

When employees experience mistreatment by customers: the buffering effect of supportive organizational climate and implications of withdrawal behaviors

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Abstract

Drawing on the job demands-resources model, this study investigated how customer mistreatment can evoke service employees' deviant behaviours towards their organization, and whether a supportive organizational climate can buffer the adverse effects of customer mistreatment on employees. A questionnaire survey for frontline employees in the service industry was used to test the hypothesized relationship. Findings revealed that customer mistreatment increases service employees' organizational withdrawal behaviours through psychological strain. In addition, employees who work in a higher supportive organizational climate may experience less psychological strain in the face of customer mistreatment than those with a lower supportive climate. The implications of these relationships for theories and management practice of customer mistreatment are discussed.

Keywords: Customer mistreatment, supportive organizational climate, psychological strain, organizational withdrawal behaviours, job demands-resources model

1. INTRODUCTION

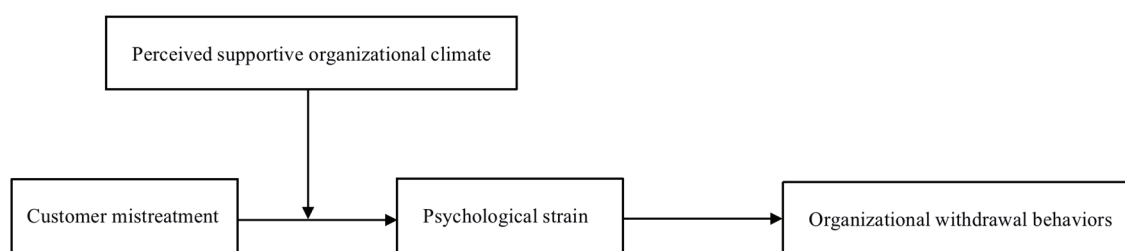
Customer mistreatment of employees, as a low-quality interpersonal interaction has become a growing problem in service-oriented organizations (Wang et al., 2011; Sommovigo et al., 2020). Customer mistreatment occurs when service employees suffer verbal abuse, disrespectful or impolite treatment, or unfair demands from customers (Grandey et al., 2004; Rupp et al., 2008). Actually, in the service industry, in contrast to other work roles, frontline employees who interact with clients on a daily basis are more vulnerable to being mistreated by customers. As well, the increasingly business competition drives service providers to expect their staff to provide superior service to customers, thus putting frontline staff under considerable pressure when they encounter difficult customers (Arvan et al., 2019). Thus, it is imperative to explore not only the detrimental impacts of customer mistreatment on service employees, but also how to address and alleviate these impacts.

The recent burgeoning of research on customer mistreatment largely has focused on employee-customer interactions, such as customer service sabotage toward the customer, employee incivility, and service staff's direct helping behaviors toward customers (Skarlicki et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2011; Yue et al., 2015; Kim and Qu, 2019). However, there is insufficient research into employee-organization interactions during the service failure encounter (Chi et al., 2018). As such, the current study attempts to fill this void in the literature. Drawing on the job demands-resources model (JD-R model; Bakker et al., 2003; Demerouti et al., 2001), we proposed that, as a source of job stress, customer mistreatment would intensify service employees' psychological strain, and in turn causes undesirable organizational outcomes (e.g., organizational withdrawal behavior). Meanwhile, as an important job resource, the organizational climate (e.g., a supportive organizational climate) would buffer the impact of customer mistreatment on employees' psychological strain (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). Picture.1 illustrates our proposed model.

Our study contributes to the literature in several distinct ways. First, we postulated psychological strain as a mediator of the relationship between customer mistreatment and organizational withdrawal behaviors. Although previous research has explored the direct relationship between customer mistreatment and withdrawal behaviors as a subset of counterproductive behaviors (Arvan et al., 2019), we have little understanding about the mechanism of the relationship between these two variables. Compared with other counterproductive behaviors, withdrawal behavior as an organizational concern, is more insidiously harmful to the organization and its employees (Wang et al., 2016). The high frequency of withdrawal behaviors may exacerbate employees' tendency toward turnover and their uncivil behaviors toward customers in their routine work (van Knippenberg et al., 2017). As such, it is essential to explore a more comprehensive picture of how customer mistreatment affects withdrawal behaviors.

Second, we also explored the supportive organizational climate, the organizational level moderator of the relationship between customer's mistreatment of employees and employees' psychological strain. Zhu et al. (2019) and Wang et al. (2013) established that social support from distinct entities in the work environment could help service employees to buffer the adverse effects of such mistreatment by customers, including support from supervisors, coworkers, and the organization. Wang et al. (2011) revealed that the supervisory support climate, as social contextual resource, can effectively counteract the resource loss of the employees due to customers' mistreatment of them. However, to our knowledge, no prior study has focused on the buffering role of the supportive organizational climate during the service encounter. As a more comprehensive property of the work environment, the supportive organizational climate encompasses work support from different surrounding objects, as well as conveying to members the organization's work-related values and beliefs. Thus, relative to other attributes of the organization, the supportive climate would have profound impacts on employees, especially when it comes to difficult customers.

Picture 1: Research model



2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Job demands-resources model

The JD-R model assumes that each occupation has its own specific risk factors associated with job stress, which can be divided into two broad categories: job demands and job resources (Demerouti et al., 2001; Bakker et al., 2003; Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). Job demands refer to “those physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical and/or psychological (cognitive and emotional) effort or skills and are therefore associated with certain physiological and/or psychological costs.” Job resources refer to “those physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that are functional in achieving work goals, reduce job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs, or stimulate personal growth, learning, and development” (Bakker et al., 2011; Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). According to the propositions of the JD-R model, job demands (e.g., work overload and unfavorable work environment) deplete employees’ mental and physical resources and thus increase their stress in responding to these demands, which in turn leads to negative work outcomes. Meanwhile, as motivational roles, job resources (e.g., social support, work environment, and proper feedback) satisfy basic human needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, which can buffer the impact of existing job demands on job strain (Bakker et al., 2003; Bakker and Demerouti, 2007).

2.2 The negative effects of mistreatment by the customer on the employee

In the current study, psychological strain is defined as the common negative reactions of individuals to perceived stressors (Greenhaus and Parasuraman, 1987). It is manifested by anxiety, depression, and loss of confidence (Tepper, 2001). Prior research in the stressor-strain area has shown that in the workplace, various job demands are important predictors of psychological strain, such as work overload, role ambiguity, and procedural unfair (Boyd et al., 2011; Bakker et al., 2011). In addition, the JD-R model proposes that difficult work tasks that require high job demands and employees’ high effort to meet, such as emotional demanding interaction with customers, are also considered a source of job stress (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007), thereby exacerbating employees’ job strain. As such, in the service encounter, as a negative service event, mistreatment by customer may lead to a higher level of psychological strain of employees. Therefore, we formulate Hypothesis 1:

Hypothesis 1: An employee’s perception of mistreatment by customers is positively related to an employee’s psychological strain.

Organizational withdrawal is the behavior whereby individuals minimize the amount of energy and effort devoted to work, while maintaining their current organizational and work-role memberships (Lehman and Simpson, 1992). It includes various counterproductive behaviors which harm organizational productivity and employees’ morale, such as leaving work early without permission, spending work time on personal matters, and putting less effort into the work (Carpenter and Berry, 2017; Lehman and Simpson, 1992). As withdrawal behaviors is more passive than other counterproductive behaviors, it is also be seen as a defensive behavioral response to work stress (Park and Haun, 2017). To be specific, as Hobfoll (1989) stated, when employees experience stressful events that drain their resources, they will strive to protect their remaining of personal resources to avoid further loss. As such, employees may practice more organizational withdrawal behaviors under a stressful circumstance to retain their available resources. Park and Haun (2017) have shown that work withdrawal

as a behavioral stressful response to email uncivility. With this research, employees with high levels of psychological strain tend to engage in organizational withdrawal behaviors. Taking the above arguments and H1 together, we speculated that customer mistreatment is indirectly associated with employees' organizational withdrawal behaviors through psychological strain. Therefore, we formulate Hypothesis 2:

Hypothesis 2: An employee's psychological strain mediates the relationship between an employee's perception of mistreatment by customers and an employee's organizational withdrawal behaviors.

2.3 The buffering role of a supportive organizational climate against mistreatment by customers

A supportive organizational climate describes the extent to which employees perceive cooperation, coordination, and support from departments within the organization, as well as the amount of support employees perceive from their leadership (Rogg et al., 2001; Sen and Elmas, 2015). The supportive organizational climate captured four dimensions proposed by Rogg et al. (2001): management competence and consistency, cooperation and coordination, employee commitment, and customer orientation. Luthans et al. (2008) revealed that in a highly supportive organizational climate, employees will feel supported and encouraged in their organization. Moreover, a supportive climate can serve as a contextual resource for employees in the face of work difficulties. Specifically, when employees make mistakes or suffer setbacks, a supportive climate will help them recover and bounce back, because it conveys the information to employees that they will not be punished, and staff around them will understand them.

According to the JD-R model, properties of the work situation can buffer the effects of a job stressor (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). The psychological safety climate, as verified by Loh et al. (2018), is an important job resource that buffers the relationship between emotional demands and emotional exhaustion. In our study, although customer mistreatment as a job demand will lead to employees' higher psychological strain, a supportive organizational climate is an organizational-level characteristic that can buffer against this job stress. Therefore, we formulate Hypothesis 3:

Hypotheses 3: Supportive organizational climate buffer the positive relationship between an employee's perception of customer mistreatment and an employee's psychological strain, such as the relationship is weaker among dyads with higher supportive organizational climate, compared to those with lower supportive organizational climate

3. MEHTOD

3.1 Date and sample

We recruited 245 participants in China paying them a small cash payment (approximately US\$2) via the Credamo website, an online data collection platform, whose users' papers have so far been accepted by many top international journals (e.g., Tourism Management, Journal of Consumer Research). This survey was targeted at full-time frontline employees from the service industry who deal with customers as they are vulnerable to mistreatment by customers in their daily work. To assure the validity and quality of the data, a minimum time (at least 150 seconds) was set for each participant to answer all questions in the survey. Among 245 surveys participants, 44.8% were male. The average organizational tenure was 5.72 years (s.d.=4.45).

3.2 Measures

Participants responded using a 7-point Likert-type scale (1= strongly disagree, 5= strongly agree) for all measures. A five- item scale of customer mistreatment was from Shao and Skarlicki (2014). A five-item scale of psychological strain was adopted from Mohr et al. (2006). The supportive organizational climate was measured by adapting the 22-item scale developed by Rogg et al. (2001), including 7 items for management competence and consistency, 5 items for cooperation and coordination, 6 items for employee commitment, and 4 items for customer orientation. Organizational withdrawal behavior was measured using a 12-item scale by Lehman and Simpson (1992), including 8 items for psychological withdrawal behavior at work, and 4 items for physical withdrawal behavior at work.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Confirmatory factor analyses

The mean, standard deviations, correlation coefficients and reliabilities of all variables are shown in Table 1. Consistent with our expectations, customer mistreatment was positively related to psychological strain ($r=0.49$, $p<0.01$) and organizational withdrawal behaviors ($r=0.59$, $p<0.01$), while negatively related to supportive organizational climate ($r=-0.42$, $p<0.01$).

Prior to hypotheses testing, we conducted the confirmatory factor analyses to support the discriminant validity of the study construct. We first adopted the parcel strategy that can maintain an adequate ratio of estimated parameters to the sample size (Little et al., 2002), using 2 parcels for organizational withdrawal behaviors and 3 parcels for perceived supportive organizational climate. The model fit indexes and χ^2 difference tests ($\chi^2 = 103.77$, $df = 84$, $CFI = 0.97$, $NNFI = 0.99$, $SRMR = 0.04$ and $RMSEA = 0.03$) revealed that the four-factor model provided a better fit than single-factor and two-factor models, indicating support for the discriminant validity of the study construct.

Table 1: Means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients among all variables

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	1	2	3	4
1. Customer mistreatment	2.30	.73	(.79)			
2. Psychological strain	2.27	.94	.49**	(.83)		
3. Organizational withdrawal behaviors	1.83	.58	.59**	.59**	(.86)	
4. Supportive organizational climate	5.53	.95	-.42**	-.60**	-.54**	(.92)

Note. $N = 245$, ** $p < .01$. Values of Cronbach's alpha were reported in the parenthesis along the diagonal.

4.2 Hypothesis testing

In order to examine the study hypotheses, we use the PROCESS Macro in SPSS based on 5000 bootstrap samples to calculate bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals (CI) (Hayes, 2013; Preacher and Hayes, 2008). PROCESS allows simultaneous for testing both the direct and indirect effects. The results are shown in Table 2. Customer mistreatment is positively and significantly related to employees' psychological strain (Estimate: 0.64, 95% CI [0.495, 0.780]). Thus, hypothesis 1 was supported.

Next, PROCESS Model 4 of Hayes (2013) was used for testing the mediating effect concerning hypothesis 2. As reported in Table 2, the indirect relationship between customer mistreatment and

psychological strain via perceived supportive organizational climate was statistically significant (Estimate: 0.20, CI [0.129, 0.283]). Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

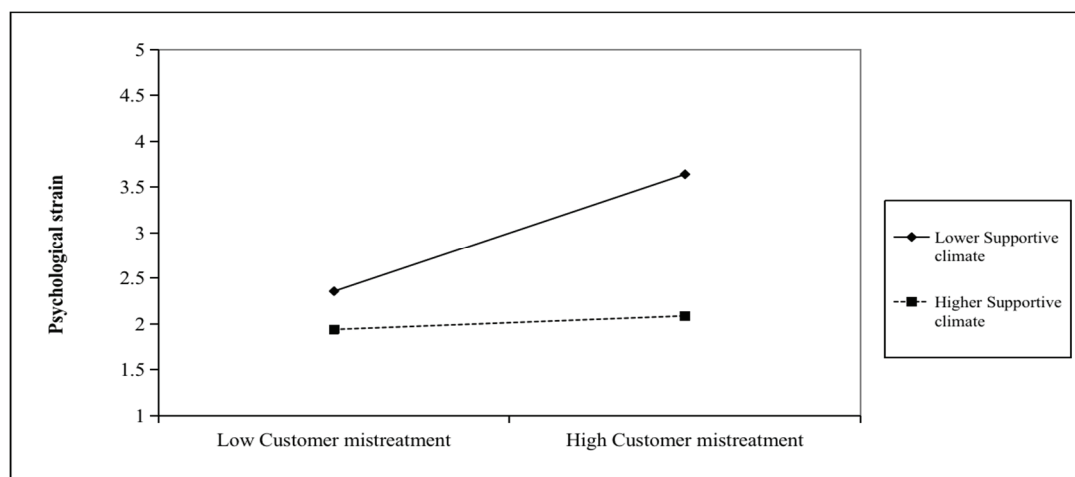
Hypothesis 3 stated supportive organizational climate moderates the relationship of customer mistreatment and employees' psychological strain, such that the positive relationship between customer mistreatment and psychological strain is weaker when supportive organizational climate is higher. As shown in Table 2, the interaction term was significant in predicting psychological strain (Estimate: 0.57, 95% CI [-0.128, -0.056]). We followed the procedure suggested by Aiken and West (1991) to plot the interaction at the two conditional values of supportive organizational climate in Figure 2 (one standard deviation above and below the mean). Simple slope test revealed that when supportive organizational climate was low, the positive relationship between customer mistreatment and psychological strain was significant (Estimate: 0.64, 95% CI [0.261, 0.479]), whereas when supportive organizational climate was high, the positive relationship between customer mistreatment and psychological strain was not significant (Estimate: 0.02, 95% CI [-0.480, 0.241]). Overall, hypothesis 3 was supported.

Table 2: Results of hypotheses testing

Paths	Estimate	SE	95% confidence interval
Customer mistreatment → Psychological strain (H1, supported)	.64*	.07	(.495, .780)
Customer mistreatment → Supportive organizational climate → Psychological strain (H2, supported)	.20*	.04	(.129, .283)
Customer mistreatment*Supportive organizational climate → Psychological strain (H3, supported)	.57*	.05	(-.128, -.056)

Note. $N = 245$, * $p < .05$.

Picture 2: Interaction between customer mistreatment and supportive organizational climate on psychological strain



5. DISCUSSION

Given the prevalence of employees' mistreatment by customers, its adverse impacts on employees have received increasing attention in academic research. In this study, drawing on the job demands-resources model, we have mainly focused on the organizational-level factors that are not only affected by such

mistreatment, but that can help employees cope with the mistreatment. Specifically, we first verified the indirect relationship between customer mistreatment and employees' organizational withdrawal behaviors through psychological strain. Further, our study examined the buffering role of a supportive organizational climate on the negative impact of customer mistreatment on employees' psychological strain.

5.1 Theoretical and practical implications

The results of this study have several theoretical implications. First, most prior research has verified that service employees may engage in forms of aggressive workplace behaviors toward the customer when faced with mistreatment by them, e.g., sabotage behaviors and retaliation (Mullen and Kelloway, 2013; Baranik et al., 2017; Skarlicki et al., 2008), but we have little understanding of employees' negative behaviors towards those others than customers in the workplace, such as their supervisors, coworkers, and the organization itself. This study takes the research stream a step further by exploring the relationship between customer mistreatment and employees' deviant behaviors towards their organization. Specifically, our study illustrated that customer mistreatment as source of job demands would increase employees' organizational withdrawal behaviors through employees' psychological strain.

Second, the study extends the customer mistreatment literature by demonstrating the importance of studying the supportive organizational climate in the customer mistreatment context. The current research on factors influencing employees' reactions to mistreatment by customers mainly centered on the individual-level, such as locus of control and self-efficacy (Park and kim, 2019; Wang et al., 2011). Despite the sound implications of these studies on how individuals themselves deal with customer mistreatment, this research overlooks the significant role of organizational characteristics during the service encounter. According to the JD-R model, job resources that can buffer the adverse impacts of job demands may be located at the organizational level; these resources include the organizational climate, role clarity, and autonomy (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). As our study has illustrated the buffering role of the supportive organizational climate in the customer mistreatment context, it is reasonable to assume that organizational-level factors, especially the organizational climate, have the potential effect of helping employees to cope with mistreatment by customers.

On a practical note, the findings of this study reveal that the potential effects of a supportive organizational climate can effectively buffer the negative impact of mistreatment by customers on employees. Thus, service industry organizations should provide employees tangible support from supervisors and coworkers and also engage in fostering a supportive organizational climate. For example, top managers should appeal to all organizational members to give care and compassion to frontline employees and cultivate an awareness of the power of cooperation among coworkers. Moreover, when service employees encounter mistreatment from the customers, the first action the supervisor should take is not to blame employees but to express comfort and understanding toward them.

5.2 Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, the data in this study was self-reported, which caused the potential for common method variance. Hence, in order to ensure true causality, it is recommended that future studies collect data from different sources. Second, all variables in this study were measured at the same time. Chi et al. (2018) have concluded that the adverse

emotional responses on employees caused by customer mistreatment may emerge within one day, the next morning, and even two weeks later. Future researchers are encouraged to explore how customer mistreatment by customers influences employees' emotions and behaviors measured at different points in time.

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