



# How and why (imagined) online reviews impact frontline retail encounters

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Available online xxx

## Abstract

This research examines how frontline retail employees respond to customers whom they think might write an online review about their experience. Across six experiments (one field and five online) we show that when employees identify potential online review authors, often by what the customer says or does, it catalyzes them to deliver better service. This ensues because they experience a rise in determination to do well, motivated by the prospect of being associated with a positive review, which they believe will impress the retailer. Thus, they go ‘above and beyond’. However, determination is tempered by two boundary conditions. When employees (i) do not consider that being associated with an online review is beneficial (i.e., not goal relevant) or (ii) feel poorly equipped to serve the customer (i.e., low in self-efficacy), then a better service delivery will not occur. We also show that retailers can enhance customer service through internal championing of the importance of online reviews, so long as this is framed as promotional rather than punitive.

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**Keywords:** Online reviews; Monitoring; Frontline employees; Employee performance; Self-efficacy; Goal relevance.

## Introduction

Alex is a retail store employee at an electronics store selling home audio equipment. It is 3.40 pm on a Saturday. A customer approaches and states: “Hey! can you help? I found this place when searching Google reviews. I need a new stereo - could you answer some questions?”. The mention of “Google reviews” triggers Alex’s belief this customer might write a review about their experience.

A body of research shows how online reviews influence favorable (e.g. Floyd et al. 2014; Wu, Jin and Xu 2021) and harmful behavior amongst consumers (e.g. Minnema et al. 2016). But as word of mouth and social media grows in importance to retailers (Grewal, Roggeveen and Nordfält 2017), further research is required to understand if reviews can have an impact beyond the customer-to-customer dyad (Raffaelli et al. 2017). The vignette above elucidates one way it might. Serving customers whom employees envisage

may author a review is a common occurrence for frontline retail employees (herein referred to as employees). To put this into context, a survey that we administered to 50 frontline retail and hospitality employees in the US revealed that in the past month, 92% had served at least one customer they perceived would write a review about their in-store experience (See Appendix A). Against this backdrop, in the current research we explore, if the simple imagined belief that a customer will write a review might shape the employee-to-customer service encounter and, if so, whether this leads to a more favorable service experience for the customer?

Utilizing Affective Events Theory (AET) (Weiss and Cropanzano 1996), as a framework for organizing the conceptual model (see Rodell and Judge 2009), online customer reviews are interpreted (by employees) as a mechanism for retailers to monitor their performance. And so, when serving customers whom they suspect might write a review, it creates what we frame as an imagined review monitoring event. Under appropriate circumstances, employees rationalize these events as an opportunity to make a positive impression on the retailer. Interpreting this as a challenge and a ‘time to shine’, they feel more determination, which results in better service

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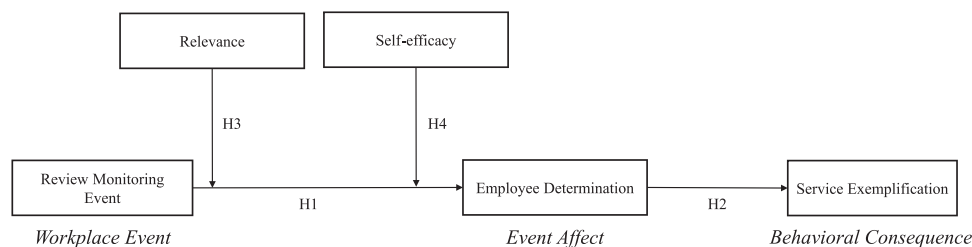


Fig. 1. Conceptual model of the effects of review monitoring events.

delivery; that is, the employee goes ‘above and beyond’ for that customer – which we refer to as *service exemplification* (See Kirby et al. 2014).

We test these assertions with six studies (one field experiment and five survey experiments), making three contributions to extant theory and practice. First, whilst significant attention has been given to online reviews from the standpoint of customers (e.g., Mathwick and Mostelle 2017), research beyond this group has been limited. By shifting the perspective to retail employees and investigating the extended arm of online reviews we address the call by Troebs et al. (2021) to understand how key marketing concepts (e.g., reviews) can impact secondary audiences beyond consumers, as well as the specific suggestion by Orlikowski and Scott (2014) to examine effects of customer reviews on frontline staff. Second, at a time where brick and mortar retailers are being advised to “offer a great in-store experience or kiss customers goodbye” (Marhamat 2022 p. 1), elucidating factors that augment in-store customer service is of significant value. We uncover a novel determinant of better service delivery (i.e., imagined review monitoring) that has not received examination in the retailing literature. Third, the research explores the pivotal role of employee determination in shaping retail outcomes. We reveal employee determination to be an emotional state that retailers would be advised to leverage whenever relevant or possible. In addition, and adding further nuance to these contributions, we identify and test two theoretically driven moderators that bound the conceptual model: (i) the relevance to the employee of being associated with an online review and (ii) their self-efficacy (Kirby et al. 2014). Last, as a managerial contribution, we provide initial evidence that retailers may exhort online reviews for the same results through deploying appropriate and strategic internal communications.

#### Affective events theory (AET)

The conceptual model in Fig. 1 reflect the sequence outlined in Affective Events Theory (AET). AET delineates how specific events experienced by employees in the workplace translate into differential behaviors because they trigger specific emotional responses (Weiss and Cropanzano 1996). In AET, workplace events are defined as “a change in [an employee’s] circumstances... a change in what one is currently experiencing” (Weiss and Cropanzano 1996 p. 31), which in past research has included events such as acts of workplace bullying and customer aggression (e.g., Glasø et al. 2011;

Cropanzano et al. 2017). Although many events are real, they can also be imagined in the sense that an employee anticipates something will occur (Weiss and Cropanzano 1996). Events are the catalyst for a sequence of employee responses comprising an affective reaction, which leads to a modification in their behavior (workplace event → affective / emotional reaction → behavioral response). Fig. 1 aligns with this sequence; that is, when an employee experiences a review monitoring event, it results in an enhanced service (behavior). This transpires because the employee is more determined (affect) to make a positive impression. We return to this sequence below. Nevertheless, first, we unpack the link between online reviews and monitoring, and how this might manifest into an event impacting frontline employees using the language of AET.

#### Imagined review monitoring

Being monitored is an everyday reality for frontline employees (r). Retailers commonly deploy methods to close the information asymmetry gap that exists between management’s knowledge of staff behavior and the actual behavior of staff (Mishra, Heide and Cort 1998). Close-circuit television (CCTV), in-store audio capture, supervisor podiums, and mystery shoppers, are all methods to monitor retail employees (Aiello and Kolb 1995; Jeske and Santuzzi 2015; Blessing and Natter 2019). Online customer reviews are a modern yet understated method for closing the asymmetry gap. These are consumer-generated evaluations of businesses, products, or services, which can be self-motivated on the part of consumers or encouraged by retailers (see r). Reviews are published on a retailer’s e-commerce site or via third-party review pages (e.g., TripAdvisor, Yelp), both of which have been growing in volume. For instance, in 2022 over 1 billion reviews (up 13% since 2021) were posted on TripAdvisor (Statista 2022). Reviews can be balanced in any direction, and it is not uncommon for customers to name or identify employees (see TripAdvisor 2019). Retailers benefit from this intelligence because it enables them to diagnose problem areas and identify examples of exemplary service (Rose and Blodgett 2016). Hence, being named or associated within a positive review represents a salient outcome because employees consider it an opportunity for their performance to be noticed and rewarded. This logic was confirmed in a survey with 58 US frontline retail and service employees, whereby over 80% confirmed they viewed reviews as a method for

impressing their manager, and as representing a mechanism for personal gain (see Appendix B).

As mentioned above, AET stipulates that workplace events can impact employee behavior even when imagined (Weiss and Cropanzano 1996). Thus, it is plausible that online customer reviews can shape a retail encounter without a customer writing a review. This characterizes a form of *imagined monitoring*, which is a well-established idea in social sciences (De Moya and Pallud 2020). Consider the Foucauldian panopticon concept (see Foucault 1977), which theorized how an optimal prison design would include a lookout tower located within the eyesight of all prisoner cells. Without prisoners seeing someone working (i.e., monitoring them), being in view of the tower was enough to develop an imagined belief they were being monitored, which would be reflected in more positive prisoner behavior. The panopticon example is an analogy. Indeed, employees might infer from an encounter that a customer will write an online review and although there is no certainty this is the case, they respond as if they were being monitored regardless. Although the link between online reviews and imagined monitoring has not been studied, a small body of research documents how imagined monitoring within online settings leads to revised behavior offline. For instance, Marder et al. (2016) demonstrated that Facebook users attending social events changed their behavior (e.g., lowering consumption of or abstaining from social drugs) when they believed other attendants would use camera phones. The mere cue of a camera phone led to the (imagined) possibility of photographs being viewed by social media connections. This was sufficient for them to feel as if they were being monitored, and so they adapted their behavior as a result (see also Lavertu et al. 2020).

Since imagined monitoring is a triggered event, it is dependent on the employee's interpretation that a customer is likely to write an online review. Retail employees are well-attuned to making inferences about customers using cues (see Ambady and Rosenthal 1993; Lim et al. 2017). The authors conducted a short qualitative online survey with 55 retail and service employees (see Web appendix 1 for a review of the method and findings) that identified three broad types of cue that lead employees to infer customers may write a review; (i) *review affiliation behavior* (i.e. the customer states or shows affiliation with online reviews – as Alex did in the vignette) (ii) *product behavior* (i.e. the customer demonstrates a higher-than-average interest in the retailer and/or the products it sells), and (iii) *customer demeanor* (i.e. the extent to which the customer fulfills specific stereotypes reflective of an online review author).

Whilst employees' imagining that a customer will write an online review is a necessary condition, it is not sufficient for an imagined monitoring event to take place. The employee must also believe that any review will be read. Thus, we clarify that an imagined review monitoring event (which we simplify to *review monitoring*) occurs when the employee believes that a customer will (i) write an online review about a service encounter (write component), which will be (ii) read by another person/monitor (read component).

Although the reader could be a myriad of participants (e.g., other customers, colleagues, competitors, etc.), we focus on the retailer as the primary monitor due to its significance to employees. Through AET we develop hypotheses that examine the effect of review monitoring on employee behavior within customer encounters.

## Hypotheses development

Should retail employees respond more (or less) favorably when they encounter a review monitoring event? Organizational citizenship behaviors reflect extra role actions beyond the typical scope of a job description. Organizational citizenship behaviors are therefore the “discretionary behavior(s)” on the part of an employee that promotes the “effective functioning of an organization” (Posdakoff and MacKenzie 1994 p. 351). This can reflect numerous activities driven by both intrinsic (e.g. a commitment to the organization) and extrinsic motivations including those pertaining to impression management (Rioux and Penner 2001). One form of organizational citizenship behavior relevant in the context is service exemplification (see Bolino 1999). Derived from the word ‘exemplary’ and the derivative ‘to exemplify’, workplace exemplification is defined as an organizational impression management strategy wherein employees (i.e., exemplifiers) aim to present to others their eagerness to do more or better than is required to create a positive impression (Bolino and Turnley 2003; see also Jones and Pittman 1982). Exemplification behavior is known as a form of “strategic self-sacrifice” since employees expend additional energy to present exemplary versions of themselves for future gain (Long 2017 p. 37). In a front-line retail context, we delineate service exemplification as being a concerted effort to go ‘above and beyond’ what would be considered standard expectations, motivated in the pursuit of making a positive impression (Bourdage et al. 2015). This might include behaviors such as allocating extra time and resources to assist customers or being creative to solve complex problems (i.e. out-of-the-box thinking) (Bolino and Turnley 2003, Bitner and Brown 2008; Ma et al. 2013).

Review monitoring should lead to higher levels of employee service exemplification because reviews offer a ‘time to shine’ (justification for which is provided from the employee survey in Appendix B). Employees are extrinsically motivated to gain favor with retailers, who are often the gatekeeper to professional success, capable of distributing financial and non-financial rewards paid in bonuses, tokens of appreciation, promotion, and responsibility advancement, to name but a few (Hansen et al. 2002). Indeed, some retailers link these rewards to online review mentions. An automotive retailer in Ohio monitors review content and remunerates reference to excellent service with bonuses (Charniga 2020). When situations offer moments to gain favor with retailers, employees raise their effort source. This often presents itself overtly. For instance, Selbie (2019) discusses how employees overperform, exceeding expectations when they are aware of active in-store mystery shopper initiatives. In a sim-

ilar vein, when employees learned their superior was paying a visit, they made greater effort to stay later and work harder (Steinmetz and Fishbachs). As such, when a review monitoring event occurs (a customer is thought likely of writing an online review to be seen by the retailer), employees will go 'above and beyond' when serving the customer (i.e. increase service exemplification), in the hope of impressing the retailer should the customer go on to author a review.

As aforementioned in AET, events impact behavior through the experiencing of psychological affect or emotion (Weiss and Cropanzo 1996). Thus, we anticipate determination (the emotion of determination) to mediate the chain between review monitoring and service exemplification. Determination is an approach-oriented and positive emotion characterized by high activation associations such as an increase in focus, exhilaration, inspiration, and motivation (Carver and Scheier 1994; Smith and Kirby 2009; Abuhmdeh and Csikszentmihalyi 2012; Kirby et al. 2014). Determination arises when individuals are faced with a challenge; that is, an opportunity to achieve a coveted but not yet attained outcome (Kirby et al. 2014). These situations are motivationally incongruent meaning a disparity exists between current (what I have) and desired (what I want) states (Russell 1980). Under the correct conditions (discussed below) review monitoring situations should be regarded by employees as a challenge because they desire the recognition that a positive review would render, but which they are yet to receive. Following this logic, review monitoring should heighten determination toward the service encounter. Feeling determined is linked to "tenacious goal pursuit" (Gable and Harmon-Jones 2008 p.481), and is associated with exemplary performance, which stems from increases in perseverance, focus, and effort expended on specific tasks – all reflecting positive determinants of individual performance (Yih, Kirby, and Smith 2020; Smith and Kirby 2009; Frijda, Kuipers, and Ter Schure 1989). In line with AET, we, therefore, propose that review monitoring will lead to higher levels of service exemplification because employees experience greater determination to do well.

**H1.** When retail employees experience a review monitoring event service exemplification will increase.

**H2.** The increase in service exemplification amongst employees who experience review monitoring arises due to an increase in determination.

#### *Boundary conditions*

As mentioned earlier, we acknowledge the hypothesized link between review monitoring and determination (and onward to service exemplification) may not always be positive, with specific conditions required. Theories of determination (see Kirby et al. 2014) and motivation (Lazarus and Folkman 1984; Carver and Scheier 2001; Leary and Kowalski 1990) pinpoint two critical 'appraisal components' that should moderate the effect of review monitoring events on employee de-

termination. These are (i) goal relevance (herein relevance) and (ii) an employee's self-efficacy.

Relevance is the degree to which a person evaluates a situation or event as a conduit to specific targets (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). This requires the simultaneous appraisal of (i) their goals and desires (i.e., their disposition to want something) and (ii) the relevance of a specific situation or event in achieving them (i.e., whether the situation satisfies that disposition) (Griner and Smith 2000). Wharton et al. (2021) summarised this evaluation as "no concern, no emotion" (p.264, see also Frijda 2009). Hence, we expect relevance to moderate the determination experienced by employees when they encounter a review monitoring event (see Kirby et al. 2014). If the event is thought not to lead to outcomes an employee cares about (e.g., career enhancement) it will constrain their determination. Though we have presumed that receiving a positive customer review will be salient to employees because it has the potential for recognition and reward (Appendix B) we acknowledge two contrary situations, both aligning with work by Griner and Smith (2000). That is, if employees (i) have career aspirations beyond retail (e.g., not be motivated by career advancement), and/or (ii) perceive that positive online reviews have a negligible impact on achieving desired career goals (e.g. know their employer does not provide rewards for positive reviews), then a review monitoring event will be interpreted as less salient attenuating the first link in the model. As such:

**H3.** The effect of a review monitoring event on employee determination is stronger when relevance is high.

The second appraisal is an employee's self-efficacy. In the determination literature, self-efficacy is used interchangeably with the term 'problem-focused coping potential' (Kirby et al. 2014; Yih, Kirby and Smith 2020), which delineates a reflective evaluation of one's ability to meet specific targets and goals (Carver, Scheier and Weintraub 1989). It both "causes and constitutes [an] emotional experience" (Kirby et al. 2014 p.380). We expect higher (lower) self-efficacy to enhance (attenuate) determination. Indeed, for an employee to become determined there must also be a level of self-belief that a desired outcome is within reach. Ostensibly, the more efficacy a person feels the more 'fired up' they become about a task. Of course, we assume that many employees will be confident in serving and satisfying retail customers (i.e. higher self-efficacy). After all, most of the time this is a routine and familiar task (Gist and Mitchell 1992) with little reason for them to suppose something will go awry (Kipfelsberger et al. 2016). However, high self-efficacy will not be universal. For some (e.g., new trainees or those working with new or unfamiliar complex products), confidence may remain low. And so, when an employee experiences a review monitoring event, a greater optimism and sense of determination will be felt in the moment, but only in those with higher self-efficacy, in the belief they have the expertise to satisfy the customer. As such:

**H4.** The effect of a review monitoring event on employee determination is stronger when employee self-efficacy is high.

### Summary and experimental overview

In Study 1 we establish if a review monitoring event impacts service exemplification in the field. We then confirm the baseline model (Study 2A) and test for alternative explanations for the empirical manipulations, whilst generalizing to a different type of retailer (Study 2B). We then turn our attention to (i) the moderators (i.e., boundary effects) (Study 3 and 4) and, last (ii) the managerially relevant question of whether retailers can leverage this same process more proactively by socializing an online review culture using appropriate internal communications (Study 5).

#### Study 1: field test of an imagined review monitoring event on service exemplification

We designed a field experiment to establish if a review monitoring event initiated through a cue delivered by a customer enhances service exemplification (H1). In practice this put to the test the opening vignette scenario concerning Alex in which a simple verbal cue corresponding to a citing form of review affiliation behavior was provided (see Web Appendix 1 for more details of citing and other review monitoring cues). As such, the customer mentioned using an online review site. A two-condition between-subjects experiment was deployed involving a review monitoring condition *vs* a control. For simplicity, we refer to this as review monitoring being present *vs* absent (RM<sub>present</sub> *vs.* RM<sub>absent</sub>) from herein.

#### Sampling, participants, and procedure

Forty hotels in the City of Edinburgh, UK, were randomly selected using the TripAdvisor website as the sampling frame. To narrow down the set, only hotels that met two key selection criteria were included. These were the geographical location (hotels needed to be in a city centre zip code), and a minimum review rating of 4 out of 5 (the average score from 300 hotels was 4.2). Hotels were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions.

An actress hired by the research team visited hotels under the guise of an information-sourcing mission. She followed a script that had been designed by the research team. For practical reasons she was aware of the study's objective, however, training was also given to ensure the script was delivered with parity across conditions. Each hotel was assigned to either the review monitoring present or absent condition, which were rotated on consecutive hotel visits. Engaging the first available employee at the hotel's reception desk, in the RM<sub>absent</sub> condition the actress explained that her family had heard about the hotel and needed advice on local attractions before they arrived from Sri Lanka. The RM<sub>present</sub> condition contained the same dialogue but with the addendum that her family had learned about the hotel via TripAdvisor – a well-known online review site. The audio was covertly recorded.

At the end of the conversation, the employee was informed about the experiment and asked to complete a short exit questionnaire. A voucher for coffee and the offer of a full debrief were provided. In this study, we captured the dependent variable - service exemplification - by measuring the time (seconds) spent by the employee in responding to the customer's question seeking advice. Although we were unable to gauge whether the time spent on serving the actress translated into 'above and beyond' levels of service from the employee's perspective, spending more time attending to customers is often cited as an example of service behavior that retailers evaluate in a positive light (see Bolino et al. 2008). From the data, two cases were omitted. In the RM<sub>absent</sub> condition a recording failure prevented data capture, whilst, in the RM<sub>present</sub> condition, one spoke uninterrupted for over six minutes - twice the length of others. The final sample consisted of 19 employees who were male, 18 were female and one was unrevealed. Subjects had an average of seven years of work experience. Situational data (e.g., if there was a sign for a review site promoted by the hotel, the number of staff at the counter, the number of customers queueing for assistance, the gender of the employee), as well as other more objective data from TripAdvisor (e.g., no. of reviews, overall score), were included as control variables in our analysis. None differed between conditions ( $ps > .05$ ).

#### Results and discussion

An independent sample *t*-test revealed that employees in the RM<sub>present</sub> condition spent more time (measured in seconds) replying to the customer's question (89.00 s, SE = 13.20) compared to those in the RM<sub>absent</sub> condition (59.17 s, SE = 9.55);  $t(36) = -1.831$ ,  $p = .038$  one-tailed;  $\eta^2 = .08$ ).

In conclusion, a subtle cue representative of a real-world review monitoring event worked to increase service exemplification providing initial support for H1. The study forewent precision for realism, which we address in the next study. However, the results legitimize addressing the question of 'why' review monitoring leads to service exemplification, and so we continue establishing the underlying mechanism by testing employee determination as the mediator.

#### Study 2A: establishing the baseline model

We turn our attention to H2. A scenario-based between-subjects design, again with a review monitoring and control condition (RM<sub>present</sub> *vs.* RM<sub>absent</sub>) was operationalized. As before, we deployed another citing cue to initiate the review monitoring condition. Though, rather than an auditory cue, this time we opted for a visual stimulus.

#### Stimuli and sample

A vignette-style scenario was designed requiring participants to imagine working as an assistant on the customer service desk of an independent hardware store. In the scenario, a customer approaches the desk and places an item

on the counter before asking a product-related question. In the RM<sub>absent</sub> (control) condition, the visual cue was a fiction book, while in the RM<sub>present</sub> condition it was a smartphone displaying the TripAdvisor logo present within the mobile application. Web Appendix 2 provides the full scenario for Study 2A as well as those for *all* subsequent studies.

The RM manipulation was checked using a pre-test so as not to lead to biased responses (Vargas et al. 2017). This was also replicated in the remaining studies. The manipulation check comprised a three-item measure to establish if the employee perceived the customer would later write an online review to be seen by the retailer (e.g. post a review that may be viewed by a manager,  $\alpha = .96$ ). The review monitoring manipulation here, and in all subsequent studies, was satisfactory. Manipulation check results for the remaining sequence of studies (and all manipulated variables) are presented in Appendix C.

In line with the conceptual definition provided by Kirby et al. 2014, employee determination was examined using three items selected from the PANAS scale (adapted from Pugh 2001) i.e. I feel determined, inspired, attentive;  $\alpha = .71$ . Service exemplification was measured using a three-item scale adapted from McClean and Collins (2011) (e.g., you would go above and beyond normal job requirements;  $\alpha = .92$ ). Measures for determination and service exemplification were used in subsequent studies, as were the following control variables: age, gender, customer-facing role (i.e., to what extent is your role customer-facing – measured on a 7-point low to high scale). A full list of measurement items is supplied in Appendix D. The sample comprised US-based retail and hospitality workers ( $n = 127$ ; 56.3% female;  $\bar{x}_{age} = 35.67$ ,  $SD = 11.48$ ), which were invited via a paid survey panel provider (CloudResearch). This platform was also used in the remaining studies. A set of internal attention checks were included to ensure scenarios were understood. Failure or non-compliance led to the automatic termination of the survey. This procedure was followed in all subsequent studies.

## Results and discussion

Analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) confirmed statistically significant relationships between review monitoring and service exemplification ( $F(1,122) = 7.860$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .061$ ;  $RM_{absent} = 5.07$ ,  $SE = .12$  vs.  $RM_{present} = 5.54$ ,  $SE = .12$ ) and determination ( $F(1,122) = 6.781$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .053$ ;  $RM_{absent} = 4.56$ ,  $SE = .17$  vs.  $RM_{present} = 5.19$ ,  $SE = .16$ ). Thus, exposing employees to the review monitoring event ( $RM_{present}$ ) was sufficient to increase service exemplification (H1 supported) and determination. Using model 4 in the IBM SPSS PROCESS MACRO we tested the indirect effect of review monitoring (IV) on service exemplification (DV) mediated by determination (M). All links in the chain were positive and significant ( $\beta_{RM_{present} \rightarrow Y_{Determination}} = .473$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $\beta_{Determination \rightarrow Y_{Exemp}} = .694$ ,  $p < .001$ ), which yielded an overall significant indirect effect through determination ( $\beta_{Determination} = .328$ , 95% CI: .100 to .595). Further-

more, this was established as full mediation since the direct path between review monitoring and service exemplification became non-significant with the inclusion of the mediator (see Table 1 for model results for all subsequent studies). These results supported H2. As a precaution, we also considered the possibility of an alternative processor (i.e., mediator). Whilst *determination* is an approach-oriented emotion it is plausible that employees respond with anxiety to the prospect of review monitoring. In comparison, anxiety is more avoidance-focused, typified by nervousness and retreat. As such, we modeled anxiety in parallel with determination using a two-item measure borrowed from Rodell and Judge (2009) i.e. I feel: nervous, anxious  $r = .92$ ,  $p < .01$ . Only the indirect effect through determination was significant, ruling out this alternative pathway and confirming our hypothesized model.

In Study 2A the results validated the findings of Study 1 (H1 supported). In addition, we confirmed the baseline model (Review Monitoring  $\rightarrow$  Determination  $\rightarrow$  Service Exemplification) and found support for H2, which conformed with the Event $\rightarrow$ Affect $\rightarrow$ Behavior framework used in AET research. Concerning the importance of replicability in management research, in Study 2B we (i) test the generalizability of the model to a different retail setting (i.e. a chain supermarket), and (ii) rule out two further explanations for why review monitoring leads to higher service exemplification.

## Study 2b: model generalization

In keeping with Study 2A, we devised a scenario-based between-subjects design, once again manipulating a review monitoring event ( $RM_{present}$ ) vs a control condition ( $RM_{absent}$ ).

### Stimuli, participants, and procedure

Participants were told they worked on the floor of a supermarket and a customer had approached holding an item – reflecting another *citing* cue. In the  $RM_{absent}$  condition, this was just a smartphone (no further information given), and for the  $RM_{present}$  it was a mobile phone showing a review page on Google Reviews for the supermarket. All baseline model measures were the same as in Study 2A. However, we included two alternative explanations for why the stimuli might enhance service exemplification that went beyond the review monitoring event. These were: (i) perceived customer status, and (ii) customer relatedness. Previous studies have shown that individuals who are (i) perceived as being of higher status, and (ii) more relatable or similar to employees tend to receive more attention (e.g. Colliander et al. 2017; Cervellon et al. 2019). Status was measured using five-items (e.g., the customers have an influential position in society,  $\alpha = .89$ ) adapted from Hollingshead (2011), while customer related-

Table 1  
Key mediation results studies 2–5\*

	Model 1 ( $X_{RM} \rightarrow M1_{Determination}$ )			Model 2 ( $X_{RM} \rightarrow M1_{Determination} \rightarrow Y_{Exemp}$ )			Model 1 ( $X_{RM} \rightarrow M1_{Determination}$ )			Model 2 ( $X_{RM} \rightarrow M1_{Determination} \rightarrow Y_{Exemp}$ )		
	<i>B</i>	<i>s.e.</i>	<i>p</i>	$\beta$	<i>s.e.</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>s.e.</i>	<i>p</i>	$\beta$	<i>s.e.</i>	<i>p</i>
Study 2a: Indirect eff (95%): $\beta = .328$ CI (.100–.595)	F(4,122) = 6.060, $p < .001$ , R-sq=.165						F(4,103) = 5.150, $p < .001$ , R-sq=.167					
Study 2b: Indirect eff (95%): $\beta = .399$ CI (.117–.741),	F(5,121) = 9.803, $p < .001$ , R-sq = .288						F(5,102) = 11.142, $p < .001$ , R-sq = .359					
Review monitoring	.472	.167	.006	.298	.217	.174	.511	.186	.007	.364	.254	.155
Facing	.371	.094	<.001	-.125	.125	.318	.165	.093	.080	.076	.125	.546
Gender	-.122	.170	.475	.039	.213	.854	.278	.182	.130	.118	.243	.629
Age	.007	.007	.38	.004	.009	.662	.024	.009	.009	.011	.012	.356
Determination				.694	.113	<.001				.781	.130	<.001
Study 3: moderated indirect eff (95%): $\beta = .226$ CI (.028–.443)	F(7,358) = 9.944, $p < .001$ , R-sq = .163						F(6,243) = 9.649, $p < .001$ , R-sq = .192					
Study 4: moderated indirect eff (95%): $\beta = .911$ CI (.443–1.438)	F(6,359) = 23.542, $p < .001$ , R-sq = .282						F(5,244) = 46.028, $p < .001$ , R-sq = .485					
Review monitoring	-.362	.272	.184	.091	.097	.352	-1.004	.663	<.001	.280	.140	.047
Gender	.167	.093	.072	.082	.105	.776	.319	.126	.012	.013	.140	.090
Age	.001	.003	.444	.008	.004	.026	.006	.005	.194	-.004	.005	.457
Determination				.616	.055	<.001				.920	.066	<.001
Employment control	.060	.062	.333	-.040	.072	.580	-.207	.096	.033	.021	.106	.843
Electric car knowledge (S3 only)	.003	.034	.994	-.024	.038	.526						
Self-efficacy (S3 only)	.081	.271	.765									
RM*Self-efficacy (S3 only)	.366	.172	.033									
Relevance (S4 only)							-1.006	.391	<.001			
RM*Relevance (S4 only)							.990	.249	<.001			
Study 5 <sup>a</sup> : Indirect effs (95%): $\beta_{Determination[promotion]} = .271$ CI (.043–.503), all other indirect paths non-significant	F(5,293) = 8.110, $p < .001$ , R-sq = .121						F(6,229) = 39.687, $p < .001$ , R-sq = .488					
	Model 1 ( $X_{RM} \rightarrow M1_{Determination}$ )			Model 2 ( $X_{RM} \rightarrow M2_{Anxiety}$ )			Model 3 ( $X_{RM}, M1, M2 \rightarrow Y_{Exemp}$ )					
	<i>B</i>	<i>s.e.</i>	<i>p</i>	$\beta$	<i>s.e.</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>s.e.</i>	<i>p</i>			
RM promotion frame	.270	.121	.027	-.104	.221	.637	-.091	.132	.491			
RM prevention frame	-.065	.121	.588	.581	.220	.009	-.004	.132	.975			
Facing	.166	.045	<.001	-.187	.082	.022	-.000	.049	.997			
Gender	.121	.101	.232	.441	.185	.018	-.112	.111	.316			
Age	.018	.005	.008	-.003	.009	.727	.002	.005	.690			
Determination							1.006	.064	<.001			
Anxiety							.045	.035	.199			

<sup>a</sup> For study 5 anxiety is specified as a parallel mediator and the independent variable was multicategorical using the RM<sub>absent</sub> condition as the comparison group.

\* Total and interaction effects on service exemplification (RM/RM\*moderator  $\rightarrow$  Exemp) are presented within the results section of each study.

ness had four-items (e.g. a sense that I am comparable to the customer,  $\alpha = .95$ ) adapted from Sweeney et al. (2014). The sample comprised 108 US-based retail and hospitality workers (52.7% female;  $\bar{x}_{\text{age}} = 38.45$ ,  $SD = 10.46$ ).

### Results and discussion

As before, an ANCOVA replicated the results observed in Study 1 and Study 2A. With the presence of a review monitoring event both service exemplification ( $F(1,103) = 7.247$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .066$ ;  $RM_{\text{absent}} = 4.76$ ,  $SE = .20$  vs.  $RM_{\text{present}} = 5.53$ ,  $SE = .19$ ) and determination ( $F(1,103) = 7.590$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .069$ ;  $RM_{\text{absent}} = 5.25$ ,  $SE = .13$  vs.  $RM_{\text{present}} = 5.76$ ,  $SE = .13$ ) were higher than in the control condition. Furthermore, neither status nor reliability differed between conditions ( $ps > .05$ ). Again using Model 4 (PROCESS), the mediation results (review monitoring  $\rightarrow$  determination  $\rightarrow$  service exemplification) were consistent with Study 2A ( $\beta_{\text{determination}} = .399$ , 95% CI: .117–.741, see Table 1 for full results). In keeping with Study 2A, anxiety was modeled in parallel with determination. Once again, only determination mediated the pathway.

Studies 2A and 2B provide compelling evidence for the main effect and baseline model, providing evidence for H1 and H2. Neither of the possible confounding explanations appears to impact the results. In Study 3 we examine the first of two boundary conditions: the role of a retail employee's self-efficacy (H4), prior to evaluating the importance of relevance (H3) (Study 4).

### Study 3: self-efficacy as a review monitoring boundary condition

As already theorized, we predict that when review monitoring occurs, employee determination (and service exemplification) increases when employees have high self-efficacy (SE). We tested H4 via a 2 ( $RM_{\text{present}}$  vs.  $RM_{\text{absent}}$ )  $\times$  2 ( $SE_{\text{low}}$  vs.  $SE_{\text{high}}$ ) scenario-based between-subjects design.

#### Stimuli, participants, and procedure

Participants were told they were a salesperson at a small car dealership specializing in electric cars. They were given a manual about selling electric cars, which chronicled relevant information (e.g., differences in battery life and power, the impact of weather conditions on range, or the need for a separate heat-pump). In the low self-efficacy ( $SE_{\text{low}}$ ) condition, for reasons outside of their control, they had not yet read the manual. In the  $SE_{\text{high}}$  condition they had studied the manual in detail and were confident in its content. Also, in the scenario, a customer had approached and sat down at the sales desk. In the  $RM_{\text{absent}}$  condition, the customer placed a smartphone on the lock screen (delivered as a visual citing stimulus), while in the  $RM_{\text{present}}$  condition, the phone displayed the retailer's Google Review page. Respondents were informed the customer had several questions about electric cars.

A sample of 366 adults residing in the US (57.6% female;  $\bar{x}_{\text{age}} = 44.10$ ,  $SD = 13.83$ ) was recruited through same panel as before. A general sample was selected because of the inherent difficulty in manipulating lower self-efficacy in retail employees who are generally confident (and thus high in self-efficacy) about serving customers. All measures were identical to Study 2A, with the addition of a three-item manipulation check for self-efficacy (e.g. I have the required knowledge to satisfy the customer,  $\alpha = .96$ ) and two further controls; 1) capturing whether participants worked in a front-line retail or service role (1 = yes, 2 = no) in real life and 2), existing knowledge of electric cars (i.e., In real life, rate your knowledge about Electric cars, measured on a 7-point scale: 1 = far below average; 7 = far above average).

### Results and discussion

A two-way ANCOVA provided support for a significant interaction effect between review monitoring and self-efficacy on determination ( $F(1,358) = 4.556$ ,  $p = .033$ ,  $\eta^2 = .033$ ). This relationship is depicted in Fig. 2. Pairwise comparisons show that review monitoring increased determination when self-efficacy was high ( $RM_{\text{absent}} = 5.78$ ,  $SE = .09$  vs.  $RM_{\text{present}} = 6.15$ ,  $SE = .09$ ,  $p < .01$ ) but not when it was low ( $RM_{\text{absent}} = 5.34$ ,  $SE = .09$  vs.  $RM_{\text{present}} = 5.35$ ,  $SE = .09$ ,  $p > .05$ ). H4 was thus supported. It is prudent to highlight that the ANCOVA revealed a partially significant interaction ( $RM^*SE$ ) on service exemplification ( $p = .08$ )<sup>1</sup>. Using Model 7 in PROCESS we established support for the moderated mediation since the indirect effect ( $RM \rightarrow$  determination  $\rightarrow$  service exemplification) was statistically significant when self-efficacy was high rather than low ( $\beta_{\text{determination}} = .226$ , 95% CI: .028–.443).

This study confirms the divergent impact of review monitoring based on an employee's self-efficacy and the critical nature of this appraisal. When employees are less confident in their ability the link(s) to determination (and service exemplification) breaks down (Kirby et al. 2014).

### Study 4: relevance as a review monitoring boundary condition

As discussed earlier, review monitoring needs to be interpreted by employees as an opportunity to achieve personal goals. We presume that the possibility of being mentioned, named, or implied within an online customer review is a positive consequence of their career ambitions. We operationalized another 2 ( $RM_{\text{low}}$  vs.  $RM_{\text{high}}$ )  $\times$  2 ( $Rel_{\text{low}}$  vs.  $Rel_{\text{high}}$ ) between-subjects design study where relevance (Rel)

<sup>1</sup> ANCOVA results of interaction ( $RM^*SE$ ) on service exemplification  $F(1,358) = 3.016$ ,  $p = .083$ ,  $\eta^2 = .008$ . Pairwise comparison showed review monitoring increased service exemplification ( $RM_{\text{absent}} = 5.66$ ,  $SE = .11$  vs.  $RM_{\text{present}} = 6.09$ ,  $SE = .11$ ,  $p = .011$ ) but not when self-efficacy was low ( $RM_{\text{absent}} = 5.58$ ,  $SE = .11$  vs.  $RM_{\text{present}} = 5.60$ ,  $SE = .11$ ,  $p = .938$ ). Albeit the interaction only approaches significance.



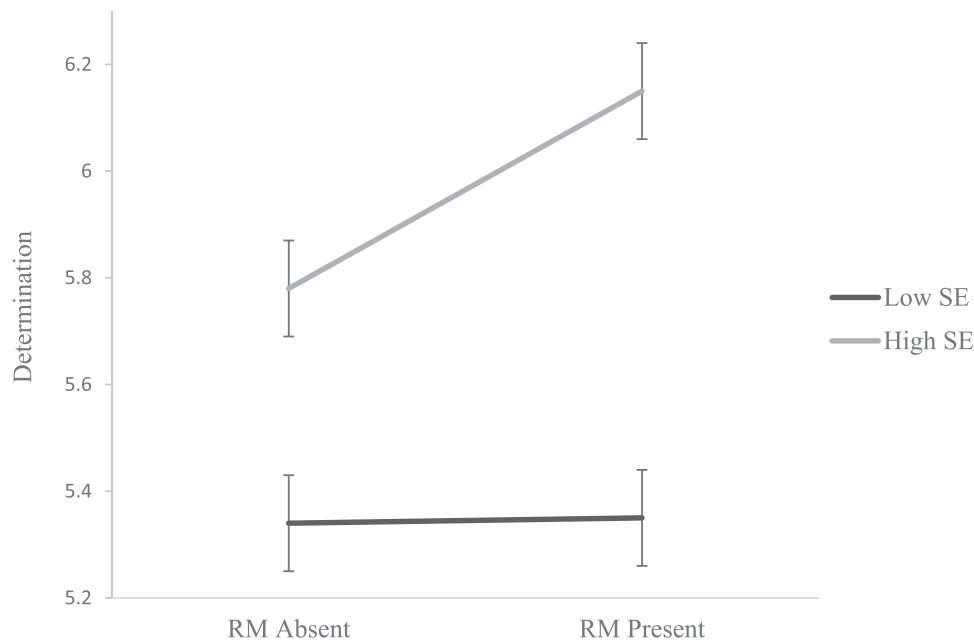


Fig. 2. The effect of review monitoring on determination for employees high (vs. low) in self-efficacy.

was primed to be either high or low. It should be noted that in Study 4 the review monitoring conditions were designed to be scaled (either high or low levels of monitoring) rather than present or absent. This is explained below.

#### Stimuli, participants, and procedure

Participants were asked to imagine working at a department store answering customer questions in the electronics section. They had a clear ambition to be promoted through the ranks. For the  $Rel_{high}$  ( $Rel_{low}$ ) condition, respondents were told to imagine that: “you personally believe that online customer reviews about the service you deliver should (not) be something that contributes to your promotion application. Therefore, you are (not at all) motivated by the prospect of being featured in a customer’s online review”. They were then advised that their retail experience enabled them to read signals (e.g., verbal, appearance, actions) that indicated whether customers were more or less likely to write an online review about the encounter. In the scenario, it was a busy Saturday and several customers waited in line.  $RM_{high}$  ( $RM_{low}$ ) was manipulated by suggesting subtle signals meant they were ‘sufficiently confident this person will (not) write a review about their visit’. Here we did not manipulate review monitoring through a specific stimulus but rather the higher-order necessary appraisal that must arise from any stimuli to be classified as a review monitoring event. The reason for this was to provide initial support for review monitoring effects generalizable across the breadth of potential cues that may exist (see Web Appendix 1). Participants were then asked questions about serving this customer. Measures were collected as per Study 2A with the addition of a three-item manipulation check for goal relevance (e.g. online reviews about my

service are relevant for me to get promoted,  $\alpha = .99$ ). The sample mirrored the approach taken in Study 3 ( $n = 236$ ; 55.6% female;  $\bar{x}_{age} = 41.89$ ,  $SD = 13.43$ ).

#### Results and discussion

A two-way ANCOVA (see Fig. 3) provided a significant interaction between review monitoring and relevance ( $F(1,243) = 15.804$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .061$ ). As expected, determination was higher when goal relevance was high ( $RM_{low} = 5.23$ ,  $SE = .13$  vs.  $RM_{high} = 6.21$ ,  $SE = .12$ ,  $p < .001$ ) but not when it was low ( $RM_{low} = 5.29$ ,  $SE = .12$  vs.  $RM_{high} = 5.28$ ,  $SE = .13$ ,  $p > .05$ ). For completeness, we established that this interaction was also statistically significant when service exemplification was the dependent variable ( $p < .001$ )<sup>2</sup>. In keeping with Study 3, an analysis of the moderated mediation path for review monitoring on service exemplification through determination was only significant when goal relevance was high ( $\beta_{determination} = .911$ , 95% CI: .443–1.438). See Table 1.

The study provides strong support for H3. That is, review monitoring leads to higher levels of service exemplification via determination, but only when receiving an online customer review is seen as being relevant to the employee achieving his or her career goals.

<sup>2</sup> ANCOVA results the interaction (RM\*Rel) on service exemplification ( $F(1,358) = 21.268$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .081$ ). Pairwise comparison showed when relevance was high, RM increased service exemplification ( $M_{RM-low} = 4.81$ ,  $SE = .17$  vs.  $M_{RM-high} = 6.26$ ,  $SE = .16$ ,  $p < .001$ ) but not when relevance was low ( $M_{RM-low} = 4.69$ ,  $SE = .16$  vs.  $M_{RM-high} = 4.60$ ,  $SE = .18$ ,  $p = .711$ ).

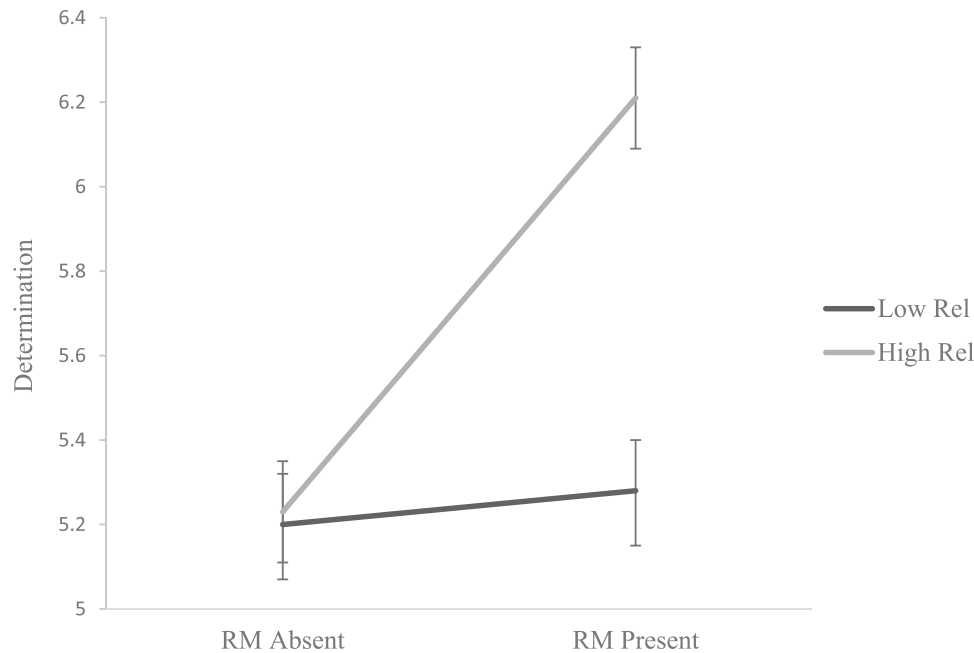


Fig. 3. The effect of review monitoring on determination for employees perceiving high (vs. low) relevance.

### Study 5: achieving service exemplification through a management-led review orientation

As aforementioned, review monitoring consists of the joint likelihood of two components: (i) believing a customer will write a review (i.e., writing component) and (ii) the retailer will read it (i.e., reading component). Previous studies have focused on increasing the likelihood of employees inferring that a customer will ‘write’ a review. Alas, in practice, it is difficult for a retailer to have control over this likelihood (see Koukova et al. 2023 r). And so, in the final study, we flip perspectives and examine ‘if’ retailers can increase service exemplification by *focusing* only on the reading component; that is, by declaring and socializing their intention to prioritize reading online reviews (i.e. implementing a ‘review orientation’). However, there is more than one way to communicate this to employees, and with contrasting outcomes.

In line with our previous findings, for a review orientation to increase service exemplification behavior, it needs to be communicated in a way that makes employees more determined. Since determination is an approach-focused emotion (Kirby et al. 2014), it follows that a promotion-focused framing, centered around shared goals, advancement, and achievement of ideals and aspirations (“standards one hopes to meet”) will be sufficient to trigger this (Mogilner, Aaker and Pennington 2008, p.671). Indeed, Wells et al. (2007) found that when a telecommunication firm announced how in-house monitoring would be employed for developmental purposes (i.e., promotion framed), it led to higher levels of organizational commitment and communal buy-in, both of which are approach-oriented. Yet, it is also possible to communicate a review orientation by framing the message as prevention focused; that is, by stressing an obligation to meet certain stan-

dards (“the ‘standard we need to meet’”). Prevention-focused communications are generally punitive (Mogilner et al. 2008), and often interpreted as a hindrance by employees, obstructing rather than enabling goal achievement. For most, hindrances are associated with anxiety (and avoidance) rather than determination (see Higgins 1998; Cheng et al. 2013; Kirby et al. 2014). As such, we anticipate when a prevention framing is used, any positive effects associated with review monitoring will be attenuated or even reversed.

In summary, when a retailer deploys a promotion-framed message to communicate a review orientation (i.e., “we read reviews to identify and reward your excellent service”), then service exemplification will increase because employees are more determined. This will be attenuated (or even reversed) when a prevention framing is used (i.e. we read reviews to uncover poor service), which we expect to be associated with higher anxiety. The single factor between-subject experiment has three conditions: a control condition with no review monitoring ( $RM_{\text{absent}}$ ), a review monitoring condition using a prevention framing ( $RM_{\text{prevention}}$ ), and one using a promotion framing ( $RM_{\text{promotion}}$ ).

#### Stimuli, participant, and procedure

Participants were asked to imagine working as a sales assistant at a bicycle store. During a presentation, employees were shown a slide deck with updates and news. In the  $RM_{\text{promotion}}$  ( $RM_{\text{prevention}}$ ) condition, the retailer orientated staff by presenting slides about how they will read online reviews to identify excellent (poor) service. In the  $RM_{\text{absent}}$  condition, they were provided with details of an unrelated health and safety policy. The latter was consistent in format and length to the other conditions. Determination, service exem-

plification, and anxiety were measured as per study 2A. A single-item manipulation check for review orientation framing used a bi-polar scale and captured whether respondents located what the retailer wanted to identify by reading customer reviews (i.e., examples of poor service – exemplary service). The sample comprised 299 US-based retail and hospitality workers (60.2% female;  $\bar{x}_{\text{age}} = 36.01$ ,  $SD = 9.95$ ).

### Results and discussion

We employed ANCOVAs with pairwise comparisons to examine the effect of each condition on determination, anxiety, and service exemplification. This confirmed determination was highest when a promotion framing was used ( $F(2,293) = 4.383$ ,  $p = .013$ ,  $\eta^2 = .029$ ;  $RM_{\text{promotion}} = 5.92$ ,  $SE = .08$  vs.  $RM_{\text{prevention}} = 5.59$ ,  $SE = .08$   $p < .01$ ;  $RM_{\text{absent}} = 5.65$ ,  $SE = .09$   $p = .027$ , although we found no significant difference between the prevention framing and absent group ( $p > .05$ ). Anxiety was higher when prevention framing was used ( $F(2,293) = 5.69$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .037$ ;  $RM_{\text{prevention}} = 2.91$ ,  $SE = .16$ ; vs.  $RM_{\text{promotion}} = 2.22$ ,  $SE = .15$   $p < .01$ ,  $RM_{\text{absent}} = 2.32$ ,  $SE = .16$   $p < .01$ ). There was also no difference in anxiety between the promotion framing and control conditions ( $p > .05$ ). No significant difference in service exemplification was discovered between the three conditions ( $p > .05$ ).<sup>3</sup>

To examine the effect of each RM condition on service exemplification via determination and anxiety, a multi-categorical parallel mediation model was specified using Model 4 in PROCESS ( $RM_{\text{absent}}$  [Reference group] vs.  $RM_{\text{prevention}}$  and  $RM_{\text{promotion}}$ ). The results revealed one significant indirect effect - this was between the  $RM_{\text{promotion}}$  and service exemplification through determination ( $\beta_{\text{determination}} = .271$ , 95% CI: .043–.503) (see Table 1 for full results). This was consistent with our initial expectation.

### General discussion

From marketing academics to practitioners, online customer reviews have been celebrated as a tool for shaping positive consumer behaviors (e.g., Floyd et al., 2014; Wu, et al. 2021). Though undoubtedly the case, we expand this sphere of influence to reach the retail frontline. In particular, when an employee imagines that a customer is likely to write an online review about their experience, it is imagined as tantamount to monitoring (i.e., a way the retailer knows how they perform in serving customers). Seeing this as an opportunity, the employee approaches the encounter as a challenge, experiencing a rise in determination to do well. Hence, they raise their service game, providing the customer with an enhanced service experience, typified by the employee's increased efforts to go beyond what would be expected. Retailers will be buoyed by these findings. Indeed, this unintended outcome

is good news for them (and customers), given the perennial quest for retailers to create memorable in-store customer experiences (Grewal, et al. 2017).

In Study 1 we provided support for H1 using a field experiment used to test the underlying proposal that: when employees experience a review monitoring event, they deliver a more exemplified service. Studies 2A and 2B confirmed this, and the role of determination as the mediating variable in the model (i.e., H2). However, the prospect of review monitoring taking place does not mean all employees will experience a rise in their determination to do well. Studies 3 and 4 show that for those who are low in self-efficacy or do not believe that being associated with a positive review is relevant for advancing their personal goals (e.g. promotion), review monitoring fails to convert into service exemplification (H3, H4 supported). Last, in Study 5 we provide exploratory support for retailers triggering this same process by orientating employees toward an internal review culture (i.e., retailers read online reviews to better understand the employee's performance). Moreover, this messaging should always take on promotion rather than prevention framing.

### Theoretical discussion and further research

By switching the perspective of reviews from a customer-to-customer influencing tool to a mechanism for impacting retail frontline employees, we make important contributions to the online customer review (e.g. Floyd et al. 2014; Wu, Jin and Xu 2021) and retail service performance literature (e.g. Dallimore et al. 2007; Rapp et al. 2015; Jung et al. 2022). We respond to the simultaneous calls made by scholars to understand how core marketing concepts can impact secondary audiences (Troebbs et al. 2021), specifically employees (and their work) (Orlikowski and Scott 2014). Moreover, in the retail service performance literature, a body of research has identified situations in which customers can influence the service they receive, and we offer another context where this is the case.

We postulate that online customer reviews have a secondary function, interpreted by employees as a mechanism for the retailer to glimpse into their customer encounters (i.e., monitor service performance). Online reviews offer retailers a chance to glean important and otherwise difficult-to-capture insights, closing a section of the information asymmetry gap between management and the frontline (Mishra, Heide, and Cort 1998). Thus, when a customer is likely to later write an online review (perhaps because of something they do or say), it creates an imagined review monitoring event for the employee. Drawing from Affective Event Theory (Weiss and Cropanzano 1996), this event is only *imagined* however still sufficient to drive changes in affect and behavior. Thus, review monitoring is reminiscent of Foucault's panopticon where prisoner behavior is shaped by imagined rather than actual monitoring. Whilst we draw attention to imagined monitoring events as an unexpected antecedent of positive customer-employee service encounters, this is merely an initial step in a nuanced context. It is essential to examine the potential

<sup>3</sup> Service exemplification across RM conditions ( $F(2,293) = .874$ ,  $p = .418$ ,  $\eta^2 = .006$ ;  $RM_{\text{absent}} = 5.33$ ,  $SE = .13$ ,  $RM_{\text{prevention}} = 5.29$ ,  $SE = .12$ ;  $RM_{\text{promotion}} = 5.51$ ,  $SE = .12$ ).

for other retail phenomena (e.g., suspected social media influencers) to initiate comparable monitoring events governed by a similar process, and whether review monitoring leads to differential (e.g. more favorable) outcomes as compared to other forms of monitoring, in particular those used by retailers (e.g. CCTV, mystery shopping) (Aiello and Kolb 1995; Blessing and Natter 2019).

As already presented, when review monitoring events occur, service exemplification rises. But what triggers the perception a customer might write a review in the first place? We consider them triggered by specific cues that signal a higher likelihood of being the focus of a review. Various examples in the retailing literature of employees interpret customer-transmitted cues to the end result of performing better in their role (e.g., facial expressions, dress sense) (Dal-limore et al. 2007; Cervellon et al. 2019). However, given the novelty, we found little in academic literature that captured these cues. As such, in Web Appendix 1 we outline a series of cues found in a qualitative study undertaken with frontline staff. To this end, we uncover three broad categories of cues that might lead employees to this conclusion. While not the focus of the current research, we should not presume all cues should trigger review monitoring events to the same degree. A useful endeavor would be to establish the relative efficacy of cues in reflecting review monitoring events, and how different cues translate into improved service performance against the backdrop of varying retail / in-store conditions (e.g., high vs. low customer traffic, high vs. low complexity of products), and whether all review monitoring cues lead to positive outcomes (i.e. determination and service exemplification). Concerning the universal nature of review monitoring cues, it may not be too far of a stretch to deduce there are situations where the perception a customer will author a review leads to negative consequences. For example, if a customer forewarns the employee they will evaluate the quality of the service (“I will review your service later), this may induce anger, anxiety, or fear, reminiscent of other, more overt forms of monitoring that have the same effect (Jeske and Santuzzi 2015). As such, the context leading to review monitoring events might shape the nature of the subsequent service delivered at an even more granular level than what is reported in this research. Due to the type of cue selected as stimuli we are limited in the assertions about the outcomes of review monitoring holistically.

The final contribution relates to the determination mediator. Our empirical work aligns well with the event→affect→behavior process found in AET (Weiss and Cropanzano 1996) and does so by introducing determination as the pivotal processor. The rationale for determination (as opposed to other emotions) stems from the fact that, to employees, the prospect of being associated with a positive customer review is seen as a ‘challenge’ to surmount (Kirby et al. 2014). This stems from the fact that this represents an opportunity for the employee to gain something of value – that is, regarding future personal goals (e.g., promotion, prestige, etc.). Indeed, retailers play an important role as gatekeepers of economic rewards such as promotion and progression, which is why we refer to retailers as the strongest

audience for review monitoring (see Leary and Kowalski 1997). That said, it is also plausible that other audiences (e.g. customers, colleagues) might drive determination, especially if there is something to gain from influencing that audience. In support of this, the impression management literature asserts that behavior change can be motivated by the need for self-esteem (e.g., esteem from other customers reading positive reviews and requesting an employee’s service) or the endeavor to sustain one’s identity (e.g., project through reviews the identity of being successful to colleagues) (Leary 2019). Moving beyond this narrower context it would be valuable to explore whether there is efficacy in different retail stakeholders (beyond the retailer) as ‘monitoring’ audiences and if determination remains integral in driving positive service outcomes.

In a similar vein, in this research, we focussed on the importance ascribed to extrinsic rewards in the form of career enhancement for motivating retail employees. It is also the case that employees could be motivated by intrinsic rewards such as, for instance, the joy to serve customers to a high standard. This would have implications for the model we tested. A person who loves satisfying customers may already work at capacity and have reached a ceiling in the level of service exemplification that is realistic within their capabilities. An additional extrinsic reward might not move the needle further. As such, further research is needed to probe the interplay between extrinsic and intrinsic motivations surrounding review monitoring.

The favorable outcomes captured in the model remain contingent upon two key boundary conditions. Employees must first perceive they have adequate self-efficacy, backing themselves in the challenge of making a positive impression should the customer choose to write a review. When this was not the case (i.e., the employee lacked the requisite expertise), a rise in determination did not materialize nor improve service exemplification (see also Delahajj and Van Dam 2017). Beyond bolstering a general need for skilling and resourcing the frontline as a priority, this boundary condition implies the necessity for retailers to be cautious in leveraging review monitoring as a formal strategy (as in Study 5). Such strategies are seldom optimal when employees are inexperienced, pessimistic, or self-critical (see Thiel, et al. 2012). In light of this, we must acknowledge that our empirical research may be limited with regard to external validity. For consistency, review monitoring events were operationalized in each study at the outset of the service encounter (customers initiated the cue before the service encounter). As such, self-efficacy was deemed a static trait, which is unrealistic in practice. For example, future research should examine if self-efficacy varies in either direction and in real-time based on emerging flows of information presented during the encounter (e.g. a customer shows disappointment). If so, how this shapes the effects of review monitoring (See Carver and Scheier 2001). In addition, it would be interesting to establish if lower self-efficacy combined with review monitoring events give rise to emotions not considered in this research. For instance, is it possible that a lack of control during a service encounter leads to anger or

fear? What might happen to the service delivered when these emotions rise?

We also established goal relevance as a boundary condition to the first link in the model. Returning to the assertion that without concern, there is no emotion (Wharton et al. 2021; Frijda 2009) we found that it is only when employees believe that a positive online customer review will impact their chance of achieving specific personal goals (e.g., gaining a promotion) that determination arises. It is worth revisiting the fact that the manipulation used to establish goal relevance (Study 4) was event-specific (i.e., how relevant are online reviews perceived by employees to achieving their goals). It, therefore, is logical for retailers to connect the concepts of (positive) reviews with the gaining of career benefits and rewards. Some firms make this connection explicit by, for example, providing financial bonuses for being named or associated with a positive online review (e.g., Charniga 2020). However, there may be other ways to mobilize event-specific relevance. For instance, making employees identifiable through name badges may boost review monitoring, arguably because it enhances the likelihood of the employee being distinguished (i.e., making the event more relevant). Therefore, the chances of success with the retailer becomes higher.

Dispositional goal relevance should also bound determination (Griner and Smith 2000). In particular, if employees believe there is nothing to gain, then there is no challenge to become enthusiastic. This is plausible for employees who have little ambition of a career in retail (e.g. stop gap workers). As such, even where the link between gaining a positive online review and rewards is well documented (making the outcome of a positive online review more relevant in theory to the employee) if that reward doesn't align with the employee's goals, determination will likely be blunted.

### Managerial implications

We have identified several ways that retailers (including HR representatives and marketers) can foster a service environment that encourages the positive effects of review monitoring (i.e., prioritizing employee self-efficacy and cementing the link between reviews and rewards. In Study 5, we explore if review monitoring can be simulated by adjusting (heightening) the certainty with which employees believe that reviews will be read (by the retailer). We find explicitly communicated review orientation can enable success. Specifically, we show that two forms of communicating a review orientation – a promotion versus prevention framing – caused differential emotional appraisals. Indeed, a promotion (prevention) framing led to determination (anxiety). As such, in line with previous research when the retailer frames the deployment of online reviews in an encouraging way (approach-oriented) positive outcomes prevail (Wells et al. 2007). Otherwise, retailers should avoid all forms of prevention framing backlash as this results in anxiety and no discernible change in service performance. Thus, while retailers cannot control customers' behaviors, they can maximize the effect of the latent perceived

chance a customer may write a review by ensuring employees acknowledge it will be read.

### Limitations

Of course, there are limitations to this research that can be redressed. First, all studies have a cross-sectional time frame horizon. That means the results are indicative of what might transpire when a customer walks into the store. But customer-employee interactions are often repeated over time, providing employees with opportunities to learn about the people they serve. What happens in these scenarios? Also, is there the possibility of “determination wear-out”, whereby repeated episodes when reviews fail to materialize cause skepticism. Does this dilute the process? Longitudinal studies will be needed to answer this. Second, our field experiment was limited by its size. Future research should aim to replicate our findings on a larger scale and within different retail contexts. Third, our manipulation of goal relevance was explicit to knock the theoretical nail on the head, thus lacking some real-world nuance; further study is needed to validate our findings with managerially relevant manipulations (e.g., career vs. stop-gap employees, HR protocols that support the use of reviews for promotion vs. not). We will monitor these developments in the retailing literature.

### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

### Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:10.1016/j.jretai.2023.03.004.

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