How situational circumstances modify the effects of frontline employees' competences on customer satisfaction with the store

Laura Lucia-Palacios[a], Raúl Pérez-López[a*] and Yolanda Polo-Redondo[a]

[a] Faculty of Business and Economics (University of Zaragoza)

Postal Address: C/ Gran Vía, 2, 50005, Zaragoza, Spain

*Corresponding author: raperez@unizar.es

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyze whether the effectiveness of frontline employees' competences (task and interaction) at managing customer satisfaction <u>with the store</u> differ depending on situational circumstances, specifically, on type of query (consultation vs. assistance) and store crowding. <u>A qualitative study was used to investigate the importance of these two situational circumstances in sales encounters. Subsequently, the hypotheses were tested by a quantitative study based on a survey of 575 customers about their shopping experience. The findings indicate that the effect of frontline employees' task competence on customer satisfaction increases when the store is crowded, while the effect of interaction competence is stronger in relation to consultation queries than to assistance queries. Important theoretical and practical implications for frontline employees and store managers are outlined.</u>

Keywords: Customer satisfaction; frontline employee competences; situational circumstance.

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1. Introduction

Customer experience management entails analyzing each encounter between the customer and the firm (Vorhees et al., 2017). Managers have started to monitor these encounters as a means by which to provide their customers with outstanding experiences that translate into favorable consumer outcomes and behavior, such as satisfaction, purchase intention, and loyalty (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Previous research on service encounters in retailing has focused particularly on customers' interactions with employees, other customers, atmospherics, and technology (Bowen and Schneider, 2014; Vorhees et al., 2017).

Customer–employee contacts, also known as sales encounters, are critical encounters that have a significant impact on clients' impressions of the retailer and of the brand, largely determine perceived service quality, and influence consumption behavior (Söderlund, 2016; Jha et al., 2017; <u>Söderlund et al., 2018</u>). Despite the importance of the online channel and the inclusion of information technologies in physical stores, mainly self-checkouts, frontline employees "are still the service" (Zeithaml et al., 2009, p. 352) of retail companies and key to the success of the company (Cadwallader et al., 2010). The online channel and self-checkouts are options that can enrich the retailers' frontline service and help create shopping value (Pantano and Migliarese, 2014; Verhagen et al., 2019). However, they do not replace employees; in fact, they become even more important to determining customer satisfaction when self-checkouts fail (Fernández-Sabiote and Román, 2016). In addition, shoppers still value the frontline employees' service because of the interaction and trustworthiness that they offer (Riquelme et al., 2016; Larivière et al., 2017; Lee, 2017).

Frontline employees' competences are especially important in creating a pleasurable and convenient service encounter. Previous research has demonstrated that these competences can influence customer satisfaction with the service, the establishment, and the company, and that they also affect brand image and loyalty (van Dolen et al., 2004; Brexendorf et al., 2010). There are two broad categories of competences: task and interaction. Task competence refers to the employees' knowledge of the product and of the selling task, and interaction competence concerns employees' communication abilities, friendliness and kindness. Previous research has analyzed the effects of frontline employees' competences on customer satisfaction (Price et al., 1995; van Dolen et al., 2002; Brexendorf et al., 2010; Wu et al., 2015; Delcourt et al., 2017). Some studies have questioned the effectiveness of sales encounters (measured with variables other than competences, such as job satisfaction and adaptive selling strategies) to achieve customer satisfaction, finding that some situational circumstances, such as store busyness, service complexity and time pressure, impact on this effectiveness (Grandey et al., 2011; Mikolon et al., 2015; Zboja et al., 2016). However, these studies do not focus on frontline employees' task and interaction competences, nor do they consider which of these situational circumstances have the most important effect on the relationship between the competences and customer satisfaction with the store.

A qualitative study based on in-depth interviews of 41 Spanish shoppers was conducted to investigate which situational circumstances are more important in modifying the specific effects of frontline employees' task and interaction competences on customer satisfaction. This study identified type of query (consultation vs. assistance) and crowding. Although crowding has been extensively examined in retailing, little is known about its moderating effect on frontline employees' activities (Mattila and Wirtz, 2008). A query involves a direct contact between the frontline employee and the customer (Haas and Kening, 2014), so

different queries may require different frontline employee competences in order to satisfy customers. Despite the importance of this variable, there is no empirical evidence addressing its modifying effects on the effectiveness of frontline employees' competences to obtain customer satisfaction. Thus, the following research question can be asked: How can type of query and crowding modify the effect of task and interaction competences on customers' satisfaction with the store?

This research question leads us to propose two main research goals. First, this study examines whether the effects of frontline employees' competences vary depending on type of query and crowding. Second, we aim to uncover how this modification takes place. To address these goals, we employ an empirical analysis based on structural equation modeling. Data were collected from 575 customers in a Spanish shopping mall. This context is especially interesting for testing our proposed relationships because the number of shopping malls has continued to increase during the last five years in Europe and they allow the gathering of data from clothing stores where frontline employees still have a relevant role (Lee, 2017; Verhagen et al., 2019). Furthermore, self-checkout machines have rarely been adopted by Spanish retailers in shopping malls. This gives a more important role to frontline employees in sales encounters (Holschtein et al., 2019).

The Spanish retail sector is the fifth largest European market with an annual turnover of €486.68 billion (Spanish National Statistics Office – INE, 2018), with an annual increase of 1.7% in 2018 (INE, 2019). Furthermore, the footfall index, which measures trends in the number of shoppers that visit retail establishments, indicated that the Spanish sector received 2% more shoppers in 2018 compared to 2016 (Savills Aguirre Newman, 2018), beating the trend in other major European sectors that registered minor increases (below 1%), or even reductions, such as the UK. Furthermore, the sector is a cornerstone of the Spanish economy, accounting for 18.3% of the country's Gross Value Added and employing 12.3%

of the Spanish labor force (Spanish National Association of Distributive Large Companies – ANGED, 2017).

The findings of this research contribute to the marketing literature by providing new evidence of the moderating role of situational circumstances in the effectiveness of frontline employees' competences in influencing customer satisfaction with the store. First, the study adds type of query, which has rarely been considered by previous research, as a situational factor. This variable is especially important when employees have low levels of competences. Second, it analyzes store crowding, which is similar to store busyness but differs in terms of the emotions it causes in customers, and it contributes evidence of crowding's relevance when customers perceive low levels of frontline competences. Our findings present implications for managers when ensuring customer satisfaction with the store.

The remainder of this paper is made up of five sections. Section 2 explains how frontline employees can affect shoppers' feelings, especially their satisfaction. Section 3 outlines the theoretical framework. Section 4 describes the methodology and Section 5 presents the results. Finally, Section 6 offers some conclusions about the findings, together with important managerial implications and lines for further research.

2. The influence of sales encounters on customer satisfaction with the store

A sales encounter in a retail store is an event between a frontline employee and a customer which contributes to the experience the customer has with the company and, thereby, impacts the customer's perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, feelings, and behavior (Subramony et al., 2004; Brexendorf et al., 2010; Rod et al., 2016). Previous research has shown that sales encounters influence customer satisfaction with the company, the seller, and the store (Grandey et al., 2011; Jha et al., 2017; Söderlund, 2016).

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The present article focuses on satisfaction with the store, since this satisfaction is one of the main goals of retailers when managing their establishments and offers an overall assessment of the service provided by the retailer (Brexendorf et al., 2010). Customer satisfaction with the store is defined as his/her overall assessment of the store, including its products, ambience, physical environment, and frontline employees' service (Westbrook and Oliver, 1981; Oliver, 1997; Berry et al., 2006; Delcourt et al., 2017). Despite the presence of other determinants of customer satisfaction with the store, customer–employee contacts are critical touchpoints that influence the overall service quality offered by the establishment and the company (Andersson et al., 2016; Gaur et al., 2017; Schepers et al., 2018; Söderlund, 2018).

In their assessment of employees, customers evaluate employees' ability to diagnose and meet customer needs, their capacity to understand the customer, and the interpersonal care they demonstrate, with consideration given both to convenience and to social interaction (Beatty et al., 1996; Srivastava and Kaul, 2014). Consequently, two broad categories of competences can be distinguished: task competence and interaction competence (Price et al., 1995; van Dolen et al., 2004; Berry et al., 2006). The former refers to the frontline employee's product knowledge and ability to assist customers in their buying task, and it involves the delivery of an appropriate core service; the latter concerns the frontline employee's social, relational and communication capabilities (Rod et al., 2016). Greater employee task competence leads to higher customer intentions to return and to recommend a store, and it increases sales, satisfaction, service quality, and loyalty (Reynolds and Beatty, 1999; Brexendorf et al., 2010; Wu et al., 2015; Rod et al., 2016). On the other hand, interaction competences can increase satisfaction, loyalty, service quality, positive emotions, and intention to recommend a store, and they reduce negative feelings

(Reynolds and Beatty, 1999; van Dolen et al., 2002; van Dolen et al., 2004; Wu et al., 2015; Fernández-Sabiote and Román, 2016; Lucia-Palacios et al., 2018).

With regard to the link between salespeople's task and interaction competences and satisfaction, Price et al. (1995) found a positive association using a qualitative approach. Van Dolen et al. (2002) quantitatively demonstrated that both types of competences have positive impacts on customers' satisfaction with the service provided by the company, and Brexendorf et al. (2010) confirmed these findings, adding a link with loyalty and brand attitude. Interaction competence is a useful tool to increase customer satisfaction after a service failure recovery (Fernández-Sabiote and Román, 2016). Furthermore, it can help employees reinforce the positive effects of good task competence, as it is useful not only for meeting customers' expectations but also for exceeding them (Berry et al., 2006; Delcourt et al., 2017).

3. The moderating role of situational circumstances in the sales encounter

3.1. Theoretical background

According to the literature on customer experience and service encounters, the customer response to any encounter with the firm is a result of the combination of the company's offering, the customer's characteristics, and situational factors. These three sources determine customers' cognitive appraisals, feelings, and behavior (Verhoef et al., 2009; Lemke et al., 2011; Jüttner et al., 2013; Lucia-Palacios et al., 2016; Yuroba et al., 2017). Situational circumstances are contextual factors that surround the main participants of the sales encounter in a specific shopping situation.

Olshavsky (1973) was one of the first to empirically address the influence of situational circumstances on the sales encounter, focusing on the different phases of a transaction process (orientation, evaluation, and consummation) and finding that salespeople try to understand different customers' needs in each phase. Weitz (1981) built a theoretical

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framework in which salesperson effectiveness was a function not only of their selling behaviors but also of the characteristics of the customer–salesperson relationship and the customer's objectives. Williams et al. (1990) mentioned some of these characteristics – such as product complexity, interaction length, shopping involvement, and environmental characteristics – but did not demonstrate whether they affected the salespeople's effectiveness in communicating with customers. After these initial theoretical propositions, more recent research has focused on situational factors in sales encounters, finding that situational circumstances can modify the salespersons' persuasiveness to increase purchase intentions (Shao et al., 2004; Yuroba et al., 2017), their service quality (Dean and Rainnie, 2009), and their relational orientation to foment customer loyalty (Homburg et al. 2011).

Only a few of these studies take customer satisfaction as the outcome of the sales encounter, and none have considered frontline employees' task and interaction competences (Homburg and Stock, 2005; Wangeheim et al., 2007; Grandey et al., 2011; Mikolon et al., 2015; Zboja et al., 2016). Homburg and Stock (2005) found that the effect of the job satisfaction of salespersons on customer satisfaction is stronger when the frequency of customer–employee interaction is high. Service climate is a circumstance that can enhance employee satisfaction, thereby helping them to achieve greater customer satisfaction (Wangenheim et al., 2007), and store busyness can also affect the influence of employee satisfaction on customer satisfaction, making it weaker in busy stores (Grandey et al., 2011). Mikolon et al. (2015) found that high service complexity can increase customers' cognitive capacity, which results in greater satisfaction with the service encounter. In addition, regarding time pressure, Zboja et al. (2016) found that being in a hurry makes customers perceive the seller's tactics as more aggressive, which results in less satisfaction with the encounter and less trust in the salesperson.

3.2. Selection of situational circumstances: Qualitative study

Since a large variety of situational circumstances can be relevant for the encounter between customers and frontline employees, it is necessary to simplify the model that will be tested quantitatively. An advisable way to proceed is to conduct an exploratory study that can provide some clue as to which situational circumstances are most important for shoppers (Chocarro et al., 2013). This study employed content analysis of in-depth interviews, since this approach generates detailed process descriptions of how consumers experience their shopping activity and form their opinions, feelings, and perceptions (Jüttner et al., 2013).

A series of semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with a sample of 41 Spanish respondents about their shopping experiences between January 2013 and January 2014. This qualitative study belonged to a greater study about retail customer experience and was conducted during one year because some periods can affect shoppers' experience differently, such as sales periods and Christmas. These informants were recruited using a snowball sampling technique on a volunteer basis. The interviews were inserted into a bigger project about shopping experience. During their narrations, 38 people referred to their interactions with frontline employees, and 25 of them highlighted one or several situational circumstances. Of those who referred to frontline employees, 22 were women. They were aged between 19 and 59 (median age 32.17). Out of the total sample, 19 of the respondents were graduates; 21 were married or engaged; and 12 were parents.

Before starting the interview, participants were informed about the aim of the study, its anonymity, its voluntary nature, and the task involved (Flint et al., 2002). The interview started by asking the participants to remember their last shopping experience in a shopping center and to report the aspects that most clearly influenced that experience. Next, in order to help the participants reveal more information, they were asked to remember their last but one visit to a mall and to compare it with the last one. Finally, respondents were asked for a global evaluation of their more recent experiences. The interview protocol also included

some more specific bullet points regarding shopping experience, such as atmosphere, music, personnel service, crowding, and store layout (see Appendix A). The interviewer tried not to bias informants' responses, giving them freedom to answer. At the end of the interview, the interviewer asked about the specific aspects of the experience that had not been mentioned by the informants spontaneously.

The interviews lasted between 25 and 65 minutes, with an average of 45 minutes. They were recorded and subsequently transcribed so that codes could be developed using the NVIVO software. Three researchers served as coders and analyzed the information, using dimensional analysis in order to identify the main aspects of the interviews. Disagreements were resolved through discussion. Several methodological controls were used to ensure the trustworthiness, validity, and reliability of the data in the qualitative approach (Flint et al., 2002; Rao and Perry, 2003).

Table 1 depicts the situational circumstances that were identified through the interviews, indicating how many informants mentioned each circumstance. Nine different situational circumstances were mentioned by the respondents. The researchers agreed to consider for the quantitative analysis only those circumstances mentioned in at least 20% of the interviews. This equated to two circumstances: type of query and crowding.

Table 1

Identification of situational circumstances

Situational circumstances	No. of mentions	Frequency (%)
Type of query	10	40
Crowding	9	36
Shopping goals	2	8
Shopping companions	2	8
Sold-out products	1	4
Product complexity	1	4
Interaction length	1	4
Tidiness	1	4

Type of query was the most mentioned circumstance. Example comments from the informants were: "I didn't talk to any (frontline employees), except to pay and ask for another size" (female respondent, 25); "I don't usually talk to frontline employees, but I needed to buy something I don't usually buy and spoke to one. He was really helpful" (male respondent, 25). It seems that shoppers interact more with frontline employees when they need to reduce their perceived risk or their uncertainty about product characteristics or when they wish to obtain some advice.

Crowding was the second situational factor that appeared in the interviews, with nine references. Most people pointed to the fact that crowded stores imply messy shelves and less personal availability, making frontline employees work harder and complicating the shopping trip. For example, a female respondent (36) said: "A huge amount of people is a nightmare because there are no frontline employees available and they are all in a hurry".

3.3. Hypothesis development

3.3.1. Type of query

The services provided by frontline employees in retailing usually include a wide array of tasks, from simple assistance with payments or product searches to consultation services related to information about the characteristics and functionalities of products (Levy and Weitz, 2004). Consultation involves at least a discussion related to the customer's purchase problem, and it may include information about products and their attributes and recommendations (Haas and Kenning, 2014).

In accordance with the literature on information searches and sales, customers mainly consult frontline employees to reduce uncertainty or perceived risk in the purchase situation (Kalra et al., 2003; Mortimer and Pressey, 2013). Purchase uncertainty occurs because of a lack of information about purchase-related aspects, such as the various alternatives that are available in the store, product attributes, and performance. When shoppers consult frontline

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employees, they expect to get information that will help them reduce their purchase uncertainty (Pieters et al., 1998). Similarly, in high involvement purchases, the information provided by frontline employees is more effective for increasing willingness to buy (Hoschstein et al., 2019). We can extrapolate this argument to our context because consultation queries usually take place in purchases characterized by high involvement. Thus, frontline employees' task competence, which is related to product knowledge and the selling task, is more important in enhancing customer satisfaction regarding consultation queries than in assistance queries.

While most research has focused on consultation to reduce purchase uncertainty, Haas and Kenning (2014) demonstrated that shopping enjoyment may be another motivation for consulting frontline employees. Shopping enjoyment refers to customers' perceptions of shopping as an entertaining and pleasurable experience and is an important shopping motivation that is also related to social shopping experiences (Arnold and Reynolds, 2003). Consultation is an opportunity for shoppers to socialize, and they expect a pleasant interaction with frontline employees (Reynolds and Beatty, 1999). Interaction skills are more important for increasing customer satisfaction with the store, since it can result in customers feeling more involved in the purchase situation (Delcourt et al., 2017). Thus, frontline employees' interaction competence will influence customer satisfaction more strongly in a consultation query than in a case of providing simple assistance.

H1$_a$: *The influence of frontline employees' task competence on customer satisfaction will be stronger in an interaction based on a consultation query than on an assistance query.*

H1$_b$: *The influence of frontline employees' interaction competence on customer satisfaction will be stronger in an interaction based on a consultation query than on an assistance query.*

3.3.2. Crowding

Crowding is an atmospheric aspect that has been intensively analyzed by the marketing literature (Baker and Wakefield, 2012; Mehta, 2013; Zhang et al., 2014). Perceived crowding refers to customers' perceptions of the number of customers present in a given retail environment, and it emerges when a person's spatial needs are overwhelmed (Machleit et al., 2000). This atmospheric cue has been proven to reduce satisfaction and positive emotions (Machleit et al., 2000; Eroglu et al., 2005; Pons et al., 2014); worsen attitude and intentions to enter a store and purchase (Pan and Siemens, 2011); and reduce shopping convenience (Reimers and Chao, 2014) – among other consequences. As a result, crowding will make customers want to complete their purchases more quickly, to leave as soon as possible, and to attach more importance to shopping efficiency (Lucia-Palacios et al., 2018).

Frontline employees' task competence is key in helping customers gain efficiency during their shopping activity, as it helps them to meet their shopping goals quickly (Grewal et al., 2003). In a crowded environment, customers will want to conduct their shopping task more efficiently, so task competence will be more important for improving customer satisfaction. In addition, interaction competence will play a more important role, since kind and pleasant communication with frontline employees can help customers regulate their feelings and sensations, thereby improving their experience and satisfaction (Mattila and Wirtz, 2008; Du et al., 2011). A crowded store implies a stressful situation for shoppers since it can overwhelm their personal space, thereby affecting their shopping activity and making it less pleasant and satisfactory (Baker and Wakefield, 2012).

Similarly, Grandey et al. (2011) showed that the positive effects of frontline employees' job satisfaction on customer satisfaction differed depending on the level of store busyness. It was more difficult for frontline employees to transfer their job satisfaction to their customers when the store was busy. However, they also recognized that it is in these moments when

shoppers ask for greater employee effort and show greater emotional demands. Therefore, good attention from frontline employees, who take into account this uncomfortable situation thanks to their better interaction competence. Thus, interaction competence will have a larger impact on customer satisfaction <u>with the store</u> in a crowded setting than in an uncrowded one.

H2$_a$: *The influence of frontline employees' task competence on customer satisfaction will be stronger in a crowded store than in an uncrowded store.*

H2$_b$: *The influence of frontline employees' interaction competence on customer satisfaction will be stronger in a crowded store than in an uncrowded store.*

Figure 1 depicts the theoretical model, which includes the hypothesized relationships as well as control variables, namely, retail format (discount vs. full-service stores), gender, age, familiarity with the store, day of the week, and shopping goals, because they are relevant variables in shopping behavior (Mattila and Wirtz, 2008; Baker and Wakefield, 2012).
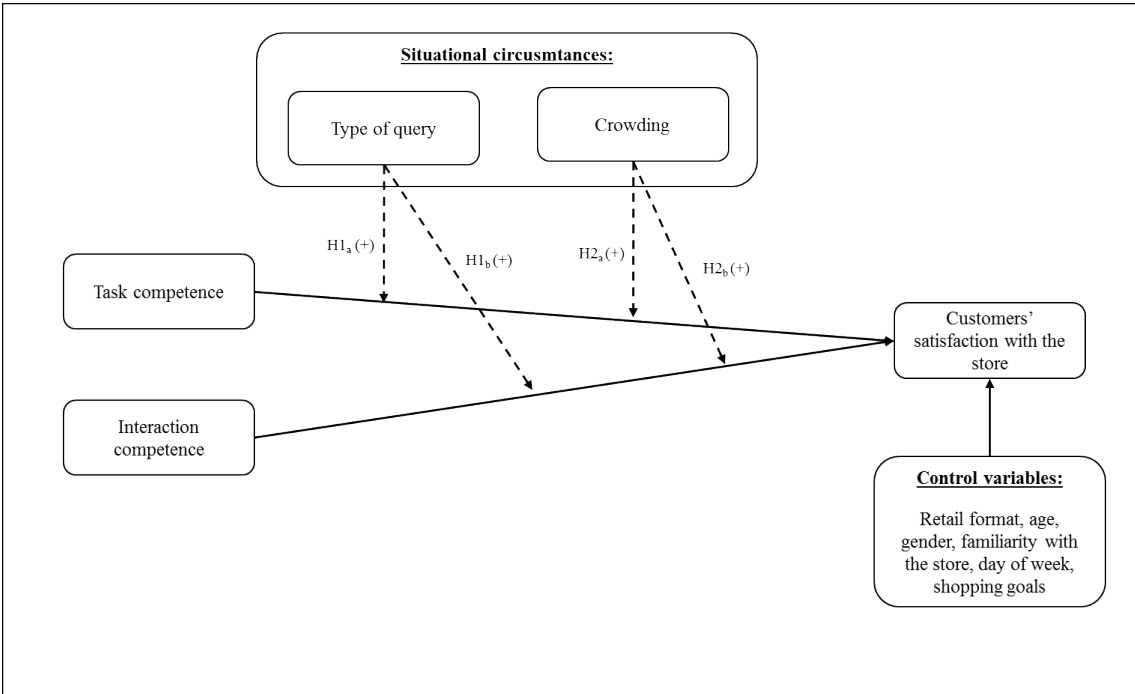

Fig. 1. Conceptual model

4. Methodology

4.1. Data collection

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Data were collected through a survey conducted in a shopping mall located in Spain during two weeks in June 2015, from Monday to Saturday, in the afternoons (12–15h) and evenings (18–21h). Prior to gathering this data, the authors conducted another survey in October 2014 in the same shopping mall with a sample of 231 as part of another research project. This previous study served as a pre-test, since it allowed checking that the measures were well structured and could be understood by the participants.

The final questionnaire was administered by eight interviewers who had previously been trained by a marketing scholar. Participants were intercepted at the end of their shopping experience and offered two free drinks in an establishment of the mall as a reward. They were first asked about the establishment in which they had carried out their main shopping activity, which enabled the study to be restricted to customers who had shopped in a clothing store The interviewers intercepted 612 individuals. However, after deleting observations with missing values, 575 valid questionnaires were obtained.

4.2. Measurement of variables

The questionnaire was designed by three researchers following previous articles that had already validated the measures employed. Customer satisfaction with the store and frontline employees' competences were measured through reflective latent variables, while perceived crowding was a formative construct with two dimensions: human and spatial crowding. These constructs were measured using seven-point Likert scales adapted from previous research and translated into Spanish (see Appendix B). Customer satisfaction was adapted from Westbrook and Oliver (1981), since this measure has been widely applied in studies about sales encounters (Mattila and Wirtz, 2001; Kim et al., 2008 Rose et al., 2012). Frontline employees' competences were addressed through a scale adapted from van Dolen et al. (2002) and Brexendorf et al. (2010), and perceived crowding from Machleit et al. (2000) and Eroglu et al. (2005). Type of query was a dummy with a value of 0 for assistance

queries where shoppers interacted with frontline employees for payment or returning a product, and 1 for consultation queries in which customers asked frontline employees for product information or wanted the frontline employee's recommendation. Following previous approaches (Gonçalves and Sampaio, 2012; Yuroba et al., 2017), a semi-structured question was used to ask respondents why they contacted the employee. The responses were classified into assistance and consultation queries independently by three researchers following Haas and Kenning's (2014) recommendation.

Retail format, age, gender, familiarity with the store, shopping goals, and day of the week were included as control variables. Retail format was a dummy of 1 for full-service stores and 0 for discount stores. Age was a continuous variable measured in years, while familiarity with the store was continuous, measured in visits per month during the last six months. Gender was a dummy that took the value of 1 for female. Shopping goals was also a dummy, with a value of 1 for shoppers who attended the shopping center with specific shopping goals in mind (e.g., browsing or purchasing from a specific store) and 0 for those with nonspecific objectives. Day of the week was a dummy that took the value of 1 when the participants were intercepted on Friday evenings or Saturdays, and 0 otherwise.

4.3. Common method bias

Since all the data used in this study were obtained through a questionnaire and were based on consumers' perceptions, common method variance may have caused observational errors (or measurement errors) or biased estimations. Statistically, if common method bias is present, a sole factor should emerge from the exploratory factor analysis, or a sole factor will explain most of the covariance between variables (Krishnan et al., 2006). The exploratory factor analysis revealed a solution formed of five latent variables that jointly explained 78.77% of the model variance, while the largest factor explained 30.33%. Thus, it can be concluded that there are no problems related to common method bias in this study.

5. Results

5.1. Descriptive results

Table 2 reports descriptive results for some variables included in the model. Most of the customers intercepted were younger than 45; 56.52% were women; 61.91% shopped at the store to which the questionnaire referred between one and four times a month; and 68.87% went shopping on weekends. Furthermore, 80.70% of the shoppers who encountered a frontline employee said that they had asked him or her about product information or had sought a recommendation.

Table 2
Sample characteristics

Age (%)		Gender (%)		Familiarity (% times monthly)		Shopping goals		Day of week		Type of query (%)		Retail format (%)	
≤ 25	28.53	F	56.52	<1	29.39	S	61.91	Mon–Fri	31.13	A	19.30	D	31.13
26–35	25.04	M	43.48	1–2	41.04	NS	38.09	Fri–Sat	68.87	C	80.70	FS	68.87
36–45	25.04			3–4	20.87								
46–55	14.43			≥5	8.70								
≥ 56	6.96												

*F: Female, M: Male, S: Specific shopping goal, NS: No specific shopping goal, A: Assistance query, C: Consultation query, D: Discount store, FS: Full-service store.

5.2. Measurement model assessment

The exploratory factor analysis revealed a solution made up of four reflective constructs: customer satisfaction, frontline employees' competences, human crowding, and spatial crowding. Two items of the human dimension of perceived crowding loaded on another component. Furthermore, both task and interaction competences loaded on the same construct. However, both were retained in order to make a decision about what to do with them after the confirmatory factor analysis. This analysis, conducted using SmartPLS 3.0 software (Ringle et al., 2015), revealed a solution of five constructs, with frontline employees' task and interaction competences loading on different factors.

Regarding item reliability, every item loaded higher on its respective construct than on other constructs, and all loadings were higher than 0.7, except for two items of perceived

human crowding, PHC1 and PHC3, which loaded at 0.581 and 0.553 respectively (see Table 3). After eliminating these two items, the average variance extracted (AVE) of this construct rose from 0.640 to 0.806. The values for Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability exceeded the minimum requirement of 0.7 (Nunnally, 1978). With respect to convergent validity, the AVE values were above 0.5 for all the latent variables. Regarding the formative construct of perceived crowding, the variance inflation factor (VIF) for both spatial and human dimensions was below the threshold of 3.3 (Diamantopoulos and Siguaw, 2006), indicating that there were no multicollinearity problems. The weights of these dimensions on the second-order construct were significant.

Table 3
Measurement model

	Loadings/ weights	VIF	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	AVE
Customer satisfaction with the store (SAT)					
SAT1	0.909				
SAT2	0.958		0.918	0.948	0.859
SAT3	0.913				
Frontline employees' task competence (TC)					
TC1	0.872				
TC2	0.896		0.886	0.921	0.745
TC3	0.811				
TC4	0.870				
Frontline employees' interaction competence (IC)					
IC1	0.915				
IC2	0.936		0.952	0.965	0.873
IC3	0.943				
IC4	0.943				
Perceived crowding (PHC, PSC)					
Perceived human crowding	0.608***	1.393			
PHC1	Eliminated				
PHC2	0.863				
PHC3	Eliminated		0.920	0.943	0.806
PHC4	0.898				
PHC5	0.912				
PHC6	0.916				
Perceived spatial crowding	0.682***	1.199			
PSC1	0.868		0.730	0.881	0.745
PSC2	0.905				

*** $p<0.01$; ** $p<0.05$.

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Discriminant validity was addressed through Fornell and Larcker's (1981) criterion and the heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT ratio) (Henseler et al., 2015). The squared roots of the AVE were higher than correlations between pairs of constructs, and the HTMT ratios were below the threshold of 0.85 for all the latent variables. Thus, both criteria confirm discriminant validity (Table 4).

Table 4
Discriminant validity

	SAT	TC	IC	PC
SAT	0.927	0.573	0.515	N.A.
TC	0.528	0.863	0.823	N.A.
IC	0.485	0.759	0.934	N.A.
PC	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.

SAT: Customer satisfaction; TC: Frontline employees' task competence; IC: Frontline employees' interaction competence; PC: Perceived crowding; N.A.: Not applicable.
Diagonal: Squared roots of AVE. Below diagonal: Correlations between variables. Above diagonal: HTMT ratio values.

5.2. Structural model assessment

Four models were estimated using ordinary least squares with the program STATA 14.0. The first includes only the direct effects of all variables, the second adds the moderating effect of type of query, the third includes that of perceived crowding, and the fourth includes all the moderating effects together. The variables were centered to calculate interactions. All VIF values were under the threshold of 5, so no multicollinearity problems were detected (Studenmund, 2013).

According to the results, goodness of fit is adequate (Table 5). The model explains almost 36% of customer satisfaction with the store, which is a considerable amount of variance taking into account that our study's focus is on the sales encounter. Regarding the hypotheses, $H1_a$ is not supported, since the moderating effect of type of query on the relationship between task competence and customer satisfaction with the store is not

significant. Interaction competence is more important as an influence on satisfaction with the store when the query is based on consultation than in encounters in which customers only want to pay (assistance query), which confirms $H1_b$ (Figure 2).

Table 5
Results

Independent variables	Dependent variable: Customer satisfaction			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
TC	0.3318***	0.3161***	0.2855**	0.2620**
IC	0.1910***	0.2385**	0.2063**	0.2613***
TQ	-0.3259***	-0.3401***	-0.3221***	-0.3332***
TQ x TC ($H1_a$)		-0.0053		-0.0637
TQ x IC ($H1_b$)		0.2114**		0.2454**
PC	-0.1305***	-0.1277***	-0.1288***	-0.1260***
PC x TC ($H2_a$)			0.1098*	0.1160*
PC x IC ($H2_b$)			-0.0729	-0.0827
RF	0.2822***	0.2744***	0.2781***	0.2699***
Gender	-0.1414**	-0.1356**	-0.1477**	-0.1419**
Age	0.0006	0.0005	0.0010	0.0009
Familiarity	0.0015	0.0015	0.0015	0.0014
Shopping goals	0.0523	0.0703	0.0539	0.0694
Day of week	-0.0194	-0.0067	-0.0122	0.0030
Constant	3.3251***	3.1294***	3.5208***	3.2331***
RMSE	0.8727	0.8695	0.8703	0.8668
R^2	0.3457	0.3529	0.3516	0.3591
Chi^2	17.54***	16.41***	17.98***	16.69***
VIF (range)	(1.01; 2.42)	(1.01; 2.95)	(1.03; 4.63)	(1.03; 4.74)
AIC/BIC	1,486.074/ 1,533.972	1,483.773/ 1,540.38	1,484.868/ 1,541.475	1,482.203/ 1,547.518

*** $p<0.01$; ** $p<0.05$; * $p<0.1$
TC: Frontline employees' task competence; IC: Frontline employees' interaction competence; TQ: Type of query; PC: Perceived crowding; RF: Retail format; RMSE: Root-mean-square error; AIC: Akaike information criterion; BIC: Bayesian information criterion.

$H2_a$ is confirmed because the effect of task competence on customer satisfaction is greater in crowded stores. Figure 3 depicts this moderating effect and shows that it takes place when task competence is low, indicating that the lack of high task competence is especially important in influencing satisfaction in crowded stores. In contrast, $H2_b$ is not confirmed, since the proposed moderating effect runs in the opposite direction and is not significant.
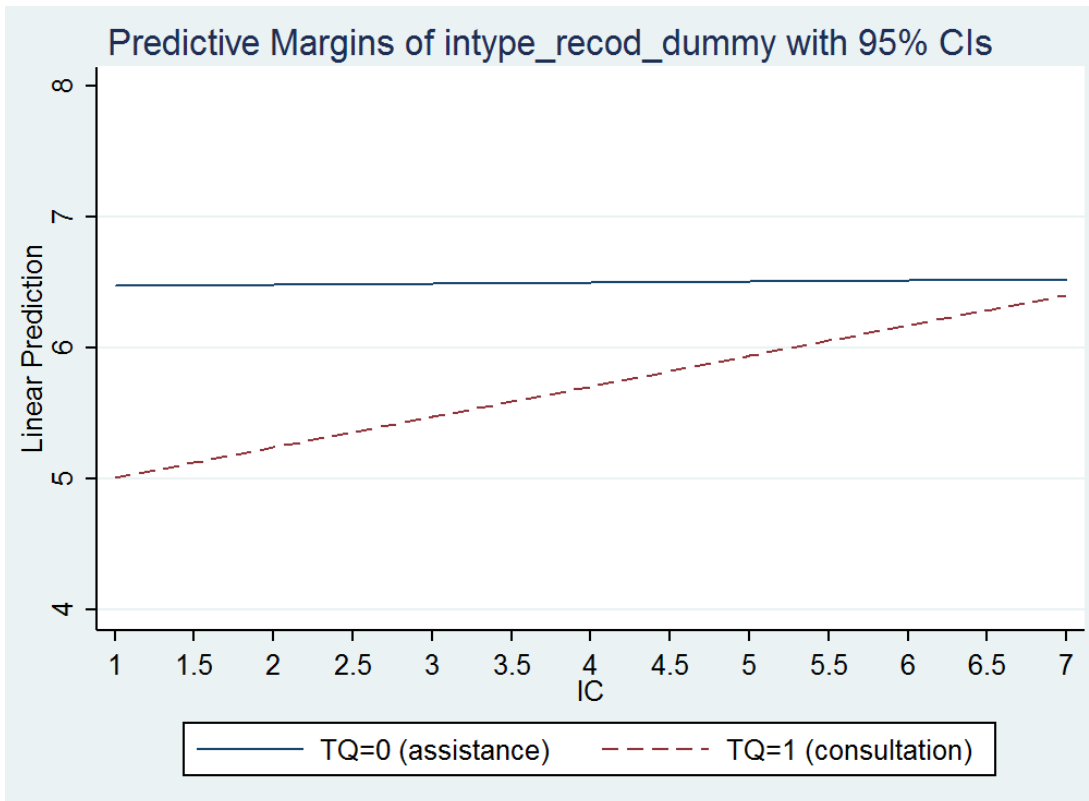
Fig. 2. The moderating effect of type of query on the relationship between frontline employees' interaction competence and customer satisfaction. Notes: TQ: Type of query; CI: Confidence interval.
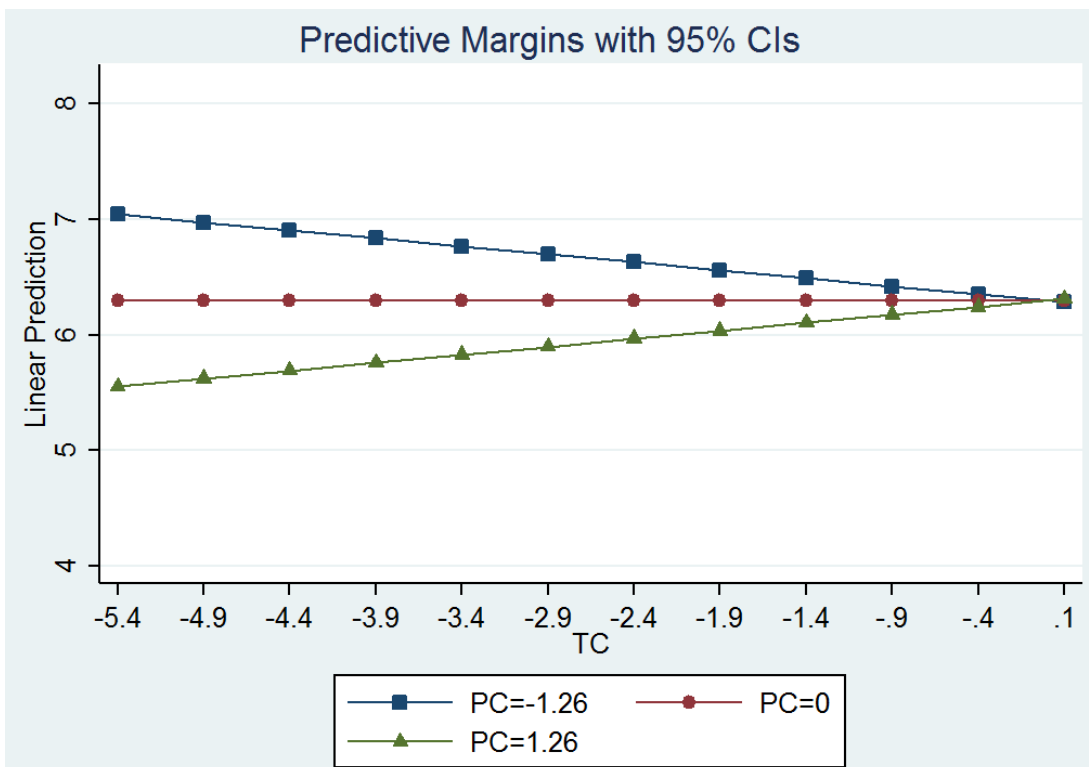

Fig. 3. The moderating effect of perceived crowding on the relationship between frontline employees' task competence and customer satisfaction. Notes: PC: Perceived crowding; CI: Confidence interval.

6. Discussion, managerial implications, limitations, and further research

6.1. Discussion of results

This research aimed to investigate whether the effects of frontline employees' competences on customer satisfaction with the store are not stable but depend on situational circumstances, with a focus on the role of type of query and crowding. The research has consisted of both a qualitative and a quantitative study. The qualitative study shows that these situational circumstances are the most common part of sales encounters as they received the greatest number of mentions by the interviewees. The quantitative findings demonstrate that frontline employees' ability to manage customer satisfaction with the store can be affected by both type of query and crowding.

With respect to type of query, the results reveal that frontline employees' interaction competence is more important when customers ask frontline employees for product information and purchase recommendations than when they ask mere assistance queries. In contrast, the moderating effect of type of query on the relationship between task competence and customer satisfaction with the store is not significant. This confirms that a pleasant encounter is especially important in consultation queries because shoppers need more comfort and attention due to higher doubts about their purchase decision. However, the greater uncertainty that customers face in a consultation query compared to an assistance query does not make them value frontline employees' task competence more (Haas and Kenning, 2014). Furthermore, the moderating effect of interaction competence occurs when this competence is low. This means that it is the lack of interaction competence that is especially noticeable for customers when they seek a consultation.

Crowded environments increase shoppers' desire to leave the store because such environments increase stress, reduce shopping pleasure, and make the shopping activity longer and uncomfortable, thereby complicating the shopping task (Pan and Siemens, 2011;

Mehta, 2013). In these circumstances, shoppers value frontline employees' product knowledge and selling skills more, since these can provide them with an easier and more efficient experience, giving shoppers the opportunity to leave and rest. In addition, the absence of high task competence appears to be particularly important for customers' satisfaction when they are in crowded environments. In contrast, in non-crowded environments, the effect of the lack of task competence on customer satisfaction is less negative. This may be due to customers not feeling so much pressure because of the ambience.

6.2. Theoretical contribution

The present article contributes to retailing research on shopping experience by providing new empirical evidence regarding the relevance of including situational circumstances in the analysis of a sales encounter.

First, the research adds type of query to the extant literature on situational factors in the sales encounter, demonstrating that it modifies the importance of frontline employees' task and interaction competences in managing customer satisfaction. Type of query is an under-researched issue, and few articles have studied shoppers' motivations to consult and make contact with frontline employees (Haas and Kenning, 2014). Furthermore, the present research analyzed crowding. The concept of crowding is similar to, but different from, that of store busyness proposed by Grandey et al. (2011). Grandey et al. (2011) stated that store busyness refers to customer volume and the number of sales transactions in a store. Although these phenomena may have similar consequences to crowding, store busyness is considered to affect the employees' working rhythms by demanding their time and energy, which can affect their ability to assist customers and is likely to reduce friendly expressions and positive emotional displays. Thus, store busyness makes it more difficult for frontline employees to change their satisfaction into customer satisfaction. Crowding, on the other

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hand, refers to customers' perceptions. As a consequence, crowding mainly affects the customers' shopping experience, making it more difficult and less pleasant, and this is why frontline employees' competences may influence customer satisfaction differently depending on crowding perceptions.

Second, the article has shown that when frontline employees' competences are high, situational factors cannot modify their positive influence on customer satisfaction with the store. However, when customers perceive that frontline employees' competences are low, their negative effects on customer satisfaction are stronger.

6.3. Managerial implications

These findings have important implications both for retail managers and for frontline employees. Managers should provide employees with adequate training to ensure high task and interaction competences, which will increase the positive effect of these competences on customer satisfaction with the store, independent of situational factors. Their role is important even at self-checkout points. These machines may substitute frontline employees for payment activities, but shoppers sometimes do not understand how they work. In these cases, the interaction with a frontline employee is critical to solving the situation and achieving customer satisfaction (Pantano and Migliarese, 2014; Larivière et al., 2017).

Frontline employees should be conscious of their own strengths and weaknesses to better manage their customers' satisfaction. Furthermore, although both competences are relevant to enhancing customer satisfaction with the store, the importance of each varies in some situational circumstances. Frontline employees should be able to determine when a purchase situation requires their best efforts in terms of task or interaction competences, and store managers should know how to best employ their personnel. For instance:

- When customers ask frontline employees for consultation – that is, when customers ask for product information or for a recommendation – employees should be very

careful in their communication, and should ensure that they provide a friendly and pleasant service. This will lead to more satisfied customers. As a consequence, store managers should keep frontline employees who show higher communication abilities with consultation queries, while those with lower skills can be allocated to tasks that require shorter interactions with customers, such as dealing with assistance queries or other tasks like charging for products, stock management, or delivery. In this way, managers can make better use of their personnel. Moreover, managers of stores with more complex products should be more conscious of their frontline employees' interaction competence when hiring and training them since, in these stores, customers are more likely to ask for consultation.

- In crowded environments, salespeople should focus on providing customers with an efficient shopping experience, emphasizing their product knowledge and their selling abilities, and helping customers fulfill their shopping goals as soon as possible. This is especially relevant in periods during which the volume of customers is high, such as during in-store sales or the Christmas period, when companies usually hire novice frontline employees to cope with this increase in store traffic. Stores should focus on training employees to increase their task competence as soon as possible in order to increase customer satisfaction during these periods. Furthermore, store managers should bear in mind that experienced personnel should be available in the store at every moment to assist customers. Furthermore, they can also assign customer contact to experienced employees, giving other tasks that involve less interaction with customers to novices.

6.4. Limitations and further research

This study is not without limitations. First, our results should be generalized with caution because the study focused on a Spanish shopping mall. Further research could consider other

retail situations and country contexts. Second, the quantitative research used cross-sectional data obtained during June 2015. Future analyses based on longitudinal data could offer new and interesting implications. Third, this study included two relevant situational circumstances that can affect the frontline employee–customer encounter. However, further research could consider additional situational factors, such as shopping goals or product complexity. Fourth, type of query and shoppers' motivations to consult salespeople have rarely been studied to date; though this study sheds some light on these issues, further research could consider additional circumstances that can motivate customers' consultations and how they can influence customers' perceptions of the sales encounter. Fifth, our study focuses on the role of frontline employees' competences to explain customers' satisfaction with the store. However, although it is not the case in the European clothing retail sector, self-checkout machines have begun to replace frontline employees in other retail contexts such as food and beverage retailing. Further research could address how customer satisfaction is formed in these sales encounters.

7. Conclusions

This study aimed to examine the role of two situational variables, type of query and crowding, in the stability of the relationship between frontline employees' task and interaction competences and customer satisfaction – a relationship that has been established in previous research (van Dolen et al., 2002; Brexendorf et al., 2010). First, a qualitative study showed that these two circumstances are the most important in sales encounters, and, second, a quantitative study demonstrated their influence and how they modify the effects of competences on customer satisfaction.

The main contributions of this article are the consideration of type of query as a situational variable in sales encounters and the finding that situational factors are only relevant when frontline employees' competences are low. Store managers should consider

that frontline employees with high task and interaction competences can positively affect satisfaction independently of situational factors. Nevertheless, they should assign employees with lower communication abilities to other tasks in the store, such as stock management, leaving customers' queries, and especially consultation queries, to those with higher communication abilities. Furthermore, they should guarantee that customers are assisted by experienced and knowledgeable employees, especially in crowded situations.

Appendix A. Interview protocol

Presentation.

Our university is conducting a study on shopping experience at malls. We need your cooperation to participate in an interview about your experience in shopping malls. The interview will last around 30 minutes and it is completely anonymous.

Structure:

1. *How was your last experience in a mall?*
    1.1. What aspects do you think were more important in your experience in this mall?
        - Tenant mix
        - Accessibility
        - Additional services: information points
        - Personnel: mall, store frontline employees
        - Atmosphere
        - Activities and events
        - Mall layout
        - Other shoppers (crowding, type of consumers)
        - Did you go with anyone else? Who? What role did this person play in your experience?
        - Do you know of any communication campaign from this mall?
        - Mall image
    1.2. Would you change anything about your experience?
    1.3. What sensations and feelings did you experience going to this mall?

2. *Experience quality*

2.1.   How would you assess your experience in that mall?

2.2.   Can you remember your last experience in a different mall? How did these experiences differ? In what ways were they similar?

3. Motivation

3.1.   What goals led you to go to this mall?

4. Questions about personality

4.1.   Could you define your personality please? If the informant does not say anything, ask about the following aspects: innovator/follower, optimistic/pessimistic, conformist/rebel. How do you see yourself in 10 years from now? How would you like to see yourself?

5. **Statistical data:** Age, job, education level.

Appendix B. Measurement scales

Items	Description
Customer satisfaction (Westbrook and Oliver, 1981; Mattila and Wirtz, 2001)	
SAT1	I enjoyed this establishment
SAT2	I am satisfied with the establishment I've been to
SAT3	Shopping in this establishment was a good choice
Perceived crowding (Eroglu et al., 2005; Machleit et al., 2000)	
Perceived human crowding	
	In XXX…
PHC1	There were a lot of clients
PHC2	I felt overwhelmed
PHC3	There were not many people during my visit
PHC4	It was crowded
PHC5	I felt the store was constraining
PHC6	I experienced saturation
Perceived spatial crowding	
PSC1	It appeared to be an open and airy space
PSC2	It seemed to me that it was a very spacious place
Frontline employees' task competence (Brexendorf et al., 2010; van Dolen et al., 2002)	
TC1	I think this employee was very capable assisting me
TC2	This employee was organized
TC3	This employee was an expert in the product I was looking for
TC4	The employee who assisted me met my expectations
Frontline employees' interaction competence (Brexendorf et al., 2010; van Dolen et al., 2002)	
IC1	It was noticeable that this employee enjoyed helping me
IC2	I believe this employee likes to help customers
IC3	I believe this employee was easy to talk to
IC4	I believe this employee was a cooperative person

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