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Exploring U.S. Retail Employees' Experiences of Corporate Hypocrisy

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ABSTRACT

Corporate hypocrisy (CH) exists when people believe that firms are not what they claim to be. Much of the previous research has focused on how consumers may perceive firms as hypocritical and how that might affect firms' sales and profits, but little has been researched on CH as experienced by employees. This study explored CH experienced by employees in the U.S. retail sector, which is predominantly comprised of part-time, low-income personnel. Through in-depth interviews of 16 retail employees, the study revealed that for participants, inconsistencies in both supervisors' and corporate claims and actions resulted in perceived CH in employees. This, in turn, seemed to be related to participants' feelings and future employment intentions. The study findings offer important implications for leaders and managers of U.S. retail companies, as they show how employees perceive, feel about, and act in response to CH.

KEYWORDS

Employees; hypocrisy; management; retail

What happens when a business says that it will do something and then does not follow through? What happens when a business is perceived as hypocritical? In recent years, research into these questions has mostly focused on the impact of perceived corporate hypocrisy on consumers' reactions. Aaker (1997, p. 347) reported on how consumers' feelings change about a brand's personality when they are faced with perceived brand hypocrisy. Wagner, Lutz, and Weitz (2009) researched effective corporate communication strategies to overcome consumers' perceptions of corporate hypocrisy (CH). Along similar lines, La Cour and Kromann (2011) studied the effect of euphemism in managing corporate hypocrisy in the corporate philanthropy setting. Fassin and Buelens (2011) found perceived hypocrisy to be related to corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices. Throughout these studies, the authors observed that companies have come under criticism for behaving inconsistently with their promises, not acting according to their own policies, and even lying.

For example, in 2014, U.S. retailer Hobby Lobby was under scrutiny for opposing certain conditions of the Affordable Care Act, a mandatory employee health care plan issued by the U.S. government, on the grounds that the plan contradicted the company's religious faith and its rules (Redden, 2014). The company argued that it could not approve and implement a mandatory health plan that supports contraception and abortion, practices contrary to the doctrine of its faith. There have been many points of contention over the issue, and some people perceived the company as hypocritical and questioned its actual religious commitment (Bhasin, 2014). These critics noted that Hobby Lobby is in business with and sells their merchandise in China, a country known for poor working conditions and its one-child policy (Bhasin, 2014). Further, the company's retirement plan was found to invest in several companies specializing in drugs and devices used for contraception (Redden, 2014). These facts showed contradictions between the company's professed beliefs and inconsistent actions.

Another example of discrepancies between a company's messages and its actions can be found in Wet Seal. This United States-based clothing retailer made statements to its employees about their store performance situations, assuring employees that the stores would not be closed and convincing them to continue to work. However, Wet Seal is now listed as among the many companies that are downsizing, shutting down approximately 330 retail stores (Farfan, 2015). As the media indicated, employees refer to this incident as a deliberate act of lying to ensure "there wouldn't be a mass employee exodus during the critical 2014 Christmas holiday shopping season" (Farfan, 2015).

Inconsistencies between companies' messages and actions are thought to create a public perception of CH and thereby negatively affect brand personality,

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sales, and even corporate social responsibility performance. Although CH has been studied in the past, much of the past research focuses on consumers' perceptions on CH and the impact of CH on consumers. Relatively little is known as to how CH is formed and affects employees who may have insiders' views and daily experiences of corporations' policies, implementations, and managerial practices. Considering that people might have different sets of expectations toward and obligations for a corporation as an employee or as a consumer, employees are expected to experience different consequences of CH than consumers may do. After all, employees are in more vulnerable situations than consumers when it comes to responding to perceived CH.

Therefore, this study was designed to explore how employees form their perceptions of CH and the impacts of CH on their employment through in-depth interviews of U.S. retail employees. Given that there is a lack of in-depth understanding of CH that employees experience, an exploratory approach to this topic was deemed appropriate. The study first presents a literature review of corporate hypocrisy and theories of organizational hypocrisy. The U.S. retail industry is discussed, as this provides unique and varied contexts to explore the study's topics. The methods and results are presented next, and the study concludes with its contributions and possibilities for future research opportunities.

Literature review

Corporate hypocrisy

Hypocrisy is defined as a "distance between assertions and performance" (Fassin & Buelens, 2011, p. 587), and it has been a topic of interest for psychological and philosophical researchers, where the impact of individuals' behavioral inconsistencies has been extensively studied. The complex concept of hypocrisy is generally considered a negative behavior, and its perception is found to be affected by different factors (Alicke, Gordon, & Rose, 2013). The order of an actor's sharing his or her beliefs and attitudes, along with executing his or her contradictory behavior, is one factor that affects perceived hypocrisy (Barden, Rucker, & Petty, 2005). Researchers have found that when an actor behaves in certain ways prior to sharing his contradictory beliefs, he is perceived as more hypocritical than someone who shares his beliefs prior to behaving inconsistently with them (Barden et al., 2005). Alicke et al. (2013) proposed other factors, such as the severity of the contradictory behavior and the severity of the outcome. The severity of contradictory behavior indicates how egregious—both in degree and in kind—the contradictory behavior is compared to the claims made. The severity of outcomes refers to how different types of outcome—as opposed to the behaviors themselves—can result in different levels of perceived hypocrisy.

Applying this concept to a corporate setting, Wagner, Lutz, and Weitz (2009, p. 79) defined corporate hypocrisy (CH) as "the belief that a firm claims to be something that it is not." One may form a perception of CH when exposed to inconsistent corporate messages and managerial behavior. Most CH research has focused on the impact of firms' policies and behaviors on consumers, investors, and stakeholders. For example, Wagner et al. (2009) showed how consumers' attitudes and beliefs about firms are negatively affected by perceived CH. Brunsson (2007) asserted that addressing CH is important for companies to try to meet their competing stakeholders' demands. He explained that while companies might need to use different tones to speak to different types of stakeholders, such as a tone of philanthropic commitment while addressing society and a tone of economic commitment while negotiating with investors, these multiple tones might be viewed as contradictory and lead to perceived hypocrisy.

The complex effects and outcomes of the perception of corporate hypocrisy can be influenced by several external factors, such as whether the hypocrisy stemmed from intentional deception or weakness of will, how extensive the discrepancy is between the attitude/claims and the contradictory behavior, and how severe the misdeed is (Alicke et al., 2013). For example, the higher the discrepancy is between the corporation's beliefs and acts, the greater the perceived corporate hypocrisy would be. The severity of the misdeed, the enormity of the resultant outcomes, and any subsequent problems due to hypocrisy can also affect corporate entities (Alicke et al., 2013).

Theories of organizational hypocrisy

The term *hypocrisy* in reference to corporations had been discussed in media as early as the 1970s. An article in *The New York Times Magazine* by Milton Friedman (1970), an American economist, referred to business social responsibilities as a "hypocritical window" for corporations to earn appreciation and goodwill in exchange for social services. In the research community, as early as 1974, Argyris and Schon (1974) discussed inconsistencies between organizational beliefs and actions. Kerr (1975) also added to the literature when he discussed how ineffective reward systems can also amount to organizational hypocritical behavior by

rewarding behaviors contradictory to the stated organizational norms. Brunsson (1989) asserted that organizational hypocrisy is an unavoidable conflict within organizations, one that must be organized and managed.

Wagner et al. (2009) reintroduced the concept of corporate hypocrisy to test effective communication strategies and reduce perceived CH and its negative effects on consumers' perceptions about the company and its social commitment. They explained CH by showing corporate social responsibility (CSR) reports inconsistent with the corporations' stated standards for social responsibility. Wagner et al. (2009) reported that companies engaging in proactive communication strategies, such as announcing their CSR statements prior to contradictory behaviors, are perceived to be more hypocritical than those making contradictory claims after engaging in inconsistent acts. This order of claims and inconsistent behaviors affected the level of perceived CH, which in turn affected consumers' attitudes toward the firms negatively and directly.

May Yee and Chee Fei (2014) discussed CH in reference to consumers' perceptions of CSR reports and any contradictory information. They reported that inconsistent CSR reports divulged information that, when compared to companies' actual performances, resulted in perceived CH among consumers. The authors showed that when inconsistencies in corporate strategies and behaviors are observed through companies' CSR reports, consumers' attitudes and beliefs regarding such companies are negatively affected.

Research potential of corporate hypocrisy in the U.S. retail industry

The retail industry is one of the largest employment sectors in the United States, with an increase in employment of 319,000 from 2014 to 2015 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015a). In June 2015, it added approximately 33,000 jobs, where almost 10,000 of those were in general merchandise sections (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015b). The retail industry offers many entry-level jobs (Amadeo, n.d.) that do not require high-level qualifications or skills (Lewis, Ryan, & Gospel, 2008). Instead, it is known to hire aesthetic labor (Witz, Warhust, & Nickson, 2003; Wolkowitz, 2006) that has the "right look" (Williams & Connell, 2010, p. 353), emphasizing "looking good and sounding right" over other qualifications (Williams & Connell, 2010). Warhurst, Thompson, and Nickson (2009, p. 104) criticized this practice as "the commodification of workers' corporeality" wherein employees' physical appearance becomes a central hiring criterion. While this practice has often been criticized as discrimination (Zamudio & Lichter, 2008), it still exists. In fact, U.S. labor laws are in favor of employers' demands for aesthetic conformity with their brand images (Avery & Crain, 2007).

Some researchers describe the retail sector as a "bad job" industry, with lower compensation, less benefits, and fewer career growth opportunities, thus leading to high turnover rates (Williams & Connell, 2010). As of June 2015, U.S. retail trade employees had the lowest average hourly earnings compared to other private service-providing industries at $17.42, much lower than the $28.70 in the wholesale sector and $36.79 in the utilities industry (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015c). As of April 2015, the U.S. retail industry had a total of 4.6% turnover rate, which is comparatively higher than other employment sectors. The manufacturing industry, for example, had a 2.1% turnover rate (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015d).

All of these characteristics that the U.S. retail industry bears offer excellent opportunities to study about possible corporate hypocrisy. Given the facts, such as high turnover rates, the perceived notion of a bad industry, discriminatory employee hiring, and the significant population of entry-level and low-income employees, the retail industry was chosen as a sector where employees may experience many examples of corporate hypocrisy. This approach was also expected to fill the gaps in the corporate hypocrisy literature, which mostly focuses on corporate social responsibility related practices and the impact of such corporate hypocrisy on consumer and shareholders' viewpoints. In this light, this study examined corporate hypocrisy and its impact as described by employees within the U.S. retail industry. More specifically, as the first step toward a larger scope of research on corporate hypocrisy, the study was designed to explore (a) the sources of corporate hypocrisy that U.S. retail employees observe and (b) the impact of inconsistencies between corporate messages and actions on employees' feelings and behavior.

Methods

For this research, an interpretive study was conducted. Given (2008, pp. 459) defines an interpretive inquiry as "understanding (interpreting) the meanings, purposes, and intentions (interpretations) people give to their own actions and interactions with others." It allows researchers to gain in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and expressions beyond the barriers of the researchers' theories, knowledge, interests, and purposes and therefore to capture the reality (Smith, 1992). With semistructured interviews, participants were allowed to lead discussions to unpredictable

contexts, and researchers were able to gather in-depth responses (Wengraf, 2001). Further, such interviews enable researchers to analyze and interpret participants' responses in their natural setting (Walsham, 2006), with the participants' own language and phrasing enabling researchers to capture their actual emotions and experiences (Gadamer, 1975).

Participant recruitment and characteristics

After the study was approved by the institutional review board, participants were recruited through a two-step approach. First, recruitment advertisements were published in the university news media, as well as announced in four undergraduate classes by the research team, in a Midwestern city in spring 2015. Because many college students work part-time in retail while going through their education (*Huffington Post*, 2013), we believed that by targeting the population we would be able to find appropriate participants for the study. When participants were initially contacted, the purpose of the study was explained to them, and interested candidates were then asked for their eligibility for the study. Next, more potential participants were contacted through a snowballing technique. At the end of the interviews, we asked the participants whether they knew any other potential candidates for the study. We then contacted these to solicit participation in this research.

Retail industry experience of, at minimum, 1 year determined eligibility for the participant selection process. This requirement was set to ensure that participants had spent a reasonable time within a company and had sufficient experience related to assessing its beliefs, practices, and policies as relevant to the purpose of the study. However, we also limited participation to those who had fewer than 10 years of experience because they are still relatively early in their careers and, we believe, would have more frequent job changes during that period. If they did have changes in jobs, we wanted to explore whether their job changes had anything to do with perceived corporate hypocrisy. This approach of recruiting and selecting participants helped to achieve a purposive sample group matching the research objectives (Mason, 1996). In total, 16 people participated in the study, and $15 gift cards from a large retailer were given to seven random participants as an incentive. Although 16 participants might seem to be a relatively small sample size, analysis of the interviews revealed patterns and themes in the responses. This indicates data saturation (Spiggle, 1994), which in turn indicates that the collected data are sufficient for exploration and analysis, and that further new data might not generate any new findings.

All participants were female, ranging in age from 20 to 37 years. Participants' occupational experiences ranged from keyholders to sales associates to assistant store managers. Their average work experience in the U.S. retail industry was close to 3 years. While most participants were employed as part-time employees, three of them were working in retail as their main occupation. Their ethnic distribution included Caucasian and African American (see Table 1 for participant characteristics).

Data collection

Each one-on-one interview was conducted for 30 minutes at a locations convenient to the participant, such that two interviews were conducted at two different local coffee shops and the remaining interviews were conducted in two different meeting rooms for which the participants showed preferences. Participants were briefed about the study and their consent was given to audiotape the interviews, which was done to maintain a more accurate record of their words and expressions as opposed to taking notes for entire interviews (Walsham, 2006). Each interview was also transcribed immediately for recording "tacit non-verbal elements" (Walsham, 2006, p. 323). A few interview questions were further adjusted based on six initial interview responses. Approximately 8 hours of recorded audio data was then transcribed into texts in Word documents, generating a total of 112 pages of typed texts. The interviews and text data analysis suggested information saturation after interviewing 16 participants.

Interviews were designed to be semistructured in nature to explore in depth how participants feel about

Table 1. Characteristics of the participants.

Participant	Age	Gender	Occupation	Years of experience	Ethnicity
P1	24	Female	Sales associate & assistant manager	5	Caucasian
P2	20	Female	Sales associate	3.5	Caucasian
P3	36	Female	Sales associate & assistant manager	7.5	Caucasian
P4	21	Female	Sales associate	1.5	Caucasian
P5	21	Female	Sales associate	2	Caucasian
P6	20	Female	Sales associate	2	Caucasian
P7	23	Female	Sales associate	2	Caucasian
P8	21	Female	Sales associate	2	Caucasian
P9	24	Female	Sales associate & assistant manager	5.5	Caucasian
P10	25	Female	Sales associate	3	Caucasian
P11	35	Female	Assistant manager	2	African American
P12	25	Female	Sales associate	3.5	Caucasian
P13	37	Female	Assistant manager	4	African American
P14	22	Female	Sales associate	1	Caucasian
P15	21	Female	Sales associate	2.5	Caucasian
P16	24	Female	Sales associate	3	Caucasian

their companies and managers, how they feel about inconsistencies between companies' words and deeds, and how their feelings affected their job commitment. Questions, such as "Tell me a little bit about your company and job," were asked in the beginning of the interview to explore their overall impression of their professions. For this purpose, we asked whether participants were satisfied or unsatisfied and whether they were more connected to the company or any particular manager. Questions such as "Can you tell me about your job, and about how your supervisor manages you and other employees?," "Tell me about your company's reporting or evaluation culture. How did you feel about that culture?," and "If your company wants you to do something, how do they approach you?" were used to explore the company structure and culture in their perceptions.

Other questions, such as "Did you ever feel that what your company says and does are two different things? Could you describe such situations?," "Did your company keep all its promises? Can you describe the examples of any positive or negative experiences?," "Are they doing something that they shouldn't do? Any stories?," and "Are they doing something that they say you shouldn't do? Any stories?," helped researchers to understand participants' perceptions about any inconsistencies existing between companies' words and actions.

To explore how participants felt as a result of their perceived corporate hypocrisies and how they reacted to such situations, questions such as "How did you feel about it?," "How did these incidents affect you and how you feel about your company?," "Did you do something in response to these incidents? Why? Or why not?," "Would your reaction have been different with any change in the circumstances?," "What would you think of your company in general?," "Is this a good company to work for or not? Why or why not?," and "Would you recommend this company to someone else? Why or why not?" were asked.

Data analysis

The collected data were transcribed and analyzed in an interpretive procedure. First, transcribed interviews were read by researchers in their entirety, leading to holistic evolving themes. Initially, the researchers quickly identified that there were two theme categories: sources of CH and outcomes of CH. Second, interview texts were identified as distinct units and were coded based on similarities or differences across the data, and these codes were assigned to related theme categories. This process was repeated more than 20 times, resulting in seven distinct themes emerged within the two theme categories.

Coding distinct text units based on differences also helped to locate outlying cases. For example, initially, three participants, contradictory to the majority of participants, shared their positive experiences with their managers, and therefore were less exposed to corporate hypocrisy. However, as the researchers' understanding develops from repeated coding, interpretation, and analysis, new understanding of the three participants' experiences emerged—that is, managers' important role in participants' perceptions on CH, whether it is positive or not. In yet another example, when participants were asked about their company experiences, language like "My manager did not seem to like me" and "Things were not bad except for my manager" lead to the more holistic interpretation that, for employees, immediate supervisors or managers represented a company. This process of data analysis was implemented reading the texts for a total of 50 times and repeated for all transcribed interviews to form two theme categories of perceived inconsistencies related to corporate beliefs and behaviors. Observed themes were further grouped together to form a holistic theme category (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). Themes of managerial inconsistencies and corporate inconsistencies together presented the theme category of claim/action inconsistencies. All the observed themes and their categories were analyzed and interpreted, leading to the summary of interpretation in Figure 1.

Interpretation

Interpretation of interview data revealed that there are inconsistencies between retail companies' messages and behaviors, and such inconsistencies seemed to lead our study participants to develop a perception of corporate hypocrisy. Data interpretation showed two different sources of these inconsistencies: discrepancies between (a) supervisors' messages and actions and (b) corporate policies and implementations. Due to these inconsistencies, participants felt annoyed, betrayed, sick, threatened, and panicking.

Inconsistencies between supervisors' messages and actions: Sources and effects

The review of existing research indicated that managers and leaders of an organization play an important role in employee management. In fact, a corporate culture, its goals and visions, and its environment are all found to be influenced by its leaders (Kets, 2006; Schein, 2010). Moreover, organizational literature suggests that

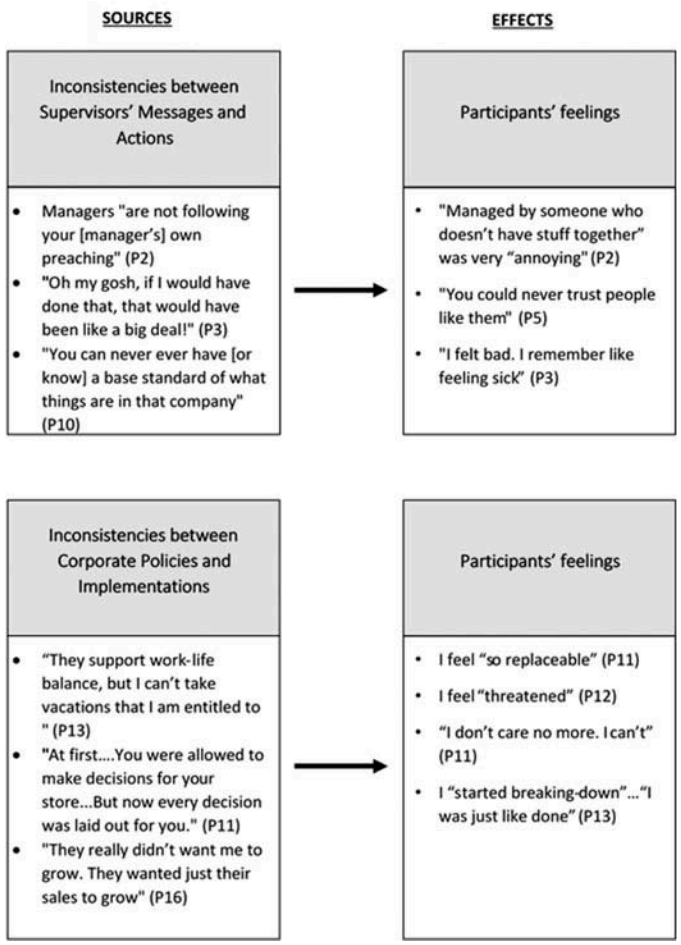

Figure 1. Summary of interpretation.

managers are not only leading figures or role models contributing to organizational effectiveness, but also central figures to be looked upon during moments of crisis (Diamond, 1991; Schein, 2010).

Supporting previous studies, this study's results also suggested the important role and position a store manager or supervisor plays in participants' perceptions. Specifically in the retail industry, where study participants had limited interactions with the corporate managers, they often seemed to relate their supervisors or store managers as a representation of the company. From the interviews, 10 out of 16 respondents specifically indicated that their managers played an important role in their perception of and experience in the company for which they worked. Only three participants shared that they had had a few "good" (P2) managers whom they could look up to on a shop floor and who made them enjoy being at work. P2 shared that she "just got along" with her manager, and that "she [the manager] was like a friend more."

However, the majority of the participants shared that their supervisors showed actions differing from their own words, causing a potential hypocrisy within the company. To the participants, such inconsistencies are easily perceived when the supervisors (a) do not follow their own preaching and (b) communicate unclear messages. Consequently, participants would (c) lose trust and feel physically ill.

Not following own preaching

The biggest reason for corporate hypocrisy seemed to arise from inconsistencies between supervisors' messages and actions. P2, for example, described the case of her second company where the managers "are not following your [manager's] own preaching." P6 also indicated something similar where employees would be "frowned upon" for not following managers' instructions, but managers themselves could get away with it.

In this light, P3 described an incident where she observed her manager making mistakes that are not typically allowed to regular sales associates. Her manager's making such a mistake was an issue for P3, and not apologizing for it seemed to create an even greater degree of hypocrisy for P3 to swallow:

P3: She [manager] was like "when you are really busy, things happen." But then I was like, oh my gosh, if I would have done that [kept the bucket of bars (hangers) visible in the store front], and then later the day when I am there, if it is still there, that would have been like a big deal! It's like dropping the ball in a big way [meaning, I would get into trouble but the manager wouldn't], you know!

Communicating unclear messages

Unclear or ambiguous messages from supervisors also seemed to form hypocrisy in study participants' minds. For example, supervisors may penalize participants for the same mistakes that the supervisors would also make. Two standards for the mistake—one for the study participants as employees and the other for the supervisor—seemed to be common in retail operation. P10 shared a colorful story of this experience:

P10: I told my manager, well, I was told never ever can I have it [transaction per labor hour] above 12. Then, my manager said "Well, umm, that's not true, we changed our mind." I was like oh, I didn't get that. And they [were] like, "things could change, they always change." You can never ever have a base standard of what things are in that company. And, then I got into trouble. I mean, like for the past 3 years, you had been telling me this is purple, and you ask me what color sky is, I say purple. And now today you tell me sky is red. It's very difficult to understand what was going on and what you are supposed to do.

Losing trust and feeling sick

While study participants had been experiencing such inconsistent and contradictory manifestations of their managers' claims and instructions, how such inconsistencies affected participants' feelings and future employment behavior was also a matter of concern. Participants indicated that such claim–behavior differences made them feel annoyed, distrustful, and even sick. To P2, having to deal with inconsistent managers or being "managed by someone who doesn't have [their] stuff together" (P2) was very "annoying," and the accumulation of annoyance led P5 to lose trust in her managers who play favoritism in employee management:

P5: The management was very favoritism driven. So, they will find their favorites in the company. They were super great and bestie [best friend] with them. But, they [were] kind of rude to everyone else. You could never trust people like them.

For P3, the impact of her managers and their actions was so great that her working experience made her feel sick due to a new manager:

P3: The first year I was at store, the store manager was great! She [manager] was shouldering all the criticism coming from regional and district managers because she knew that we all work really really hard. But, when the new manager came in, she did not have the same way of managing [shouldering criticism]. And, so she fed that [management criticism] down the chain. And it just became a horrible store situation. I hated going to work. I felt bad. I remember like feeling sick.

Inconsistencies between corporate policies and implementations: Sources and effects

Along with managers' inconsistent claims and expectations for their employees (as compared to their own behaviors), participants seemed to form an impression of corporate hypocrisy due to a lack of consistency between corporate policies and the enactments of them. Throughout the interviews, participants indicated that most of the time when companies had communicated or announced some business policies, their implementation contradicted the actual policies, thus contributing to study participants' perceptions of hypocrisy. For example, pointing out inconsistencies between corporate policies and implementations, P13 stated that "they support work–life balance, but I can't take vacations that I am entitled to." In this light, three themes emerged as the sources of corporate hypocrisy: (a) inconsistency in management authority, (b) inconsistent performance evaluation practices, and (c) inconsistency in professional development plans. The results of such corporate hypocrisy seemed to make the participants feel conflicted on their personal values, emotionally threatened, and panicked.

Inconsistency in management authority

P11 shared that she was initially able to work creatively and independently and managed her own store and customer base. After a while, new store management policies were created and she was no longer able to work with her customers at all. She thought that the new policies reduced flexibility to serve her customer base. This inconsistency made her feel as if she were a machine, without any creativity:

P11: At first, you had a lot of time to figure things out for your store. You were allowed to make decisions for your store, because your store and the others would be different, there are so many differences. Their managers had to be more skilled because they had to be able to make decisions. But now it felt to me that things became much more mechanized, so you didn't have to make decisions … But now every decision was laid out for you. And so everyone was like this part of a machine. You just have to repeat the same thing.

Inconsistent performance evaluation practices

On a different note, P3 challenged the ambiguity of a rule book that she believed was written to protect the company, not its employees. P3 specifically pointed out inconsistent ways work performance was evaluated that seemed of little or no importance to her at all:

> P3: I thought their rule book was so flexible so they could change it anytime. It would be like what we were measured on. So we were measured on ADS [average dollar sale], and that was a big one … But then they would shift and okay now we are doing UPT or unit per transaction. I don't care about ADS, your ADS might be whatever, you must have 4 UTP … Okay, last week we cared about ADS, but this week it's UPT, and next week again it's [it would be] just conversion.

Inconsistency in professional development plans

Finally, participants shared the inconsistencies within personnel development policies, as P5 described: "They told about being fair to every girl, like helping them to grow and all. But there was like this huge thing only about their sales. Like nothing else mattered to them." Concurring, P16 put it this way:

> P16: They really didn't want me to grow. They wanted just their sales to grow. I think in order to have a really awesome team, you need to invest in your company's culture, not just in the sales you are making. And I felt all such experience because of the entire management team, more than one person.

Conflict between personal and corporate values

The results of the inconsistencies seemed to lead participants to feel conflicted between their own values and corporate values. By value conflicts, participants seemed to imply that their own beliefs and moral values had to be compromised in order to fulfill corporate demands. For example, P4 felt conflicted with "companies' over-expectations" from her to push customers to open new store credit cards, while her personal values suggest that "credit cards are debt pools, I myself do not want to own so many of them." This conflict seemed to exist across the study participants, regardless of their employment status or career goals. Through the value conflicts, participants described that they "felt upset" (P4), "felt cheated by the company, they didn't even explain it [unsaid hiring strategy] to me about this part of the job" (P5), and "felt required and forced" (P8) to perform duties. As a result, most participants reported that they have quit their jobs before, while a few reported that they still "struggle" (P9) and "compromise" (P5) to continue with their jobs.

> P9: I felt required to criticize my friends and coworkers. It [criticizing friends] was insane; I always tried ways to avoid it. I am not going to throw her under the bus. They [corporate management] are just constantly creating this animosity. They would ask me to report on my store manager in the same way. I struggled and hesitated, eventually I quit.

Feeling threatened and panicked

Resulting from such experiences, participants showed seemingly two different kinds of emotional stages. First, participants thought that the inconsistencies in management authority, performance evaluation matrix, and professional development plans made them feel "so replaceable" as if "you [the company] could drop anyone into the position" (P11). Feeling "threatened" (P12), P16 described that "I was so afraid seeing so many managers like drop, drop, drop, I was scared, it was a completely different culture." This threat pushed participants away from the job, and made them look for alternative employment options. It also left them feeling oblivious to their situations in some cases. P11 explained:

> P11: One day, the DM [district manager] was in. He pulled out papers and stood in front of the room. He just looked at me and breaking me for two hours. And then he looked at me and said "you need to shape up because you are lucky to have a job. A lot of people don't have a job. And you are lucky to have one." At this moment, I was done with him, whatever. Because he was breaking me and I already got a new job. And I was just waiting to hear back from them. (…) I couldn't [take it]. He told me that I am a good worker, so it was very interesting. And I don't care no [any] more. I can't.

These terrible feelings then seemed to make participants experience emotional panic as they "started breaking down" (P13) when the new culture or policies were implemented. P3 was still going through emotional turmoil to the extent that she could not even drive to submit her resignation notice:

> P3: I was just started crying like, I can't go to work today, no I can't go to work, I just can't. I knew if I would have stayed till the end of the year, I would have gotten a big bonus. I just needed to stay till like next month, like 27 days. But I kept on telling like no, I can't go, I can't go, I can't go. And I just got so upset by the time that I couldn't even drive. So I asked him [her fiancé] to drive me there, turn in my keys, hand in my resignation, and I was just like done.

Discussion and conclusions

The study explored the sources and effects of corporate hypocrisy described by 16 U.S. retail employees in a Midwestern city. The findings showed that the study participants perceived corporate hypocrisy through the

inconsistencies between retail companies' messages and managerial actions, and between their policies and implementations. The dearth of research on organizational hypocrisy applied to the retail industry and its workforce led us to explore the issues by utilizing interpretive analysis through interviews.

Analysis and interpretation of in-depth interview data showed how a company, as a corporation along with its management, can be perceived as hypocritical by its employees due to inconsistencies between its claims and its actions. The study suggested that, for study participants, both the corporation and their immediate supervisors represented the company. Thus, inconsistencies between either or both of their claims and their actions resulted in the participants, as employees, perceiving them as hypocritical in nature. This perceived hypocrisy, in turn, seemed to be related to participants' feelings and their overall employment intentions. Participants did indicate having an overall positive and satisfied experience towards their retail jobs when there was no inconsistency and no perceived hypocrisy. Participants seemed to relate their resulting feelings to their employment intentions. Those in hypocritical environments felt annoyed and even sick, and they eventually either quit their job or did not care about the company. This finding sheds light into how the study participants experience CH with visceral descriptions of their feelings and emotions, which is a unique and critical contribution that qualitative research could provide. In fact, the impacts of CH on the study participants seem different from those on consumers. Previous research suggests that consumers who experience hypocrite corporations form negative attitudes, avoid, boycott, or leave negative reviews (Smith, Read, & López-Rodríguez, 2010; Wagner et al., 2009). In this light, the consequences of CH on employees, particularly the study participants, seemed much severe than those on consumers, as the study participants expressed their personal moral value compromise and voluntary employment termination with visceral physiological responses.

The study findings have several contributions and implications. First, the results open new doors for current theory of organizational hypocrisy literature. The current theory focuses on how a company may be perceived as hypocritical when its actions deviate or contradict its beliefs or messages, and how such perceptions in consumers might affect corporate business. This study offered an insider's look at how immediate supervisors could also create corporate hypocrisy, jeopardizing retail companies' image or reputation. This calls for a new theory on the sources and effects of corporate hypocrisy that could be created through daily activities and performance within the corporate settings, which is different from existing literature focusing on consumer responses and reactions.

Second, the study's findings indicated the importance of retail company managers or supervisors on sales floors, as they become so associated with the corporation itself that they almost become the face of the companies for employees. Study participants, as employees, tend to consider their experience with managers in the workplace as their experience with the corporation itself. Specifically, in the retail industry, where participants as the front-line employees had limited exposure to corporate management, their experiences with the company mostly revolved around their immediate supervisors. Thus, retail companies might need to improve business structure so as to have responsible and respectable managers and to encourage a consistent work environment. Favoritism, biased penalizing, and inconsistent instructions seem to be some commonly reported issues that add up to participants' perceptions of corporate hypocrisy and led them to feel distrustful, nervous, and skeptical. Considering the importance of managers and leaders in framing a corporate culture and environment, as found in the literature and supported by this study, the hiring team specifically might need to consider these common issues while assigning candidates to store managerial positions.

Third, according to the study data, inconsistent corporate messages and behaviors also seemed to lead participants to perceive corporations as behaving hypocritically. Participants expressed concerns about difficulties in trusting their companies when they contradict their promises and messages and behave in unpredictable ways. Some common issues, as highlighted in this study, are companies having inconsistency in management authority, performance evaluation matrices, and professional development plans. Participants also expressed that their ability to trust a company was related to these inconsistencies, which made them feel replaceable, threatened, scared, emotionally panicked, and sometimes oblivious to their situation. Retail companies might therefore need to review their policies and have relevant strategies to establish a consistent business structure. Leaders and management teams might need to ensure that their policies and their actions do not contradict their claims and image as advertised. Further, companies might also need to be more communicative and transparent in their management so that they might explain the rationale behind their inconsistency instead of implementing seemingly random changes.

Fourth, the study further presented in-depth views into how these inconsistencies affected participants to the extent that they struggled with whether to continue with employment, developed aversions toward companies, or even quit their jobs. The retail industry is already well known for its employee turnover, so managers might need to focus on such conditions to reduce its turnover rates, increase organizational effectiveness, and improve organization reputation.

This study has a few limitations and therefore future research opportunities. First, since the study used a smaller sample size with limited geographic, ethnic, and gender diversity, applying its findings in general must be done carefully. Rather, the study findings illuminate new research agendas, requesting further research on employees' perceptions on corporate hypocrisy. Further study with a larger sample size, all genders, wider age distribution, more geographic locations, and greater ethnic diversity is expected to improve the generalizability of its results. Second, while the qualitative nature of the study helped to explore and understand common corporate inconsistencies, their sources, and their effects as perceived by employees, the lack of a quantitative approach prevents us from measuring such inconsistencies and results. Therefore, further investigation is necessary into why managers do or do not follow corporate policies, creating potential CH, and how much of such deviation occurs in today's workplace. Furthermore, investigation of differences between consumers' and employees' responses to CH is another important research topic in the future. Given the difference in power relationships between consumers/employees and corporations, quantification of potential economic loss from employee separation as well as consumer loss due to CH would shed light on how important it is for corporations to be transparent and consistent with their stakeholders. Beyond these points, one might suggest that the level of employees' knowledge on corporate policies or economic performance of companies may affect employees' perceived CH. Given the lack of our understanding of employees' perspectives of CH, the study findings suggest many future research opportunities in this area to gain a holistic picture of the employment and management problems of the industry.

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