

## **Abstract**

### **Purpose**

The article challenges the narrow view in scholarship which presents disengagement as passive and simply the absence of condition of engagement and explores how food-retail employees articulate their disengagement within the intensified customer-centric service work. The article adopts the term 'active disengagement', as presented by Ackroyd and Thompson (2016), and empirically examines this as a form of oppositional voice towards managerial norms and behavioural expectations.

### **Design/methodology/approach**

The article draws on qualitative data from two case study organisations in the Cypriot food-retail sector. Forty-six interviews took place with participants across different departments, including front-line employees, and front-line and senior managers, to better understand the research problem through different perspectives.

### **Findings**

The data show that disengagement is an integral part of the organisational life, and it is expressed in an individual and less-risky way. The data also reveal a variation in disengagement actions across departments, depending on employees' mobility on the shop floor and the intensity of interaction with the customers and the line manager. Shop floor employees enjoyed a wider 'space of disengagement', in comparison to those working on the front-end/checkouts. Nevertheless, checkout employees have developed sophisticated actions to express disengagement.

### **Research implications**

This research provides a refined understanding of active disengagement in organisations. It empirically contributes to the existence of a spectrum of engagement and expands Ackroyd and Thompson's (2016) 'active disengagement' framework, discussing it as a form of oppositional voice towards corporate values and the customer-centric work intensification.

### **Practical implications**

The research provides empirical evidence that employee disengagement is not merely the absence of engagement, as HRM scholars and practitioners have argued, but entails further social meanings. This article will be useful for practitioners to rethink, revisit, and revise employee engagement programmes in organisations, as well as to re-write corporate values, mission, and vision, to also consider employees' experiences within the workplace. This will allow the provision of social support by management to address active disengagement in service organisations.

### **Originality/value**

The study provides an important insight in employees' individual actions to express disengagement towards corporate values and managerial expectations related to customer service. It highlights the variation of dynamics across the food-retail shop floor, which have been treated as a contextual periphery within the disengagement debate. Applying a broader lens on retail work heterogeneity, it provides further understanding of the diversity of how frontline service workers express disengagement within the triadic employment relationship. This study offers ground for future research to examine active disengagement in various contexts for better conceptual and practical understanding of this behaviour in organisations.

## **Introduction**

Employee engagement is a key concept in HRM literature and practice (Afrahi et al., 2021). Less attention has been given to employee disengagement which, although it is an issue of concern for the business world and is increasing across different national and sectoral contexts (see Aslam et al., 2018; Rastogi et al., 2018a; 2018b; Purcell, 2014; Wollard, 2011), remains thin and atheoretical in academic scholarship. Disengagement is often presented as passive and simply the absence of the condition of engagement (Afrahi et al., 2021). This is a theoretically and empirically unsupported argument, as employees stand along a spectrum of engagement, from actively engaged to actively disengaged (Hejjas et al., 2019; Dawsey and Taylor, 2011). Focusing on the latter end of the engagement spectrum, this article expands Ackroyd and Thompson's (2016) 'active disengagement' framework, discussing active disengagement as a form of oppositional voice that underpins actions of active resistance to managerial norms, corporate values, and behavioural expectations (Ackroyd and Thompson, 2022; Thompson et al., 2020). This illustrates that disengagement is not merely a behavioural element, as the HRM scholarship suggests (Sutherland, 2018; Purcell, 2014; Rastogi et al., 2018a; 2018b; Afrahi et al., 2021), but a broader sociological issue that underpins active resistance in organisations (Bhebhe, 2020).

Belanger and Thuderoz (2010) note that research should go beyond simply identifying the types and forms of oppositional action and should focus on their meanings and actors' rationales. In order to understand the meanings and rationale of the oppositional actions, and therefore the social meanings of active disengagement, we also need to understand the capacity, space, and context for the action to take place. Employee disengagement is a context-related phenomenon and further research is necessary to examine it in its organisational context (Valentin, 2014; Afrahi et al., 2021). Along similar lines, Thompson (2016) argues that to evaluate the content of oppositional practices, including active

disengagement, researchers need to refer to the empirical object and the subjective motives and rationales of the oppositional actors. Giving emphasis to appropriation of time and effort (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; 2022), this article examines the triangular manager-worker-customer relationship in food-retail, within which tensions (Korczynski and Evans, 2013) and disengagement (Auh et al., 2016; Bhebhe, 2020) are likely to emerge.

Additionally, calling upon Lemmon et al.'s (2020) proposition to select a diverse sample in (dis)engagement research, this study highlights the variation of dynamics across the food-retail shop floor, which has been treated as a contextual periphery within the service work literature. Scholars tend not to recognise or conceptualise the heterogeneity of (food) retail work. It cannot be assumed that those working on the frontline (e.g., checkouts) and those who are more distant from the customer (e.g., shop floor aisles), experience the same pressures; neither express the same levels - or forms - of (dis)engagement. It is argued that the resources and the spaces of disengagement vary across cross-institutional as well as *inter-institutional* contexts. This article fills this theoretical and empirical lacuna by applying broader lenses, recognising and exploring the heterogeneity of service work when discussing disengagement, even within the same organisation. This is necessary in order to apprehend the drivers for employees' (dis)engagement (Lemmon et al., 2020) and further understand the variety in how this is expressed across and within organisational contexts.

Overall, this article responds to authors' calls to put the context back at the centre of the analysis when researching (dis)engagement (Ackroyd and Thompson, 2016; 2022; Afrahi et al., 2021). It discusses food-retail employees' active disengagement actions and argues that their decision to utilise these is hinged on the level and intensity of interaction with the frontline manager and the customer, as well as the employees' mobility on the shop floor. It concludes that the structural conditions on the front-end are catalysts to how, why, and when active disengagement emerges.

The article is organised as follows. First, an overview of the literature is presented, providing a discussion on theoretical debates on employee (dis)engagement and active disengagement in service work. Next, the methodology is outlined, with the findings presented in the following section. Finally, the article discusses the theoretical and practical implications of the research.

### **(Dis)engagement and active disengagement**

Employee engagement has become a fashionable HRM discourse, and an ‘up-to-the-minute’ trend within corporate and consultancy circles, aiming to develop, and sell, a narrative of causality between engagement and performance measurements (Purcell, 2014; Turner, 2020). Yet, the ‘employee engagement’ concept lacks clarity, clear definition, focus and intellectual coherence (see Ackroyd and Thompson, 2022). Purcell (2014) questions the reliability of the measures of engagement, suggesting that disengagement is vigorously evident in the workplace. He describes disengagement as evidence of conflict at work, an issue that has been omitted in the engagement literature. As Godard (2014: 11) notes, employee engagement reflects the growing ‘psychologisation’ of employment relations which ‘individualises and atomises workers while obfuscating underlying conflicts’. Similarly, Sutherland (2018: 25) reports that ‘engagement fits well with the unitarist perspective of the organisation’, neglecting the divergence of interests in organisations which lead to actions of active animosity and disengagement (Ackroyd and Thompson, 2022; Author 2019).

Many studies of employee engagement remain a-contextual (Purcell, 2014) and a-theoretical (Rastogi et al., 2018b; Ackroyd and Thompson, 2022), detaching employee engagement from the organisational setting (Jenkins and Delbridge, 2013). Several factors, including the sector and internal structures, can influence engagement (Jenkins and Delbridge, 2013). This argument can similarly be extended to discussions on disengagement, which also remains a vaguely defined concept in the literature (Wollard, 2011; Rastogi et al., 2018a). Despite the

development of key theories which seek to explain the phenomenon of disengagement, see for example burnout (Maslach and Jackson, 1981), job demands-resources (Demerouti et al., 2001), psychological theory (Kahn, 1990), and coping processes (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), disengagement is often simply described as the opposite behaviour of engagement (Bhebehe, 2020). As Afrahi et al. (2021) put it, disengagement and engagement are treated as a simple binary. Ackroyd and Thompson (2016) refer to this condition as passive disengagement and argue that HRM and managerial scholarship have, misleadingly, inferred that this can be reversed with a little encouragement. This is evident in Rastogi et al's (2018b) review of the disengagement literature where it is proposed that the introduction of interventions and counselling mechanisms from HR practitioners is a solution to halt the increase of disengagement in organisations and, therefore, achieve re-engagement. Management intervention is a wider argument found in the literature as the solution to the flourishing work disengagement (see Aslam et al., 2017, Turner 2020; Afrahi et al., 2021). This, however, provides little, if any, convincing exegesis of widespread employee disengagement.

Ackroyd and Thompson (2016) argue that disengagement has a developed intellectual component that includes what they call *active disengagement* (also see Ackroyd and Thompson, 2022). In other words, as the same authors put it, 'people become disengaged for a reason...[and] it may not be easy to find a way back from an initial disengagement' (Ackroyd and Thompson, 2016; 198). This view challenges and discards HRM scholars' description of disengagement as passive and easily reversible, simply defined as the absence of engagement, and suggests that it entails deeper social meanings. Hejjas et al. (2019) report engagement and disengagement as two distinct and independent states and, similar to Dawsey and Taylor (2011), discuss a spectrum of engagement, varying from active engagement to active disengagement. Dawsey and Taylor (2011: 33) describe active disengagement as: 'a

psychological state where employees selectively and actively choose to uncouple their selves from their work roles in ways that...lead to destructive behaviours acted out against the organisation'. This definition is strongly related to actions of disengagement, as discussed by Ackroyd and Thompson (2016; 2022), which reflect *active resistance* against corporate managerial values, rather than simply defining a psychological state.

Thompson (2016) has recently argued that disengagement from corporate values and practices is systemic in managerial regimes (also see Ackroyd and Thompson, 2022) and continuously changing contexts. Therefore, paraphrasing Wollard (2011: 533), '[active] [dis]engagement is not a one-size-fits-all construct. Context is essential'. This is reflected in Lemmon et al.'s (2020) review of engagement literature, as well as Hejjas et al.'s (2019) discussion on disengagement, which report that the research focus is on white-collar jobs neglecting low skill jobs, such as food-retailing. Lemmon et al. (2020) report that low skill jobs have limited possibility of engagement due to limited access to job resources, such as autonomy, which has been described as a central predictor for employee (dis)engagement. Similarly, Afrahi et al. (2021) discuss employees' lack of control and decision-making, their limited authority, as well as other organisational and workplace conditions, for example being exposed to aggressive social behaviours at work, such as customer abuse, as predictors for disengagement. Research has long discussed the intensification of retail work (Bozkurt, 2015; Cai et al., 2020), as well as the extensive customer abuse in the service sector (Korczynski and Evans, 2013). This, arguably, creates space for the emergence of active disengagement towards the corporate service values imposed by management, as workers choose to 'withdraw and defend their [authentic] selves at work', as Kahn (1990: 692) puts it, in response to the violation of their dignity (Sayer, 2007) and the lack of meaningfulness and safety in work (Rastogi et al., 2018b). This argument, however, to be fully understood, needs

to be located and further explored within conceptual boundaries informed by the structural context (Thompson, 2016)

### **Active disengagement in service work**

In service organisations such as food-retail, employee engagement, and specifically customer-focused employee engagement, has been described as a crucial organisational variable for organisational success (Schneider et al, 2009; Chandni and Rahman, 2020). Customer satisfaction and customer loyalty are concepts that have been positively correlated with employee engagement (Cheema et al., 2015; Cain et al 2017); with organisations introducing customer service training programmes to promote higher levels of employee engagement within the customer service process (Johnson et al., 2018). This approach entails an underpinning, ambiguous, ‘unitarist’ assumption that the interests of workers coincide with the organisation (Valentin, 2014). Studies show that service workers are amongst the most disengaged in the workforce (Auh et al., 2016; Bhebhe, 2020) whilst, as the sociology of service work literature highlights, service employees are positioned between conflicting demands of management and customers, where conditions are likely to generate tensions (Korczynski and Evans, 2013) and misbehaviour (Harris and He, 2019).

Scholars have long discussed the triangular dynamics in service work and have recognised the variety of interests and alliances in the ‘service triangle’ (Leinder, 1999; Subramanian and Suquet, 2018). Research has suggested the unique characteristic of frontline interactive service work, being its direct contact with the customer (Leidner, 1993), as another layer of control and source of workplace pressures. Korczynski (2002: 65) introduces the concept of ‘customer orientated bureaucracy’ which contains ‘dual logics of rationalisation and orientation to the formally irrational aspects of customers’. This suggests the routinisation, standardisation, and intensification of service work, espoused with the logic of having to deal with the unpredictable nature of customer service (Korczynski, 2002). Management uses



sophisticated controls to measure and increase productivity, keep costs low and generate a customer-centric service environment. Service workers via principles of emotional labour, which refers to the management and regulation of employees' feelings to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display (Hochschild, 1983: 7), are expected to engage with customers and deliver organisational values informed by the 'Customer is King' mantra. This drives the rationalisation of interactive service work with employees being positioned in a highly intensive, routinised, and abusive social environment, which leads to tensions within the triangular employment relationship. As Leidner (1993) highlights, conflicts of power exist within the service triangle, with each party attempting to act to protect their own interests.

Thompson (2016: 117) reports that 'employees remain knowledgeable about management intentions and outcomes, and retain the resources to resist, misbehave, or disengage'. This argument emerges from the classic labour process scholarship, discussing the workplace as a 'contested terrain' (Edwards, 1979), within which social order is maintained through the suppression of the subordinates' interests, through various forms of control mechanisms, whilst the manifestations of industrial conflict are linked to socio-political structures (Hebdon and Noh, 2013). Conflict is attached to the service sector's organisational life and the structural triadic employment relationship. Service employees will continually find ways to escape and challenge managerial direction (Thompson, 2016) and actively disengage with management's expectations for high employee engagement within customer service.

Ackroyd and Thompson (2016; 2022) <sup>1</sup> highlight the existence of new and innovative types of misbehaviour in organisations, many of which remain below the horizon of our perception. Disengagement is part of this new space of organisational misbehaviour with employees

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<sup>1</sup> Here organisational misbehaviour is conceived as oppositional practices and is constructed from the perspective of re-appropriation (Belanger and Thuderoz, 2010)

distancing themselves from commitment to the organisation and its values and policies and it is widespread in organisations (Ackroyd and Thompson, 2016; 2022). Unlike most research discussing disengagement as a psychological mechanism, or merely recognising disengagement as the way that employees took emotional, cognitive, or physical distance from work (see Rastogi et al., 2018b; Khan, 1990; Afrahi et al., 2021), Ackroyd and Thompson (2016; 2022) emphasise the role of active disengagement in work social relations as a form of oppositional voice. Arguably, active disengagement underpins active resistance. It includes, however, lower risk for disciplinary action, as employees still comply with company policies (Ackroyd and Thompson, 2016).

Employee engagement enthusiasts, surprisingly, have neglected these sociological arguments, despite the well discussed low road approach in services (e.g., low wages and non-standard employment) (Author, 2017; Carré et al., 2010), the frequency of customer abuse in the sector (see for example Author, 2021; Korczynski and Evans, 2013; Reynolds and Harris, 2009) and their negative association with employee engagement (Lemmon et al., 2020). It remains, therefore, unclear how food-retail workers actively express disengagement within the triadic employment relationship, which is informed by unitarist assumptions for consensual engagement with customer-focused corporate values by service workers. In their review, Afrahi et al., (2021) briefly refer to disengagement as an adaptive coping effort that helps individuals to deal with stressful and undesirable conditions. Wollard (2011) similarly describes individual behaviours, including cynicism, absenteeism, theft, and finally quitting, as a linear process of behavioural disengagement. The interconnectedness of these behaviours is useful in understanding the social meanings of disengagement. Nevertheless, it does not fully conceptualise the interconnectedness between active disengagement and organisational values that shape the employment relationship, and the daily experiences of workers on the frontline. This article goes beyond the 'psychologisation' of disengagement and

conceptualises active disengagement within the antagonistic triangular employment relationship, where the imbalance of power leads to less overt and less risky actions of opposition.

## **Methodology**

This article draws on qualitative data from two case study organisations in the Cypriot food-retail sector, who are leaders in the country's food-retail market. MNC-CY is a world leader in the global and European food-retail sector. Despite being a smaller organisation, HOME-CY is a developing company and has steadily increased its market share. It is a leader in its region and, over the last three years, has invested and expanded its business to other areas of the island, becoming today the second largest home-grown food-retailer in the country. The organisations were selected based on their size and their market share in the local and the global market, as well as their approach to customer service and the development of cultures and values of 'Customer is King'.

Both organisations celebrate their customer-centric cultures, aiming to offer low prices and high quality of service. This is achieved with the development of sophisticated employee engagement programs. For example, both organisations have developed sophisticated HRM discourses of employee engagement and have structured similar sets of expectations for engagement with values related to high customer service quality. These were communicated via different communication channels (e.g., intranet, emails, posters and briefings) to encourage employee engagement with corporate values. Additionally, both organisations have invested in customer service training aiming to get employees engaged with the values of high service quality and customer satisfaction. These include online and face-to-face training on customer service, engagement with the customer and management of customers' complaints. At the same time, employment remains based on a low-road approach and tight control regimes by both management and customers.

The study draws on 46 semi-structured interviews across the two cases (25 in HOME-CY and 21 in MNC-CY). Semi-structured interviews have provided a structure in the methodology to ensure cross-case comparability, as well as flexibility for deeper understanding of the problem examined by revealing different participants' perceptions across the two case study organisations (Bryman and Bell, 2015). Three stores were examined in total, all located in the Northeast of the island. Two stores were examined for HOME-CY and one larger store was explored for MNC-CY. To gain different perspectives on the research problem, interviews in each store were conducted with senior, store, and frontline managers, and employees. A purposive sampling strategy was followed. This targeted information-rich cases and participants who interacted with customers directly (both employees and checkout managers), as well as those at higher levels of authority who were involved in shaping the customer service culture in each organisation (senior and store managers). Employees from across the shop floor areas (checkouts, customer service, food section, non-food section) participated in the research. Participants were recruited via visits in the individual stores. As illustrated in the table below, 19 checkout employees (including customer service) and 16 shop floor employees were interviewed in total. Although the majority of employees were trained to cover different posts across the shop floor, including customer facing (e.g., checkouts) and other posts (e.g., shelf-stocking), a distinction is made between checkout and shop floor workers. The former spent significant time interacting with the customer, whilst the latter were covering on checkouts in case of absence or when the store was busy. Additionally, seven frontline managers, from both the checkouts and the shop floor departments were interviewed, whereas four senior managers (HR and store managers) participated, providing useful insights regarding the organisation of work on the shop floor, customer service, and shop floor relations.

**Table1 here**

Interviews lasted between 35-90 minutes and were transcribed verbatim. Interviews were conducted in Greek and translated into English. The interviews were informed by the conceptual framework, which guided the questions asked to ensure validity of the knowledge constructed through this process (Smith and Elger, 2014). Specifically, the interviews and the thematic analysis focused upon several key themes and codes, notably the customer service values imposed by management, the nature of the work, and workers' experiences of their daily reality, and workers' actions of disengagement, across different departments across the case study organisations.

Next, the findings section highlights the customer-centric employment relationship across both organisations followed by the identification of the variation of oppositional and disengagement actions across departments, depending on employees' mobility on the shop floor and the intensity of interaction with the customer and the line manager.

### **Customer service values and active disengagement**

In both case study organisations, the customer held a pivotal role in the organisation of work, as this was driven by customer service standards. Evidence revealed an emphasis on high quality service with both organisations advertising and promoting their customer-centric values. Indeed, in both cases, Head Offices had developed an agenda of 'good service' and required employees to engage with these 'service imperatives', as the mission, the vision, and the values of the two organisations suggest. Managers monitored their subordinates to meet the customer service targets, developing various mechanisms to control 'service quality', such as direct monitoring by managers and mystery shoppers.

As discussed below, this pressure for employee engagement in high quality customer service was subjected to actions of disengagement via time and effort appropriation. The data reveal a variation in these actions across departments depending, on employees' mobility on the

shop floor and the intensity of interaction with the customer and the line manager. Unsurprisingly, shop floor employees enjoyed a wider 'space for disengagement', in comparison to those working on the front-end/checkouts. Nevertheless, checkout employees have developed more sophisticated actions to express disengagement, as discussed next.

### **Checkout disengagement actions: Physically stepping away from customer service**

Interviews revealed an identical work process on the frontline, and a similar organisation of work in the two organisations. Interaction with the customer was, unsurprisingly, a vital aspect of the checkout job with an intensive focus on customer service and emotional labour. In fact, smiling and engaging with customers was quoted by participants, both managers and employees, as the most crucial aspect of the job, and as the checkout manager suggested this was the focus of the customer service training. The store manager in HOME-CY argued that employees on the front-end must constantly wear a smile because they were the 'image' of the organisation to the customer's eyes, while data, in both cases, revealed a pressure by line managers to smile, who often reprimanded those employees who were not smiling. As reported:

'The customer is always right...if the customer says something negative about you...[for example] you didn't smile at them, you were rude to them, you were not fast enough...the manager will tell you off' (E16.HOME-CY).

The data illustrated a shift in the customer service culture over the last years for the two organisations. Although speed remained a core element in the customer service culture, the companies also invested in customer satisfaction. As a checkout operator in MNC-CY commented, currently the company placed more emphasis on providing quality in customer service. This emphasis on quality in customer service was translated into more tasks for employees. A checkout employee in HOME-CY similarly commented:

‘Today the company is interested in how you serve the customer. For example, before we would not pack for the customer or we would first scan all their shopping and then help them pack, just to get them moving. Today is different, we have to scan and pack for them’ (E1.HOME-CY).

The data illustrated a list of extra responsibilities for employees on the front-end, which were added to the service process. For example, as the quote above illustrates, packing the customers’ shopping became an essential part of the service process. Employees in both cases were asked to provide even more support while serving the customer. For instance, they had to be available to make returns of damaged or unwanted products, bring a product from the shelves for the customer, and go to weigh fresh groceries, such as fruits and vegetables, if the customers failed to do so in the grocery area. Additionally, checkout employees were responsible for cleaning and tidying up their tills throughout their shift, to bring bags and till-roll papers from the warehouse and distribute them to the tills, whilst during the day they were responsible for picking up the baskets from around the front-end, so they are always available for customers to use them.

Clearly, the focus on customer service values intensified the checkout job, whilst the limited mobility of checkout operators on the front-end, and the direct surveillance by the line manager, put employees in a precarious situation of ‘wearing a smile’ and servicing abusing and ‘grumpy’ customers, as a checkout employee described them. Indeed, participants in both organisations, have discussed the common and frequent verbal abuse by customers, further suggesting that they had to remain calm and unflappable towards any verbal harassment from the customer, as the organisational values for high quality in customer service suggests. A checkout employee in MNC-CY commented:

‘Customers can get loud...We have to be fast, that’s what the company wants...and it’s often that you make a small mistake...that’s when they go

mental, they call you names and yell in your face. You cannot of course answer back to the customer; you just apologise and let them get it out' (E15.MNC-CY).

This is not to argue that workers have stayed apathetic to the managerial and customer prerogative. As the data showed, checkout employees often left their desk to either avoid intensive work, or customers who were often abusive. Managers in both cases attempted to control this (mis)behaviour through common reprimands. Nevertheless, a checkout manager in HOME-CY argued that, often, she was not able to confront this action as employees were either using legitimate reasons to leave their desk, such as going to the toilet, or picking up the baskets, or servicing customers.

Participants in HOME-CY discussed the common requests by individuals to use the toilet when the front-end was busy. A line manager described the case of a particular checkout operator who was using the toilet at the same time every Saturday. The staff toilets are located on the first floor of the store, where the back offices are also located, allowing this manager to observe this employee's habit of leaving the front-end when it was busy. Employees in MNC-CY similarly described similar cases of specific individuals using frequent toilet breaks to leave their post. A checkout employee stated:

'There is this girl who goes to the toilet every 30 minutes; she is the joke of the department' (E6.HOME-CY).

This participant, similarly to all line managers, across both organisations, suggested that those asking to use the toilet frequently, use it as an excuse to avoid the busy front-end. They commented they could not refuse such a request, even though they knew that some employees were shirking their duties. They suggested that using the toilet is a human need that could not be challenged. Nevertheless, as more data has revealed, managers have tried to control this (mis)behaviour by refusing toilet requests when it was busy and asked the



employees to wait until the customer queues were shorter, with other line managers reprimanding checkout operators for using the toilet too often.

Evidently, leaving the checkout desk was an overt action triggering the managers' reaction. Hence, employees have developed and utilised more sophisticated actions to express disengagement, and leave their desk, without coming into direct confrontation with their line manager. The most common action was to collect the baskets across the front-end. Although the basket collection was part of their responsibilities, evidence shows that, often, employees would leave their till on busy hours to carry out this task to avoid the intensive job of serving customers. This was particularly evident on Fridays and Saturdays when the stores were busy and when customers were waiting in longer queues waiting to be served. A checkout operator stated:

'We have to collect the baskets and put them back on the entrance. Some are only doing it when it is busy. They do that on purpose to avoid the job. They know when to do it. I see them doing it when we are busy. They leave the till and collect the baskets. The customers are in long queues and they are off to picking up the baskets to avoid busy hours when you have all those customers waiting to be served'  
(E8.HOME-CY).

Clearly, this quote shows that employees chose when to carry out this task to avoid the busy front-end, whilst they avoided collecting the baskets on quieter days. This shows that this was a tactic utilised by employees to avoid the intensification of the checkout job by 'pretending to be busy' as one checkout operator similarly described:

'When they see a customer with a 'big' [full] trolley they say they are going to collect the baskets. If the customer did not put their shopping on the belt, they ask

them to go to a different checkout and they put the sign closed on their till and get off the till to pick up the baskets' (E11.HOME-CY).

Checkout operators in both organisations employed similar tactics to avoid customers with full trolleys, or those who they knew are frequently abusive towards workers and/or have abused them in the past. The data show, for example, that some employees were closing their till to avoid serving customers. Employees indicated to customers that the till was available by using a sign which was placed on the till. This sign had printed on one side '*next customer*' and on the other side '*till closed*'. Participant managers commented that some employees often would turn the sign to the 'till closed' side to '*steal a few minutes from the shift*', as a manager put it. A checkout line manager in HOME-CY/store2 argued that a particular individual was utilising this action when she was close to finishing her shift, whilst others put the closed sign up when they saw full trolleys and switched the sign when they saw smaller baskets. Similarly, in the MNC-CY a senior manager acknowledged an identical situation with two checkout employees displaying their closed signs when the store was busy. A checkout operator in HOME-CY, although not directly admitting practicing this action, implied the frequency of it increased when abusive 'regulars' were in the store:

'We see them [abusive regular customers] coming from the door and you know that they will again look for trouble. They are never happy with the service. [They say:] Oh you are too slow, oh you haven't packed this correctly, oh you are useless. So you would avoid service them. Sorry this till is closed.' (E16.HOME-CY).

The line managers commented that they were familiar with these cases, suggesting that the employees were closing their tills because they were lazy, rather than recognising the issues within the customer interaction. One of them stated:

‘When she sees the customer approaching, she turns it to closed, and she bends down pretending she is cleaning or tidying the bags, she’s so lazy. The customer then goes to the next till, and she is watching through the till, when the customer steps away she sits back and re-opens the till...There is one employee who does that very often. When I see that I ask her why she closed the till, I call the customer back, and I ask her to serve the customer. We have a few employees who do that’ (LM4.HOME-CY).

Although managers describe these behaviours as signs of laziness, an alternative explanation is that these tactics were utilised as an expression of opposition towards the intensified job and customer service, as well as pressures for emotional labour and abusive customers. Interestingly, even when the managers were constantly present on the front-end, employees were still improvising with sophisticated ideas to create space and express their opposition and disengagement. Therefore, rather than leaving their till, either to use the toilet or collecting the baskets, checkout operators closed their till to the customer, pushing their managers’ tolerance boundaries.

It was suggested that employees would usually use these time- and effort-appropriation tactics, to gain mobility on the front end, until the line manager, who was constantly present on the front-end, would tell them off. This shows that line management presence and tolerance played a significant role on frontline employees’ (dis)engagement tactics. Participants discussed that these behaviours varied depending which manager was on duty. They would not leave their till when a ‘strict’ line manager, as one called them, was on duty, whilst such actions were more common when more tolerant managers were present. Therefore, the line managers’ perception of these actions and the degree of tolerance, constructed the space for employees to use these actions to avoid work and express their disengagement.

### **Indirect disengagement with customer service in the aisles**

Unlike the checkout operators, employees on the shop floor (food aisles, non-food sections, frozen food/freezers) did not interact with the customer or their line manager, to the same degree as checkout workers. They had greater freedom and mobility to move around the store; therefore, they were able to avoid interaction with both customers and the line manager. Indeed, in both organisations, it was found that, because shop floor line managers were not present on the floor for the whole shift, employees had higher autonomy on how to carry out their tasks and, as a result, differentiated the appropriation and disengagement actions used. Specifically, it was argued that on many occasions employees who were working within the aisles were utilising actions such as ‘paper-shuffling’, adjusted their speed to a slower pace, and avoided tasks and extra responsibilities such as assisting customers.

Although the term ‘paper-shuffling’ would be more appropriate for an office environment, it is used here because it relates to the administrative responsibilities of these employees. Specifically, employees were responsible for changing the price labels and counted the number of items on the shelves per product. These would be reported back to the line manager and the store manager through the filling out of a standardised form. Yet, participants suggested that, often, employees were ‘paper-shuffling’ and, hence, had taken extra time to carry out this task. As one employee in the food department admitted:

‘You might just stand there and pretend to be working...just hold the file, walking around and pretending to be counting products. Many of us do it, just stand there, and looking at the prices, going through your papers, and pretending you are thinking’ (E4.MNC-CY).

Although this intentional ‘paper-shuffling’ did not directly target ‘customer service’, it had a significant impact on customer service quality as, often, price labels on the shelves and the till price did not match, generating customer complaints.

Additionally, evidence showed that employees within the aisles have used speed as a main driver to express opposition towards the intensive and time-measured job. Indeed, shop floor employees had specific time targets on how fast they re-stock shelves. Some employees suggested that they could not avoid their tasks because the manager would check the allocated tasks at the end of the shift and would flag any unfinished tasks. Yet, managers had a different view. In fact, shop floor managers suggested that, because they were absent from the shop floor, employees had room ‘not to do their job properly’, as a manager in HOME-CY put it. This manager argued because he was always away from the shop floor, as he had to be present in the warehouse, workers found the opportunity to stop working. He described it as a common incident in the department with employees ‘just sitting and chatting’, instead of stocking the products on the shelves. Similarly, the line manager in the frozen-food section in MNC-CY stated: ‘They just sit there and chat. When they see the manager coming, they return to their job’. This evidence shows that ‘time wasting’ (e.g., slower speed), when the manager was not present, was a common tactic used by shop floor employees to express disengagement towards the intensification of the job.

In addition, employees appropriated their effort and engagement with corporate values. This was evident by a food section manager who suggested that employees would never walk the extra mile and would ‘try to avoid job tasks in any way they can’. He gave the example of jam jars that were not stocked on the shelf according to head office guidelines, either because the employee was rushing the task or because a merchandiser stocking another product just pushed them away. Yet, the manager commented that the employees would tidy up the jars only when the manager highlighted the mistake, although this was part of their

responsibilities. Arguably, this shows that employees appropriated their effort, which has an indirect, yet significant, impact to the quality of the customer's experience. Utilising the manager's absence from the shop floor and the latter's inability to directly monitor every individual, due to the large size of the store, employees had enough manoeuvring space to utilise actions to indirectly disengage from the organisational customer service values.

More data have shown that shop floor employees, similarly to checkout employees, would disengage from corporate values for high quality in customer service. Specifically, although shop floor employees did not have a constant interaction with the customer, they were still required to assist customers. There were evident demands for emotional labour and high quality in customer service. As an employee in MNC-CY discussed:

'You are still responsible to provide them [customers] a great shopping experience so to leave the store happy. If they ask you where the olive oil is, even if you are working in the non-food section, stocking toilet paper, you must leave your aisle and take them to the olive oil shelf and show them which olive oil they are asking for...and all these with a smile and a happy tone in your voice. It doesn't matter if you have been walking up and down all day and you are exhausted, it doesn't matter if your work is left behind and your manager will be unhappy.' (E7.MNC-CY).

The data, nevertheless, have shown that shop floor employees would often avoid servicing customers, due to the intensified nature of their work. A few employees declared in their interview that they would provide minimum assistance or not at all, directing the customers to the checkout manager, or the information desk, especially when the customer is rude, abusive, or loud. One of them explained:

‘Our job is to stock the shelves, clean them and change the prices, but also to help customers when they need assistance. The organisation is clear on this, they rely on people to deliver excellent customer service. We repeatedly listen to the motto of the customer being at the centre of everything we do, and we have to offer the greatest service to meet their expectations. However, I personally expect the customer to also be respectful towards me. We often get rude customers that treat you like sh\*t; [a customer said] where the f\*ck is the pasta? I’m sorry but with that attitude you will get nothing from me. [I said] I don’t know sir, ask the lady at the information desk...and you walk away to continue with your work.’  
(E13.MNC-CY).

Clearly, as the quote above shows, shop floor employees, similarly to checkout employees, would disengage with management’s mission and values for high quality on customer service. Therefore, disengagement is an expression of opposition towards customer service values, the intensive shop floor work and abuse from customers.

### **Theoretical Implications**

This article provides a refined understanding of active disengagement in organisations, showing how food-retail employees articulate their disengagement actions within the intensified customer-centric service work, and managerial prerogatives that expect high quality and high engagement within customer service.

Disengagement, as Woollard (2011: 529) helpfully notes, is ‘not...absence of engagement [as HRM discourses argue] but a cognitive decision...which manifests in behaviours that put...distance between the worker and their work...and their organisation’. Research discusses a spectrum of engagement, from actively engaged to actively disengaged employees (Hejjas et al., 2019; Dawsey and Taylor, 2011). This research contributes to this

debate, suggesting that active disengagement is manifested as a form of oppositional voice to managerial corporate values and expectations (Ackroyd and Thompson, 2022; Thompson et al., 2020). This shows that active disengagement entails wider social meanings in the employment relationship.

The data revealed that employees utilised time- and effort-appropriation actions to express disengagement that would be rarely confronted by line managers and did not jeopardise their employment status. This agrees with Dawsey and Taylor, (2011) who describe active disengagement as a harmful activity for the organisation yet is manifested in ways that remain unnoticed. Interestingly, the cross-case analysis revealed that employees used similar active disengagement actions which were practiced differently across departments, depending on employee mobility on the shop floor, as explained below. This challenges scholars' perceptions of food-retail work being homogeneous, neglecting to examine the shop floor dynamics when describing the context of the employment relationship and discussing actions of disengagement and opposition.

This article has shown that the level of interaction with both the line manager and the customer across different departments shape employees' attempts to create spaces to express disengagement. The increased mobility of shop floor employees and the less frequent interaction with their line manager, as well as the customer, allowed them to create a wider space to appropriate time and effort, and indirectly disengage with corporate customer service values. In contrast, checkout employees experienced a more restricted space of disengagement due to the constant presence of line managers on the front-end and the direct interaction with the customer. Yet, these employees, attempting to gain mobility on the front end and step away from serving customers, generated more sophisticated and less risky tactics of appropriation and disengagement without coming in direct confrontation with their line manager. Therefore, they, silently, expanded their space of disengagement.



The data, as summarised above, address a research lacuna which fails to sufficiently acknowledge the context within which disengagement actions manifest and the social meanings within the contemporary service workplace (Rastogi et al., 2018a). This article's contribution is the positioning of disengagement in a sociological contextual frame, and empirically explaining it as a form of active disengagement. Arguably, disengagement is still a vital part of organisational life and, in this case, states opposition. Active disengagement is attached to the food-retail reality, and it is a multi-faceted phenomenon mainly expressed in an individual, silent, and spontaneous way (Hebdon and Noh, 2013) via time and effort appropriation tactics.

Overall, the nature of opposition in organisations has changed significantly since the classic sociological studies established their important conceptual verities (Thompson, 2016) and it is, today, expressed in less overt and less risky actions of disengagement. Scholars need to revisit the available spaces for disengagement when discussing active disengagement and opposition. Although antagonism in organisations remains covert and difficult to detect, taking a variety of forms of “*under-life*’ [emphasis added] in organisations” (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999: 164-165), this study reveals the variety of spaces of disengagement across departments, even within the same organisation. Although the rationale remains similar, and that is to express disengagement through appropriation of time and effort, spaces of disengagement and opposition differ, as the organisation of work is not identical across contexts.

### **Practical Implications**

This study, similar to previous research, shows how disengagement affects employees' customer-oriented behaviour (Chandni and Rahman, 2020) and personal performance (Rastogi et al., 2018a), as it is associated with (mis)behaviours such as taking frequent breaks, avoiding customer service and, overall, violating the organisational values and

expectations related to customer service. This is, evidently, the outcome of the low road approach towards the organisation of work, the intensification of food-retail work and the frequent abusive behaviour by customers.

This research can potentially inform practices to rethink, revisit, and revise employee engagement programmes in organisations, as well as to re-write corporate values, mission, and vision to consider, include, and value employees' experiences within the workplace. Specifically, service organisations are encouraged to re-consider the focus of their values, mission and vision, which currently concentrate on customer experience. Instead, these should also include employee wellbeing and dignity at work as core parts of their identity as employers and the organisational values. This can be achieved by developing policies and practices which will encourage employee engagement via a high road approach in management, within which workers are feeling valued, protected and enjoy dignity *in and at* work (for more see Bolton, 2007).

As current research on (dis)engagement highlights, there is necessity for managerial interventions to tackle increasing disengagement, such as training, coaching and social support from management (Rastogi et al., 2018a; 2018b). As Afrahi et al. (2021) report, individuals are less likely to disengage in a safe and supportive environment; therefore, management intervention is important. Such interventions will only be effective when practitioners further engage, investigate, and understand both the employees' experiences on the shop floor, as well as the drivers that generate active disengagement. This will help organisations to develop the necessary, and effective, measures and practices to address this economical and organisational concern, and create a workplace within which individuals will experience organisational support and decent work.

## **Conclusion**

Employee disengagement is embedded in organisational life. Employees, however, standing on a spectrum of engagement, utilise more sophisticated, spontaneous, and less risky tactics to express active disengagement, which includes opposition, towards corporate values. As shown, these actions vary across the shop floor depending on the employees' mobility and interaction with line managers and customers which suggests the different spaces of disengagement across the shop floor. Future research is needed to revisit debates on active disengagement in other contexts and further scrutinise employees' spaces of disengagement, even within the same organisation or type of work. The hospitality sector is an interesting starting point where jobs, and consequently spaces of disengagement, are mistakenly treated as homogeneous.

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