products or the amount regulations.	“We have to hear things such as we are not able, we can’t perform our job, we can’t order products correctly.”	12
The police callers <i>1 comment</i>	Customers who call the police because of the amount regulations.	“One man threatened me with a lawyer, the other one wanted to call the police to report me. His reasoning was that it’s not legal to sell only three packages per person”.	1