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THE EMPLOYEE PERCEPTIONS OF MYSTERY SHOPPING AND ITS ROLE IN SERVICE QUALITY MANAGEMENT

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The purpose of this paper is to examine employees' attitudes towards mystery shopping as a tool for evaluating service quality and improving customer satisfaction. The study addresses a gap in existing marketing literature, which predominantly focuses on managerial and customer perspectives while insufficiently considering employees' perceptions and experiences. A mixed-methods research design was employed. The qualitative exploratory phase used open-ended, projective questions to elicit employees' initial associations and feelings regarding mystery shopping. The quantitative phase involved a structured questionnaire administered to employees with prior experience of mystery shopping. Data were collected through online and field research using convenience and snowball sampling, and quantitative data were statistically analysed. The findings indicate that employees hold mixed attitudes towards mystery shopping. While many respondents recognize its potential to enhance service quality and customer satisfaction, a considerable proportion of respondents associate it with increased stress, discomfort, and concerns about fairness and objectivity. The results underscore the importance of transparent communication, timely feedback, and employee involvement in the implementation of mystery shopping programmes. Managerial implications suggest that mystery shopping can be an effective tool for assessing service quality when positioned as a developmental rather than punitive mechanism. The study provides original empirical insights into mystery shopping from the employee perspective, contributing to service marketing and internal marketing literature by integrating qualitative and quantitative evidence.

***Keywords**: mystery shopping; employee attitudes; service quality; organizational justice; emotional labour.*

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1. Introduction

Customer satisfaction is a central construct in marketing, used to evaluate the extent to which a company's products and services meet or exceed customer expectations (Vidov et al., 2014). Blessing and Natter (2019) conceptualize customer satisfaction as the share of customers whose experience with a company, its products, or its services exceeds predefined satisfaction goals. The overall satisfaction level reflects the client's perception of the value received relative to the money spent. Customer satisfaction is critical to business success because customers with positive experiences are more likely to return and recommend the company to others (Singh et al., 2023). Increasing customer satisfaction and fostering customer loyalty are crucial for businesses, given the importance of managing customer attitudes before and after consumption.

Mystery shopping is a valuable method for gauging and enhancing customer satisfaction. The technique involves hiring mystery or "secret" shoppers who discreetly evaluate the shopping or service experience to provide an objective assessment. One primary objective of mystery shopping is to provide the evaluator with a genuine experience that replicates the conditions customers encounter. Mystery shoppers evaluate various aspects of the shopping and business experience, including the friendliness of staff, the promptness of service, the cleanliness of the premises, and the overall impression of the service provider (Blessing and Natter, 2019). Mystery shopping is used by numerous companies and public organizations to evaluate service delivery quality (Jagodič and Skrbinjek, 2018). The process typically focuses on monitoring the customer experience and on assessing how shoppers' feedback relates to the service's intended purpose. By doing so, companies can pinpoint discrepancies between expectations and actual performance and adapt to current competitive trends.

Despite the widespread use of mystery shopping, existing research has predominantly focused on managerial and customer perspectives, while employees, the primary subjects of evaluation, remain underexplored. Empirical evidence on employees' perceptions of objectivity, fairness, stress, and the impact of mystery shopping on job satisfaction is minimal. Moreover, few studies adopt a mixed-methods approach that captures both depth and breadth. The primary objective of this paper is to analyse the concept of mystery shopping in the context of customer-satisfaction research and to examine employees' attitudes towards its implementation. Drawing on organizational justice theory and emotional labour theory, the paper presents the mystery shopping process from the employees' perspective and develops implications for managers seeking to design programmes that employees will experience as developmental rather than as surveillance.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical framework, covering the concept of mystery shopping, organizational justice theory, emotional labour theory, and prior empirical research on mystery shopping. Section 3 describes the research methodology, and Section 4 presents the results of the qualitative and quantitative analyses. Section 5 discusses the findings in light of the theoretical framework, Section 6 outlines the study's limitations and directions for future research, and Section 7 concludes the paper.

2. Theoretical framework and literature review

2.1. The concept of mystery shopping

Mystery (or secret) shopping is a process that involves evaluating the quality of an organization's services, products, and employees by sending trained individuals (Block et al., 2023), known as mystery shoppers, to pose as regular customers. This method assesses whether the organization's quality standards are being met and identifies areas requiring improvement (Renko and Matošić, 2007). Mystery shoppers are instructed to behave as regular customers and to gather information on the organization's operations, customer service, and employee performance (Dobrača, 2010). The data gathered are used to identify weaknesses within the organization and to compare its performance with that of competitors; by doing so, organizations gain immediate insight into the actual customer experience and can take concrete steps to optimize it (Blessing and Natter, 2019).

The literature uses several synonyms for mystery shopping, including "service checks", "service monitoring", "secret shopping", and "quality auditing" (Block et al., 2023). Mystery shoppers visit service points or stores, pose as ordinary customers, observe the service-delivery processes and, immediately afterwards, record their observations in a detailed questionnaire. Mystery shopping thereby enables organizations to assess how actual situations compare with internal standards and guidelines, and to implement improvements that ensure a consistently positive customer experience. It also provides an opportunity for additional employee training, as evaluation results inform skill development and service-delivery improvements. Because employees are typically unaware of the shopper's exact time of arrival or identity, mystery shopping may encourage employees to maintain a consistent standard of service quality (Vidov et al., 2014).

Mystery shopping assesses compliance with a company's operational standards across multiple categories, including the cleanliness of the space, the first encounter with customers, product knowledge, selling skills, handling of complaints, presentations of new products, and the speed and quality of the response to telephone and email enquiries (Blessing and Natter, 2019). The role of a mystery shopper therefore carries significant responsibility, as it directly affects employees and their careers. The methodology also continues to evolve through integration with other research methods, such as customer feedback and social media analysis, giving companies greater opportunities to explore customer satisfaction.

2.2. Organizational justice theory

Organizational justice theory was originally developed by Greenberg (1987) and later operationalized through Colquitt's (2001) four-dimensional measurement model. The theory holds that employees' attitudes and behaviors in response to evaluation are determined less by the outcome itself than by the perceived fairness of the process through which that outcome is produced. The framework distinguishes four dimensions that are directly relevant to mystery shopping programmes.

Distributive justice concerns the perceived fairness of outcomes, whether rewards, sanctions, or performance ratings are deserved and correspond to the effort or competence displayed. In the mystery shopping context, this dimension asks whether good employees receive favourable evaluations and whether the consequences of poor ratings are proportionate. Procedural justice refers to the fairness of the evaluation procedure itself. Drawing on Leventhal's (1980) criteria,

procedures are considered fair when they are applied consistently, are free from bias, are based on accurate information, and provide evaluated individuals with a mechanism for voice. Applied to mystery shopping, this concerns the transparency of evaluation criteria, the consistency of their application across visits and evaluators, and the existence of a formal procedure through which employees can respond to reports they perceive as inaccurate. Interpersonal justice captures whether employees are treated with dignity and respect when evaluation outcomes are communicated. Informational justice concerns the adequacy, timeliness, and candour of the explanations provided about the evaluation process and its results.

This framework is a natural lens for the present study for three reasons. First, Pashkina and Plakhotnik (2018) have already demonstrated its applicability to mystery shopping specifically, reporting that employee acceptance of the practice depends more on perceived justice than on the technical properties of the instrument. Second, Erstad's (1998) prescription that employee participation is paramount at every stage of programme development is, in contemporary terms, an argument about procedural and informational justice. Third, and most importantly, the variables that proved salient in the present study, advance notification, post-visit feedback, and perceived objectivity of evaluators, map directly onto the four justice dimensions rather than onto the efficacy of mystery shopping as a measurement instrument. Organizational justice theory therefore predicts that mystery shopping will be experienced as developmental where procedural and informational justice are high, and as surveillance where they are low, irrespective of the quality of the underlying data collected.

2.3. Emotional labour theory

Emotional labour theory was introduced by Hochschild (1983) and later reformulated as an organizational construct by Grandey (2000). It addresses the psychological cost of service work, in which employees must deliver not only a product but also a prescribed emotional performance. Organizations define display rules, norms governing which emotions employees must express regardless of what they actually feel, and employees regulate their affect through two principal mechanisms. Surface acting involves the simulation of emotions that are not felt: the employee produces the required smile, tone, or patience while experiencing a different internal state. Deep acting involves the active attempt to induce the required emotion internally, for example by reframing a difficult customer's behaviour so as to generate genuine empathy. A consistent body of evidence, summarized in Hülsheger and Schewe's (2011) meta-analysis, shows that surface acting is robustly associated with emotional exhaustion, burnout, and reduced job satisfaction, whereas deep acting carries a smaller psychological cost.

Mystery shopping is a paradigmatic intensifier of emotional labour because it transforms the uncertainty about who is being served into an uncertainty about who is watching. Every customer becomes a potential evaluator, and employees cannot localise display-rule enforcement to specific interactions. This structural feature, the impossibility of identifying the evaluator in advance, pushes employees towards sustained surface acting rather than selective deep acting, because the former is the only strategy that can be always maintained across all interactions. Emotional labour theory therefore predicts that mystery shopping can generate emotional exhaustion even when evaluator feedback is positive. This is because the underlying psychological mechanism operates not through the feedback itself, but through employees' chronic awareness of potential observation.

2.4. Systematized literature review and research gap

The literature on mystery shopping may be grouped into three main research streams. The first stream conceptualizes mystery shopping primarily as a service quality and customer satisfaction measurement tool. Studies in this stream emphasize its ability to assess compliance with service standards, identify gaps in service delivery, and support benchmarking across service organizations. The second stream examines mystery shopping as a managerial and human-resource practice, particularly in relation to performance monitoring, coaching, employee training, and organizational improvement. The third, more limited stream focuses on employees' perceptions of mystery shopping, including issues of fairness, objectivity, stress, surveillance, feedback, and perceived developmental value.

The following table summarizes the most relevant studies and positions the present research within this literature.

Table 1. Systematized literature review on mystery shopping

Article	**Research focus and relevance to the present study**	**Research stream**
Hesselink and van der Wiele (2003), "Mystery Shopping: In-depth measurement of customer satisfaction"	The authors discuss mystery shopping as a customer-satisfaction measurement technique, including its definitions, limitations, methods of presenting data, and practical use. The study is relevant because it represents the earlier stream of literature that treats mystery shopping primarily as an instrument for gaining deeper insight into customer service provision and measuring customer satisfaction.	**Stream 1:** Service quality and customer satisfaction measurement
Chen and Barrows (2015), "Developing a Mystery Shopping Measure to Operate a Sustainable Restaurant Business"	The study develops a mystery shopping measure for restaurant businesses and frames mystery shopping as an objective way to assess whether employees follow organizational service standards. It is relevant because it connects service-quality measurement with employee behaviour, feedback, and training, but it still primarily treats employees as objects of evaluation rather than as subjects whose perceptions are examined.	**Stream 1/Stream 2:** Service quality measurement and managerial/HR tool
Minghetti and Celotto (2014), "Measuring quality of information services"	The authors combine mystery shopping and customer satisfaction research to assess the performance of tourist information offices. This article is useful because it demonstrates how mystery shopping can complement traditional customer-satisfaction surveys and provide a more complete assessment of service performance.	**Stream 1:** Service quality and customer satisfaction measurement

Article	Research focus and relevance to the present study	Research stream
Blessing and Natter (2019), "Do mystery shoppers really predict customer satisfaction and sales performance?"	The authors test whether mystery shopper assessments align with customer evaluations and sales performance, using data from three service retail chains. Their findings are especially important because they question the assumption that mystery shoppers are reliable proxies for real customers. This strengthens the argument that mystery shopping should not be treated as a purely objective instrument without considering its limitations and the perceptions of those being evaluated.	**Stream 1/Stream 4:** Service-quality measurement and methodological critique
Jacob, Schiffino and Biard (2016), "The mystery shopper: a tool to measure public service delivery?"	This scoping review analyses the use of mystery shopping in public service delivery. The authors reviewed 34 empirical studies and showed that mystery shopping is mainly used to evaluate service quality and compliance with legal or professional standards. The article is highly relevant because it provides a structured overview of the field and discusses methodological and ethical challenges, including validity, informed consent and the limits of generalization.	**Stream 4:** Methodological, ethical and public-policy application
Erstad (1998), "Mystery shopping programmes and human resource management"	Erstad analyses mystery shopping as a human-resource management practice and stresses the importance of employee involvement in programme design and implementation. The article is relevant because it argues that mystery shopping should support training, feedback and service improvement rather than function as a punitive control mechanism.	**Stream 2:** Managerial and HR practice
Latham, Ford and Tzabbar (2012), "Enhancing employee and organizational performance through coaching based on mystery shopper feedback"	The authors use a quasi-experimental design to examine whether mystery shopper feedback, used as a basis for managerial coaching, improves employee and organizational performance. The study found that performance increased after coaching based on mystery shopper feedback was introduced. It is relevant because it shows the developmental potential of mystery shopping when feedback is used constructively.	**Stream 2:** Managerial coaching, HR development and performance improvement

Article	Research focus and relevance to the present study	Research stream
Block, Friebel, Heinz and Zubanov (2023), "Mystery Shopping as a Strategic Management Practice in Multi-Site Firms"	The authors conceptualize mystery shopping as a strategic monitoring tool used by multi-site service firms to balance sales-related and service-related activities, protect brand reputation and maintain service standards. Their data from three retail chains show that mystery-shopping scores are more strongly linked to supervisors' incentive bonuses than to sales. This article is important because it positions mystery shopping as a strategic management and incentive-control practice.	**Stream 2:** Strategic management, monitoring and incentives
Pashkina and Plakhotnik (2018), "Mystery shopping through the lens of organizational justice"	This article is directly relevant to your research gap because it applies organizational justice theory to mystery shopping and examines how employee satisfaction with mystery shopping depends on perceived fairness. It is one of the few studies that explicitly moves from customer or managerial perspectives toward employees' perceptions of mystery shopping as a performance-appraisal practice	**Stream 3:** Employee perceptions, fairness and organizational justice
Shin (2019), "Mystery Shopping and Well-Being of Service Workers in South Korea"	Shin examines how mystery shopping relates to the health and well-being of service workers in South Korea. The study is relevant because it treats mystery shopping not only as a service-quality tool, but also as a work-practice that may affect service workers' stress and well-being. This article strongly supports the employee-centred part of your research gap.	**Stream 3:** Employee stress, well-being and surveillance
Bone, Christensen, Williams, Cross and Dellande (2023), "Moving beyond Perceptions: Examining Service Disparities among Consumers"	The authors examine actual and perceived service disparities in banking by comparing customer satisfaction ratings with video-recorded service encounters and matched-pair testing. The study shows that relying solely on customer perceptions may mask unequal or discriminatory treatment, and that objective measures of employee behaviour can reveal service disparities. Although the article is not about employee attitudes toward mystery shopping, it is methodologically relevant because it shows why observational and mystery-testing methods can reveal what surveys may miss.	**Stream 4:** Methodological and equity-oriented use of objective service auditing

Article	Research focus and relevance to the present study	Research stream
Otterbring, Arsenovic, Samuelsson, Malodia and Dhir (2024), "Going the Extra Mile, Now or After a While"	The authors examine the causal effect of employee proactivity in retail service encounters on customers' purchase behaviour and satisfaction. Their mixed-methods research includes field and experimental evidence and shows that employee proactivity positively affects customer responses through perceived warmth and competence. This article is not a classic mystery-shopping article, but it is relevant because it demonstrates the importance of frontline employee behaviour in service encounters and supports the managerial logic behind evaluating employee service behaviour.	**Stream 2:** Employee behaviour, service performance and managerial implications
Sormaz, Onur, Akdağ and Yılmaz (2025), "Assessment of service quality in a la carte restaurants within the mega city of Istanbul"	The study uses the secret-shopper method to evaluate product and service quality across 311 à la carte restaurants in Istanbul over 12 months. The authors assess dimensions such as interaction, physical environment, management and output quality, and conclude that the secret shopper method can improve restaurant service quality. This is a recent and relevant example of mystery shopping as a service-quality measurement tool in hospitality.	**Stream 1:** Service quality measurement in hospitality
Jadhav and Jha (2018), "Customer Satisfaction Survey & Mystery Shopping: An Integrated Approach"	The authors compare customer satisfaction surveys and mystery shopping and argue that combining both methods can provide a more precise understanding of customer satisfaction and employee integrity. The paper is relevant only as a supplementary source, as it is conceptually useful for explaining the difference between customer perception data and frontline performance observations, but it should not be treated as a core theoretical source if the journal expects highly ranked international literature.	**Stream 1:** Integrated customer satisfaction and mystery shopping approach

Source: Authors' own compilation based on the reviewed literature.

The structured review presented in the table indicates that most prior studies belong to the first two research streams, mystery shopping is predominantly conceptualized either as a tool for measuring service quality and customer satisfaction or as a managerial and human-resource practice related to standardization, control, coaching, training and performance

management. By contrast, considerably fewer studies directly examine how employees experience mystery shopping in terms of fairness, stress, surveillance, objectivity, feedback and job satisfaction. This imbalance reveals a clear research gap in the existing literature. The present study contributes to narrowing this gap by shifting the analytical focus from customers, managers, and measurement efficiency to employees' perceptions and experiences, thereby extending the literature on mystery shopping within service marketing, internal marketing, and human resource management.

A structured review of the literature indicates that employee-centred studies remain comparatively scarce. While prior research has demonstrated the usefulness of mystery shopping for evaluating service delivery and improving performance, fewer studies have examined how employees being evaluated experience the process. Existing employee-focused studies suggest that acceptance of mystery shopping depends not only on the instrument's technical quality but also on whether employees perceive the procedure as fair, transparent, objective, and developmental. This creates a specific research gap concerning employees' attitudes toward mystery shopping as both a service quality mechanism and a workplace evaluation practice.

The present study addresses this gap by examining employees' perceptions of mystery shopping through a mixed-methods design and by interpreting the findings through the complementary perspectives of organizational justice and emotional labour. In doing so, the study contributes to the service marketing and internal marketing literature by shifting the analytical focus from customers and managers to employees as the direct subjects of mystery-shopping evaluations.

3. Research methodology

This research utilizes a mixed-methods approach, combining a qualitative exploratory phase with a quantitative survey in order to investigate employees' attitudes towards mystery shopping.

The quantitative part of this paper is based on empirical research conducted as part of a student's final thesis (Šakić, 2024). The collected data and research findings were used as the basis for the quantitative analysis presented in this study. The qualitative phase employed open-ended, projective questions to capture initial perceptions, whereas the quantitative phase employed a structured questionnaire to collect detailed data. Participants were recruited via convenience and snowball sampling, with a focus on individuals familiar with mystery shopping through direct workplace exposure.

The qualitative projective question was formulated specifically for this study, drawing on prior literature addressing employees' perceptions of workplace evaluation practices (e.g., Erstad, 1998; Pashkina and Plakhotnik, 2018), with the aim of eliciting respondents' spontaneous, unprompted associations with mystery shopping before they were exposed to the structured questionnaire items.

This phase of the research used a qualitative preliminary question posed as an open-ended, projective question: "When we mention the word mystery shoppers, my thinking is …". Responses to this open-ended question were analysed using qualitative content analysis.

Each response was read in full and inductively assigned to thematic categories reflecting employees' spontaneous associations with mystery shopping, rather than being coded against a predetermined classification scheme. Recurring themes that emerged through this process included perceived stress and anxiety associated with potential evaluation, concerns about the competence and objectivity of evaluators, perceived benefits for service quality and customer relations, and views on the relative merits of announced versus unannounced visits. Categories were refined iteratively as additional responses were reviewed, and representative statements were subsequently selected for each category to illustrate the range of employee attitudes in the Results section.

The subsequent section comprised quantitative questions designed to ascertain employees' perceptions of the mystery shopping process. The survey was conducted with a total sample of 142 respondents, of whom 100 completed the questionnaire in full; only these 100 were included in the statistical analysis, while the remaining 42 respondents with incomplete responses were excluded.

The quantitative questionnaire items were likewise developed by the authors for the purposes of this study, informed by the dimensions of organizational justice (Colquitt, 2001) and emotional labour (Grandey, 2000) identified in the theoretical framework. The instrument was not subjected to formal psychometric validation, such as confirmatory factor analysis or reliability testing (e.g., Cronbach's alpha); item wording was reviewed for face validity and clarity prior to data collection.

The study collected quantitative data on attitudes towards mystery shopping, including questions on the use of mystery shopping services and employees' perceptions of mystery shoppers. The research examined whether employees support mystery shopping as a tool for service-quality evaluation and whether they perceive it predominantly as a positive or negative practice. Respondents were selected via a screening question about prior experience with mystery shopper visits, ensuring that only participants familiar with the concept of mystery shopping were included in the survey.

The survey was administered via the LimeSurvey platform, using convenience and snowball sampling. Respondents were reached through social-media platforms. Snowball sampling is a technique in which existing research participants refer the researcher to other potential participants; as the sample grows, sufficient data are collected for further analysis. The researchers provided potential participants with a concise description of the survey's purpose and a link to the study. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, specifically frequency counts and percentage distributions for each Likert-scale item, computed using Microsoft Excel. The analysis is accordingly limited to descriptive patterns observed within the achieved sample, and any apparent associations discussed in the Results and Discussion sections should be interpreted as observed patterns rather than as statistically tested relationships. The results are presented graphically and descriptively in the following section.

4. Results

The results indicate mixed perceptions of mystery shopping among employees. While many respondents acknowledged its benefits in improving service quality, a significant portion expressed concerns about stress and fairness.

Thematic analysis of responses to the open-ended projective question yielded four recurrent categories, reflecting the range of employees' spontaneous associations with mystery shopping prior to their exposure to the structured questionnaire items. Each category is presented below together with the illustrative excerpts on which it is based

Table 2. Respondents' perceptions of Mystery shopping: illustrative quotes

Category	Respondent	Illustrative Quote
1. Recognition of developmental potential	Antea, 28, bakery	"I think these people can contribute to the quality of business and customer relations because they monitor the situation over extended periods and quickly spot potential problems. Their opinion can significantly benefit the business and the customers."
	Anita, 35, bookstore	"I am happy to receive a visit from a mystery shopper while I am at work because I am interested in a comment and review of my service."
2. Stress and emotional burden	Ivana, 47, public-service employee	"When we mention the word 'mystery shoppers', the stress in every business today takes on an additional dimension. I do not think anything good about it. They will neither fix the bad nor reward the good. Those who have learned to do their jobs conscientiously will continue to do so; the others should be recognized and sanctioned regardless of the mystery shoppers."
	Lucija, 23, drugstore	"To me, a mystery shopper is a source of stress at work. When I know a mystery shopper might visit, I find myself constantly worrying about whether I have offered each customer every product included in the promotion and whether I have done my job well."
	Marin, 24, retail store	"The thought of a mystery shopper makes me anxious about being reprimanded at work. I am concerned that I might approach a customer incorrectly, unaware that I am dealing with a mystery shopper. This is why I feel uneasy in case an irregularity happens."
3. Perceived bias / lack of evaluator objectivity	Antonela, 44, retail store	"My attitude is negative because how an employee is checked can be slightly less insidious and vile."
	Ante, 49, gas station	"I understand the need for mystery shoppers, but it would be desirable to choose them more carefully. I have often been in a situation where they wrote untruths, needlessly denigrating the merchant, who did his job entirely correctly."

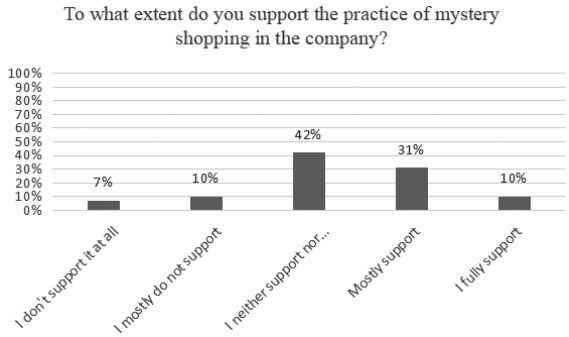
Category	Respondent	Illustrative Quote
	Lara, 43, retail store	"I think mystery shoppers should do their job more professionally, instead of humiliating underpaid traders."
	Ines, 42, bank	"Mystery shoppers very often cannot be taken as relevant in the evaluation since they are primarily students who have no experience or do not know what they are asking about. In most cases, bank employees know how to recognize them because they often do not provide identity cards, or if they do, they always ask the same unified questions. Their assessment often depends on a subjective impression, not facts."
	Mario, 43, bank	"I have an entirely negative impression. They are primarily incompetent for such an enormous task, which many superior employees regard as important. Ultimately, the result of the report provided by the mystery shopper is often wholly subjective and incompetent."
4. Doubts about method validity / advance-notification effects	Maja, 22, shoe store	"When the phrase 'mystery shoppers' is mentioned, I think this practice is slippery. In my view, that method is irrelevant, as it implies that a mystery shopper's situation is equivalent to a seller's daily routine. Sellers, like all people, have good and bad days. In addition, my personal experience is that when many new goods arrive in a single day, superiors require them to be resolved immediately. Sales and customer interactions must be slightly reduced, as this is a forced situation that may lead a mystery shopper to form an incorrect impression. Of course, some sellers are not successful, kind, or helpful, but this is why there should be a complaint book or some sort of site where all buyers can review sellers. After a high proportion of complaints about a person, the problem would be easily identified."
	Jadranka, 24, hotel employee	"Yes, I have experienced a mystery shopper evaluation at my workplace, and honestly, it was quite stressful. We knew they were coming in advance, so we had to do more than usual. For example, I cleaned the dining room three times instead of just once, and we set out way more food than usual. It felt unrealistic. I think mystery shoppers should come unannounced so they can see the real situation, not the one we prepare just for them."
	Josip, hotel employee	"I think the mystery shopper strategy is wrong. When we know the mystery shopper is coming, everything feels staged, and it is not representative of our usual service. It is stressful because we go above and beyond what we would normally do, which is not realistic. If they came without announcing it, it would give a more accurate picture of our everyday work."

Source: Authors research

The four categories are not strictly mutually exclusive; several statements touch on more than one theme simultaneously, for instance combining concerns about evaluator competence with broader scepticism about the fairness of consequences. Taken together, however, the excerpts in Table suggest that recognition of the method's developmental potential (Category 1) is qualitatively outweighed, in terms of the volume and intensity of spontaneous commentary, by concerns relating to evaluator bias and objectivity (Category 3) and by the anticipatory stress associated with the mere possibility of being observed (Category 2). The fourth category further points to advance notification as a factor that may simultaneously reduce employees' stress and undermine the validity of the assessment itself, an issue the quantitative findings reported below allow us to examine more systematically.

The second part presents the results of the quantitative research. To ensure the reliability of the results, only data from the 100 participants who provided complete responses were considered. Of these, 64 were female and 36 were male. Most respondents (40) are employed in the banking and insurance sectors, followed by retail (29 respondents) and restaurants (20). The smallest cohort comprises 11 respondents who work in clothing and footwear stores. Among respondents, 80% reported not being informed in advance of a mystery shopper's visit, while only 20% reported prior knowledge of the visit. Furthermore, 70% of respondents reported receiving feedback on the evaluation following the mystery shopping visit, while 30% reported not receiving any input.

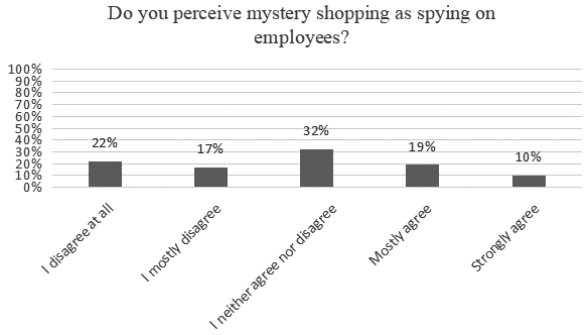
Graph 1. Level of support for mystery shopping practices in the company



Source: Šakić (2024)

When asked to evaluate their support for mystery shopping within the company, employees expressed mixed views. A minority expressed outright opposition: 7 respondents indicated "Strongly oppose" and 10 selected "Mostly oppose". The largest single group of respondents (42) selected the neutral option "Neither support nor oppose", suggesting ambivalence or uncertainty regarding the practice. A combined total of 41 respondents indicated some level of support, with 31 selecting "Mostly support" and 10 selecting "Strongly support". This contrasts with the 17 respondents who expressed some level of opposition. Although a clear majority did not articulate a definitive stance, the data therefore suggest a slight inclination toward support among those who expressed an opinion.

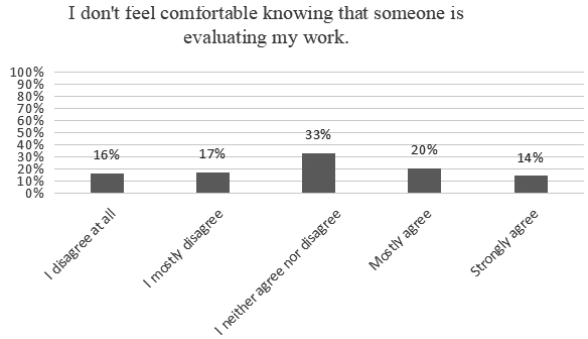
Graph 2. Perception of mystery shopping as spying on employees



Source: Šakić (2024)

Employee perceptions of mystery shopping as a form of spying elicited mixed responses. A significant portion of respondents (32) selected the neutral option "Neither agree nor disagree". A combined 39 respondents disagreed (22 "Strongly disagree", 17 "Mostly disagree"), while 29 respondents expressed some level of agreement (19 "Mostly agree", 10 "Strongly agree"). Although a plurality of respondents remained undecided, the data suggest a slightly stronger inclination to view mystery shopping as a legitimate evaluation tool rather than as a form of employee surveillance.

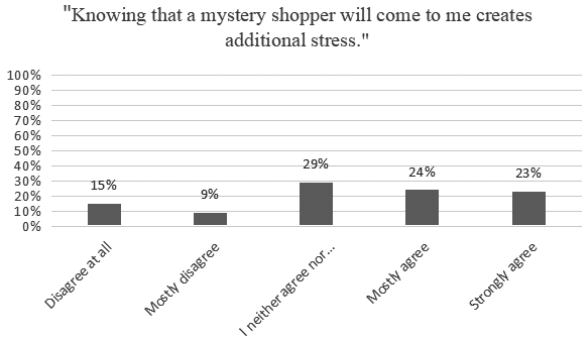
Graph 3. Employee comfort level with work evaluations



Source: Šakić (2024)

For the statement "I do not feel comfortable knowing that someone is evaluating my work", the largest group (33 respondents) selected "Neither agree nor disagree", suggesting that many employees are indifferent to or uncertain about being evaluated. Combined responses of "Mostly agree" (20) and "Strongly agree" (14) indicate that 34 respondents experience some degree of discomfort with the idea of work evaluations. Conversely, 33 respondents (16 "I disagree at all" and 17 "Mostly disagree") are comfortable with being evaluated. This highlights the importance of addressing employee concerns and ensuring that evaluations are perceived as fair, constructive, and transparent.

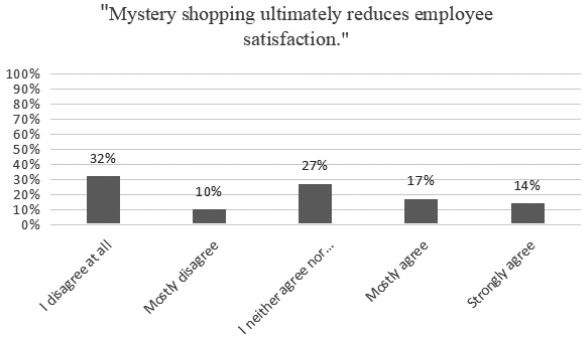
Graph 4. Mystery Shopping and Stress Levels



Source: Šakić (2024)

The statement "Knowing that a mystery shopper will come to me creates additional stress" also produced varied levels of agreement. While the largest single group (29 respondents) selected the neutral option "Neither agree nor disagree", a closer look at the data indicates a clear tendency towards agreement: a combined 47 respondents (24 "Mostly agree" and 23 "Strongly agree") indicate that the anticipation of a mystery shopper does induce stress, while only 24 respondents (15 "Strongly disagree" and 9 "Mostly disagree") do not feel added stress. The data therefore underscore the need to assess the impact of mystery shopping programmes on employee well-being and to explore strategies to mitigate undue stress or anxiety.

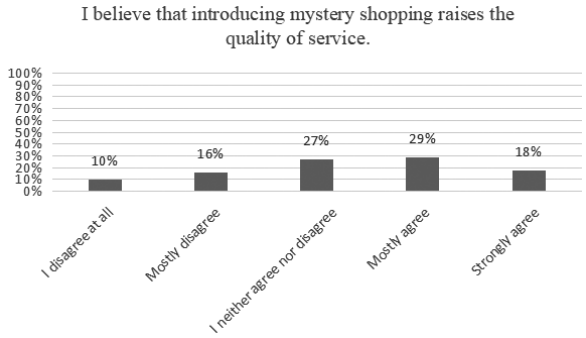
Graph 5. Impact of mystery shopping on job satisfaction



Source: Šakić (2024)

For the statement "Mystery shopping ultimately reduces employee satisfaction", 42 respondents (32 "Strongly disagree" and 10 "Mostly disagree") believe that mystery shopping does not negatively impact job satisfaction. A further 27 respondents selected "Neither agree nor disagree". A combined 31 respondents (17 "Mostly agree" and 14 "Strongly agree") perceive mystery shopping as potentially detrimental to job satisfaction. While the data do not demonstrate a clear consensus, they suggest that most employees do not believe that mystery shopping negatively affects their job satisfaction. However, the substantial number of neutral responses and those indicating a negative impact highlights the need for continued monitoring and potential programme adjustments to address employee concerns.

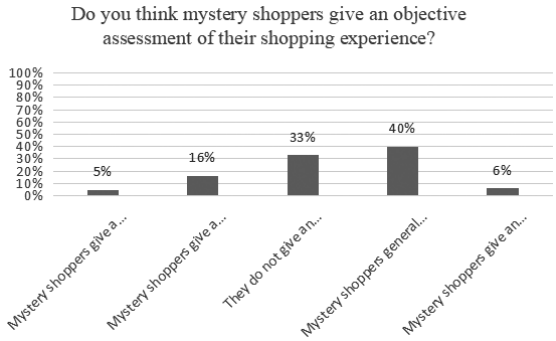
Graph 6. Potential to raise the quality of service through mystery shopping



Source: Šakić (2024)

A combined 26 respondents (10 "Strongly disagree" and 16 "Mostly disagree") believe that mystery shopping does not raise the quality of service, and 27 respondents selected "Neither agree nor disagree". A combined 47 respondents (29 "Mostly agree" and 18 "Strongly agree") perceive that mystery shopping raises service quality. Although many responses are neutral, most respondents who expressed an opinion believe that mystery shopping improves service quality.

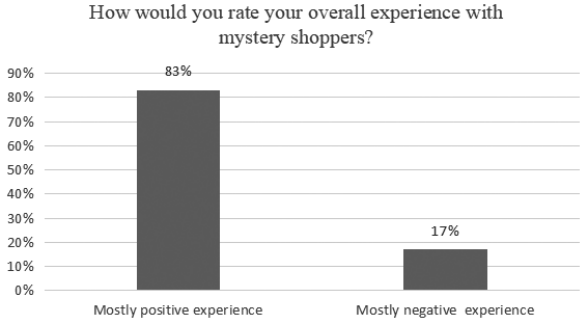
Graph 7. Employee Attitudes on the Objectivity of Mystery Shopper Assessment



Source: Šakić (2024)

Although the largest single group (40 respondents) believes that mystery shoppers generally provide objective assessments, a sizeable proportion (33 respondents) remains neutral, reporting neither clearly objective nor clearly non-objective assessments. A minority of respondents (21; 5 "strongly biased" and 16 "mostly biased") believe that mystery shoppers give a biased evaluation.

Graph 8. Employee Experience with Mystery Shoppers



Source: Šakić (2024)

When asked about their experience with mystery shoppers, most respondents (83) reported positive experiences, while 17 reported negative experiences. Taken together, the qualitative and quantitative findings converge on a consistent pattern. The first thematic category, recognition of developmental potential, is corroborated by the 47% of respondents who agreed that mystery shopping raises service quality (Graph 6) and the 83% who reported a positive overall experience (Graph 8). The second category, anticipatory stress, parallels the 47% of respondents who reported additional stress from the anticipation of a visit (Graph 4) and the 34% who reported general discomfort with being evaluated (Graph 3). The third category, perceived evaluator bias, is reflected in the 21% of respondents who rated mystery-shopper assessments as biased and the further 33% who remained neutral on the question (Graph 7), as well as in the 29% who at least partly endorsed the characterization of mystery shopping as a form of spying (Graph 2). Finally, the fourth category, concerns about staged behaviour following advance notification, is directly relevant to the finding that 80% of respondents were not informed of a visit in advance (Graph 8 context); the qualitative accounts of Jadranka and Josip illustrate what happens in the minority of cases where notification does occur, suggesting that the practice of advance notification, although intended to reduce stress, may instead compromise the validity of the assessment itself. This convergence between the two data sources strengthens confidence that the identified themes are not artefacts of either method alone.

5. Discussion

This study set out to examine service-sector employees' perceptions of mystery shopping, an evaluation practice that has been studied extensively from managerial and customer standpoints but rarely from the perspective of those being evaluated. The findings suggest a picture that is less straightforwardly positive than industry advocacy for mystery shopping tends to suggest, and one that is best understood through the complementary lenses of organizational justice theory (Colquitt, 2001; Greenberg, 1987) and emotional labour theory (Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983). The discussion that follows uses organizational justice theory and emotional labour theory as interpretive frameworks for making sense of the empirical patterns, rather than as constructs that were directly and independently measured.

A central observation from the quantitative data is the coexistence of broadly favourable overall experience reports (83% positive) with substantially elevated stress (47% report that anticipation of a mystery shopper generates additional stress) and a notable share of employees (34%) who are uncomfortable with being evaluated at all. At first glance these findings appear contradictory, but they are in fact predicted by emotional labour theory. Mystery shopping intensifies display-rule enforcement by transforming every customer interaction into a potentially evaluated performance. Employees cannot distinguish a real customer from an evaluator and therefore maintain surface acting, the fabrication of affect inconsistent with felt emotion, across all interactions rather than only those they find intrinsically engaging. Surface acting has been robustly linked to emotional exhaustion (Grandey, 2000; Hülsheger and Schewe, 2011), which explains why elevated stress can coexist with reports of a positive experience: the two constructs operate at different levels. The qualitative accounts from hotel employees Jadranka and Josip are textbook illustrations: when a visit was announced in advance, they engaged in deliberate staging, cleaning the dining room three times, laying out "way more food than usual", which they themselves recognized as misrepresentative of their normal work. This is not evidence of dishonesty on the employees' part; it is the predictable organizational consequence of coupling surveillance with ambiguous consequences.

The study's results on information flow reveal a procedural-justice deficit that is striking given Erstad's (1998) long-standing prescription that employee participation is paramount at all stages of programme development. Eighty per cent of respondents were not informed in advance about mystery shopper visits, and 30% never received feedback about the evaluation. Framed through Colquitt's (2001) four-dimensional model, both findings represent low informational justice, the absence of adequate, timely and truthful explanation of the procedure and its outcomes. The finding that 59% reported no discernible changes after a mystery shopping visit is particularly telling. If mystery shopping data are collected but neither acted upon organizationally nor fed back to employees, the exercise satisfies neither its stated developmental purpose, nor the distributive-justice expectation that evaluation effort should produce corresponding outcomes. Under these conditions, the practice functionally resembles surveillance rather than a development tool, which helps explain why 29 of 100 respondents at least partially endorsed the characterization of mystery shopping as "spying". This echoes Pashkina and Plakhotnik's (2018) argument that employee acceptance of mystery shopping depends far more on perceived justice than on the technical quality of the instrument.

A further tension worth discussing concerns perceived objectivity. Although 40% of respondents consider mystery-shopper assessments generally objective, one in five explicitly regards them as biased and a third are neutral, meaning only a minority positively endorses the fairness of the assessments. The qualitative data sharpen this picture: bank employees Ines and Mario report that mystery shoppers in their sector are frequently inexperienced students whose evaluations reflect subjective impressions rather than documented facts, and several retail respondents (Ante, Lara) describe humiliating or factually inaccurate reports. These accounts do not merely reflect disgruntlement; they point to a substantive procedural-justice problem, namely the consistency and accuracy criteria of Leventhal's (1980) procedural-justice framework, which Colquitt (2001) operationalized. When the ratings an employee receives can turn on the competence of an individual evaluator whose training and credentials are opaque, the procedure fails a basic fairness test, irrespective of the aggregate statistics the employer

collects. This finding qualifies Latham et al.'s (2012) quasi-experimental result that feedback coaching based on mystery shopper data improves performance: the effect Latham et al. observed likely depends on an implicit precondition, that the evaluators are perceived as competent, which the present respondents suggest cannot be assumed.

The practical contribution of integrating the two theoretical lenses is that they produce different, complementary recommendations. organizational justice theory directs attention to programme design: transparent criteria published in advance, timely feedback given to every evaluated employee, a clear procedure for contesting inaccurate reports, demonstrated competence of evaluators, and a visible organizational response to aggregated findings. Emotional labour theory, however, warns that even a procedurally impeccable programme will impose a psychological tax if it is used continuously and unpredictably. The implication is that the frequency and predictability of visits matter as much as procedural design. Employees who know a quarterly review is coming can mobilize deep acting; employees who face indefinite surveillance are pushed into sustained surface acting. This suggests that intermittent, announced cycles may produce better well-being outcomes than the unannounced-visit model that 80% of respondents experienced, without materially weakening the instrument's diagnostic value.

Finally, the findings must be interpreted in the light of a fundamental tension the data expose: the predominantly positive experience reports (83%) and the clear plurality view that mystery shopping improves service quality (47% agree versus 26% disagree) indicate that employees are not ideologically opposed to being evaluated. What they object to, consistent with both theoretical frameworks, is being evaluated opaquely, inconsistently, and without meaningful organizational uptake of the results. This aligns the present study with the core argument of internal marketing, that employees, as the first customers of any service, respond to the same justice and communication principles the organization expects them to extend outward. Mystery shopping programmes that treat employees as subjects of evaluation rather than as participants in quality development appear, on the evidence of this study, to generate precisely the stress, cynicism and staged behaviour they are meant to detect in the first place.

6. Limitations and future research

This study is subject to several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, the sample is subject to important representativeness constraints. Participants were recruited exclusively through convenience and snowball sampling, both non-probability methods in which inclusion depends on accessibility and on referrals within respondents' existing social and professional networks rather than on random selection from a defined population. This sampling strategy is particularly susceptible to self-selection bias, as individuals with stronger opinions about mystery shopping, whether markedly positive or negative, may have been more inclined to participate and to share the survey within their networks, while employees with indifferent or neutral views may be under-represented. The final analytical sample comprised only 100 valid responses, a relatively small size that further restricts statistical power and the precision of the reported estimates. Moreover, because participants were not drawn proportionally across industries, company sizes, or geographical regions, the resulting distribution across sectors (e.g., the over-representation of banking and insurance employees relative

to other sectors) may not reflect the actual population of employees exposed to mystery shopping. Taken together, these factors mean that the findings should be interpreted as exploratory and indicative rather than as generalizable to the broader population of service-sector employees, and caution is warranted when extrapolating the reported attitudes, stress levels, and perceptions of fairness beyond the specific sample studied. Second, the use of self-reported data introduces the risk of response bias, particularly given the sensitive nature of employee evaluations and performance assessments.

Third, although organizational justice theory and emotional labour theory provided the interpretive lenses through which the qualitative and quantitative findings were read, the constructs central to these theories, namely the four dimensions of organizational justice and the distinction between surface and deep acting, were not directly measured using validated psychometric scales. The theoretical framework was therefore applied post hoc, to make sense of patterns already present in the data, rather than tested empirically through purpose-built instruments. The correspondence drawn between specific survey items or qualitative statements and the theoretical dimensions should accordingly be understood as an interpretive mapping rather than as a confirmatory measurement of the underlying constructs.

The mixed-methods design, while offering both depth and breadth, also involves inherent trade-offs. Qualitative data provided rich insights into employees' subjective experiences but cannot be generalized beyond the studied sample, whereas quantitative data enabled broader comparisons at the expense of contextual nuance. Additionally, the cross-sectional design of the study precludes examination of how employees' attitudes toward mystery shopping evolve over time.

Future research could address these limitations by using stratified random sampling to improve representativeness across sectors. Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable for examining whether repeated mystery shopping exposure influences employee perceptions, stress levels, and job satisfaction. Furthermore, comparative cross-cultural studies could shed light on how national culture, organizational norms, and labour relations shape employees' acceptance of mystery shopping practices. Subsequent work could also test the theoretical model proposed here using validated instruments for the four dimensions of organizational justice (Colquitt, 2001) and for surface and deep acting (Grandey, 2000) and could examine the moderating role of advance notification and feedback quality on the stress-inducing effects of mystery shopping.

7. Conclusion

The existing literature shows that mystery shopping has predominantly been examined as a tool for measuring service quality, customer satisfaction, standardization, managerial control, coaching, training and performance management, while employee-centred perspectives remain comparatively underdeveloped. By examining employees' perceptions of fairness, stress, objectivity, surveillance, feedback and developmental value, this study contributes to closing the identified research gap and extends the existing literature by repositioning employees as active subjects of analysis rather than merely objects of evaluation.

The findings of this study deepen the understanding of employees' perceptions of mystery shopping and of the conditions under which it functions as a developmental rather than

a punitive practice. When programmes are transparent, accompanied by timely feedback, and predictable in design, mystery shopping can enhance service quality, support employee development, and strengthen organizational competitiveness; where these conditions are absent, the same instrument can become a source of stress that undermines trust and erodes its intended benefits.

Mystery shopping should therefore be understood as a strategic tool within internal marketing and human-resources management, rather than solely as a technique for monitoring service standards. By engaging employees in the design and communication of evaluation processes, organizations can leverage mystery shopping to achieve sustainable improvements in service quality while safeguarding employee well-being.

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