

Different emotional and behavioral reactions to customer mistreatment among hotel employees: A multilevel moderated mediation model

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ABSTRACT

The present research examines employees' different emotional and behavioral reactions to customer mistreatment, as well as the individual-level and group-level moderators for this effect in the hospitality setting. Data are collected at two points in time from 405 hotel employees working under 73 hotel supervisors in southern China. Results of path analysis in Multilevel Structure Equation Modeling (MSEM) reveal that employees who feel angry after receiving customer mistreatment engage in more sabotage against customers, whereas employees who feel frustrated after being mistreated by customers are more likely to disengage from their work. Additionally, the indirect effect of customer mistreatment on employee sabotage against customers via anger was positive when employees make lower level of internal attribution or work under supervisors who created lower supervisory support climate; the indirect effect of customer mistreatment on employee's work disengagement via frustration was positive when employees make lower level of internal attribution.

1. Introduction

"The customer is always right" is a mantra espoused by many hotels. Accordingly, hotel frontline employees are often trained to satisfy and be responsive to various customer requests as much as possible, whether those requests are reasonable or unreasonable. Previous research has found that positive interactions between employees and customers result in desirable organizational outcomes, such as an increase in the customer's brand loyalty and repurchase intention (Hennig-Thurau, Groth, Paul, & Gremler, 2006). However, interactions with customers are not always pleasant. Customer mistreatment is defined as low-quality interpersonal treatment that employees receive from their customers (Wang, Liao, Zhan, & Shi, 2011), and is a daily occurrence encountered by frontline employees. Research indicates that, in addition to work argument, interpersonal tensions, coworker's stressors, and work overload, coping with hotel guest's problem is always one of the salient work stressor for both managers and frontline employees (Fong, Chui, Cheong, & Fong, 2018; O'Neill & Davis, 2011).

Past research has revealed that employees respond to customer mistreatment differently as well. Although most responses are negative and destructive, some behavioral reactions are directed at customers (Wang et al., 2011; Yue, Wang, & Groth, 2017), whereas some are directed at the job (Chi, Yang, & Lin, 2018). However, the findings of

past research have provided only an understanding of why mistreated employees engage in a specific behavior to a greater or lesser extent. The unanswered question is *why some mistreated employees exhibit a certain response (e.g., sabotage against customers), while others respond differently (e.g., work disengagement)*. The attribution-emotion process described by Weiner (1985) asserts that discrete emotional states may help to explain the distinct behavioral tendencies associated with customer mistreatment.

Extant studies on customer mistreatment have considered the role of emotion, but most focus on general negative affect (Chi et al., 2018; Park & Kim, 2019; Song et al., 2018). Notably, the literature on emotion has posited that the emergence and outcomes of each discrete emotion are different and unique (Roseman, Wiest, & Swartz, 1994; Weiner, 1985). For example, people are more likely to experience feelings of anger and frustration if they attribute the cause of a failure to external factors (e.g., blaming the environment), rather than ascribing the cause to their own problems (e.g., lack of ability) (Ilies, Pater, Lim, & Binnewies, 2012). Accordingly, we suggest that mistreated employees will be angry or frustrated when they consider customers to be responsible for this negative interaction (i.e., low internal attribution). Furthermore, mistreated employees are expected to take different actions to release their emotions, depending on the emotion they experience. Specifically, we expect the feeling of anger promotes employee sabotage against

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customers, because anger is found to result in many aggressive work behaviors (see reviews by Gibson & Callister, 2010). Meanwhile, the feeling of frustration is expected to promote work disengagement, because when employees feel that the current situation is uncontrollable, limiting exposure to the stressful work situation is an effective way to avoid future feelings of frustration (Crawford, LePine, & Rich, 2010).

Additionally, important contextual factors can further explain the strength of the relationship between customer mistreatment and discrete emotions. From the perspective of resource (Hobfoll, 1989), we suggest that employees with a large resource endowment (i.e., a supervisory support climate) have greater protection against work stressors, making them less likely to experience any form of negative emotion (i.e., anger and frustration) after mistreatment. To summarize, we propose a multilevel moderated mediation model and depict it in Fig. 1.

Our research contributes to the literature on customer mistreatment in three key ways. First, the present research identifies the discrete emotions that connect customer mistreatment and employees' distinct behavioral outcomes. Integrating multiple emotional mechanisms in the research model advances our understanding of how customer mistreatment provokes a wider range of negative emotions. It is worth being studied because examining discrete emotions instead of the integrated emotion may increase our theoretical understanding of the role of emotions in particular hospitality contexts, and it may also provide practitioners a clearer mindset that in what conditions one specific negative outcome would be generated among employees under customer mistreatment. Second, we consider employees' internal attribution style and supervisory support climate as moderators of the customer mistreatment-discrete emotion-distinct behavior relationship, to better delineate when and why these effects occur. In doing so, we highlight the importance of employee's internal attribution style in negative events happened in hotel business, in understanding the additional benefits of keeping employees with a high level of internal attribution. Examining the supervisory support climate as an organizational intervention advances our understanding of the conditions under which the relationship between customer mistreatment and its emotional and behavioral reactions will be magnified or reduced. As the harmful effects of customer mistreatment would be amplified by employee's perception, incorporating supervisory supportive climate into the present research model is especially important because our research results would suggest hotel intervention as an effective and crucial manner to prevent employee's negative reactions from customer mistreatment. Third, methodologically, the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative methods is applied in this study. In quantitative part, we collect our data at two different points in time, with a one-month gap between them, and use the multilevel structure equation modeling (MSEM) approach to examine that data. In qualitative part, in-depth follow-up interviews are conducted following the survey in order to validate the results and extract insights from hotel senior management.

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1. The relationship between customer mistreatment and employees' discrete emotions: the individual-level moderator of internal attribution

Hotel employees are often required to regulate their inner feelings and emotions to display the organization-expected emotions (Lan, Gong, Liu, Wong, & Yuan, 2022; Simillidou et al., 2020). However, Dieffendorff, Gabriel, Nolan, and Yang (2019) noted that there may be situations that employees do not regulate their emotions even when they should. It often occurs when employees face the uncivil customer behavior. That is because that the attempt to restore the justice overrides the emotional display rule. Thus, customer mistreatment reduces individual's willingness to regulate the emotion and induces high level of negative emotions.

Attribution theory provides a good theoretical basis on which to explain why people may experience different emotions and have different behavioral reactions to a given trigger event (Weiner, 1985). According to the theory, the general affective reaction following an event is first experienced through the primary appraisal. When the outcome is perceived as a success, a positive affect is elicited, and when the outcome is perceived as a failure, a negative affect is elicited. Since customer mistreatment denotes an unpleasant interaction between the customer and the employee, it is no surprise that previous research found a positive relationship between customer mistreatment and the employee's negative affect (Chi et al., 2018; Park & Kim, 2019; Song et al., 2018). For instance, Pu, Ji, and Sang (2022) survey 500 employees to examine how customer mistreatment leads to the enhancement of turnover intention in China's hotel industry. However, negative affect is a broad concept that includes a wide variety of discrete negative emotions, such as anger, frustration, guilt and shame. These discrete emotions may arise from a unique set of antecedents but result in distinct motivational and behavioral consequences (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Attribution theory further proposes that the generation of a specific emotion depends on how the individual attributes the cause of an event. Internal attribution occurs when the cause is perceived to reflect one's dispositional or behavioral characteristics (e.g., efforts or abilities), whereas external attribution occurs when the cause is believed to be controlled by situational factors.

We believe that employees attempt to make external attribution rather than internal attribution for the customer mistreatment. That is because that research on attribution theory has identified several attribution biases which may distort an individual's causal perception. In particular, self-serving bias refers to "the tendency of individuals to take credit for successful outcomes while blaming other people or situational factors for negative outcomes" (Martinko, Douglas, & Harvey, 2006, p. 140). Via the mechanism of ego-defense, people's interpretations aim to make themselves look good regardless of the positive or negative

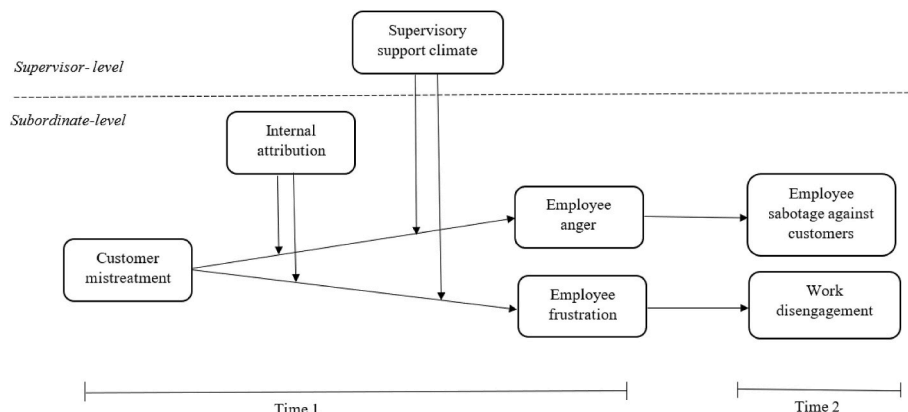


Fig. 1. Theoretical model.

outcomes. Empirical study also provides the evidences to support the notion of that mistreated employees are prone to ascribe the abuse to the others rather than themselves (Burton, Taylor, & Barber, 2014; Cheng, Guo, Tian, & Shaalan, 2020).

Weiner's model further indicates that when a negative outcome is attributed to an external factor, feelings of anger and frustration typically follow. Anger is defined as "an emotion that involves an appraisal of responsibility for wrongdoing by another person or entity and often includes the goal of correcting the perceived wrong (Gibson & Callister, 2010, p. 3)"; meanwhile, frustration refers to a negative emotion formed in response to negative workplace event which interferes with the goal attainment or goal maintenance (Spector, 1978). According to attribution theory (Ilies et al., 2012; Roseman et al., 1994; Weiner, 1985), mistreated employees feel angry when they believe that the situation is controllable, whereas mistreated employees feel frustrated when they believe that the situation is uncontrollable. While individuals tend to feel angry or frustrated when they make an external attribution (i.e., low internal attribution) for a negative event, the emotion of frustration has received relatively less research attention in workplace incivility studies, as compared to anger (e.g., Rupp & Spencer, 2006). Thus, taking into consideration the employee's attribution style, we suggest that anger and frustration are the two most plausible emotional responses to customer mistreatment, and formulate the following hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1a. Internal attribution moderates the relationship between customer mistreatment and employee anger, such that the positive relationship between customer mistreatment and employee anger is stronger among those with a lower level of internal attribution compared to those with a higher level of internal attribution.

Hypothesis 1b. Internal attribution moderates the relationship between customer mistreatment and employee frustration, such that the positive relationship between customer mistreatment and employee frustration is stronger among those with a lower level of internal attribution compared to those with a higher level of internal attribution.

2.2. Relationship between customer mistreatment and discrete emotions: the group-level moderator of supervisory support climate

Emotion is categorized as a volatile personal resource which is fleeting in nature and comes and goes in a short period of time (Ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012), but interacting with the uncivil customers depletes employee's emotional resources, results in negative emotions, (Ilies, Ju, Liu, & Goh, 2020). However, social support helps individuals gain new resources and ensures individual's proper function (Hobfoll, 1989). Resource study further suggests that social support effectively attenuates the negative relationship between contextual demand (e.g., customer mistreatment) and personal resource (e.g., emotion) (Ten et al., 2012).

Although the sources of social support are various, supervisor support exerts the most profound effect on employees in a work setting (Halbesleben, 2006). Supervisor support is defined as the extent to which a supervisor values employees' contribution and cares about employees' wellbeing (Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, & Rhoades, 2002). While research has revealed that supervisor support reduces individual's negative emotions elicited by the unpleasant event (Almeida et al., 2016), there are two main issues which have not been fully addressed by prior research of examining supervisor support in the context of customer mistreatment. First, conceptualizing and operationalizing supervisor support at the individual level (i.e., employee perceived supervisor support) limits the understanding of whether the supervisor support will have an equal effect on all of the employees working in a given team. Hotel employees often work in team-based settings (Sharpley & Forster, 2003), and, to some degree, their attitudes and behaviors must be influenced by the factors embedded in that shared environment, such like the supervisor's supportive behaviors (Knani, 2022). Supervisory support climate refers to

"the general availability to the work unit members of the key object, energy, and social resources provided by their supervisor" (Wang et al., 2011, p. 317). As compared to employee perceived supervisor support, supervisory support climate is believed to better capture the contextual effects.

Second, to the best of our knowledge, no empirical research has tested the moderating effect of supervisory support climate on the relationship between customer mistreatment and employees' discrete negative emotions. Testing this moderating effect is important because it enables us to understand whether it is possible to prevent the negative impacts of customer mistreatment early in the process. Since a specific emotion will be evoked during or shortly after the personal mistreatment episode (Peng, Schaubroeck, Chong, & Li, 2019), the emotional response is regarded as the most proximal reaction upon receiving the customer mistreatment. Therefore, if the supervisory support climate can successfully reduce the likelihood that employees will experience the negative emotions aroused by customer mistreatment, subsequent undesirable outcomes could be prevented as well.

Accordingly, we suggest that supervisory support climate acts as a protective factor which equips employees with greater psychological resilience against customer mistreatment. That is because that these employees know that when customer mistreatment occurs, their supervisors will always be on their side, and will also try to step into their shoes to clarify the situation. Customer mistreatment will not be considered particularly harmful to the individual's wellbeing. Such a belief can neutralize the negative emotions (i.e., anger and frustration) aroused by customer mistreatment. Hence, we formulate Hypotheses 2a and 2b.

Hypothesis 2a. Supervisory support climate moderates the relationship between customer mistreatment and employee anger, such that the positive relationship between customer mistreatment and employee anger is stronger among employees working in a low supervisory support climate compared to those working in a high supervisory support climate.

Hypothesis 2b. Supervisory support climate moderates the relationship between customer mistreatment and employee frustration, such that the positive relationship between customer mistreatment and employee frustration is stronger among employees working in a low supervisory support climate compared to those working in a high supervisory support climate.

2.3. Employee sabotage against customers: anger-induced behavior

Since an affective response to a trigger event is thought to shape the individual's behavioral reaction, we further expect that anger will promote employee sabotage against customers, and that frustration will promote work disengagement. Employee sabotage against customers refers to the employees' intentional behaviors which aim to harm customers, such as hurrying customers, slowing down the service, and showing off in front of customers (Harris & Ogbonna, 2006). Previous research has indicated that employee anger/hostility is a key factor that invokes aggressive behaviors at work (Lian et al., 2014), including sabotaging customers (Chi, Tsai, & Tseng, 2013). In hospitality sector, it is argued that the sabotage behaviors of frontline employees not only negative affect customers, but only destruct the brand value of the enterprise (Peng, Guan, & Huan, 2021).

There are two reasons why angry employees sabotage customers. First, anger is a highly aroused emotion, and individuals seek ways to vent and alleviate this aversive feeling. Engaging in aggressive behaviors against others is believed to be effective in relieving this aversive feeling (Berkowitz, 1993). If the feeling of anger is induced by another's aggressive behavior, retaliation by engaging in aggressive behavior against the transgressor can give an individual a pleasant feeling of satisfaction (Liang et al., 2016). Thus, employee sabotage can be regarded as an expression of anger. Second, Hutcherson and Gross

(2011) posit that when anger is induced by another's unethical behaviors, angry individuals tend to engage in high cost behaviors which aim to prevent and terminate the outside threat to themselves. In the same vein, Fischer and Roseman (2007) also demonstrated that in a negative social interaction, angry individuals attack the other to change the other's behavior and achieve the desired outcome. Accordingly, angry employees engage in sabotage against customers in order to protect themselves from receiving more and greater customer mistreatment in the future. Taken together, we hypothesize that employee's anger evoked by customer mistreatment facilitates the emergence of their sabotage against other customers.

Hypothesis 3. Employees' anger is positively related to employee sabotage against customers.

2.4. Work disengagement: frustration-induced behavior

Work disengagement refers to "distancing oneself from one's work and experiencing negative attitudes toward the work object, work content, or one's work in general" (Demerouti, Bakker, Vardakou, & Kantas, 2003, p. 14). In fact, work disengagement is a passive strategy that employees adopt to react to work stressors (a kind of emotion-focused coping strategy), because employees choose to disconnect themselves from work rather than directly address the source of stress (problem-focused coping). When do individuals adopt work disengagement to cope with a given stressor? Generally speaking, people disengage from work when they feel frustrated because the stressor is appraised as uncontrollable and a hindrance (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986; Kahn, 1990). More specifically, when individuals find that they have few possibilities and can do little to improve the undesirable situation, they become frustrated and are less likely to devote resources to cope with the problem. At that point, these frustrated people turn to cope with their negative emotion by disengaging from the stressful situation in order to restore their personal resources (Crawford et al., 2010). In hotel industry, work disengagement is increasingly concerned as frontline employees without high work engagement may not be able to deliver high quality services (Park, Johnson, & Chaudhuri, 2019). This reasoning is consistent with motivation theory (Vroom, 1964), which posits that when employees believe they have little control over the attainment of desirable work outcomes, they lack the motivation to work, and thus reduce the effort they put into their job. Therefore, frustration and work disengagement are conceptually linked, because frustration is an affective reaction to the uncontrollable stressor, and work disengagement is a behavioral reaction to the uncontrollable stressor and the accompanying frustration. However, surprisingly, there is no direct evidence to support the relationship between employee frustration and work disengagement. Hence, we propose the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 4. Employee frustration is positively related to work disengagement.

Finally, we argue that employees' internal attribution style and supervisory support climate not only moderate the relationship between customer mistreatment and discrete emotions, but also moderate the indirect relationship from customer mistreatment to employee sabotage and work disengagement via discrete emotions. Based on the preceding discussions regarding Hypotheses 1–4, we contend that the effect of (a) customer mistreatment on anger, which ultimately results in employee sabotage and (b) customer mistreatment on frustration, which ultimately results in work disengagement are stronger when both the employee's internal attribution style and supervisory support climate are low. Therefore, we formulate the final four hypotheses, which specify the moderated mediation effects predicted by the research model.

Hypothesis 5a. Internal attribution moderates the indirect relationship between customer mistreatment and employee sabotage against customers through employee anger. That is, the positive indirect

relationship is stronger among employees with a lower internal attribution compared to those with a higher internal attribution.

Hypothesis 5b. Internal attribution moderates the indirect relationship between customer mistreatment and work disengagement through employee frustration. That is, the positive indirect relationship is stronger among employees with a lower internal attribution compared to those with a higher internal attribution.

Hypothesis 6a. Supervisory support climate moderates the indirect relationship between customer mistreatment and employee sabotage against customers through employee anger. That is, the positive indirect relationship is stronger among the employees working in a low supervisory support climate compared to those working in a high supervisory support climate.

Hypothesis 6b. Supervisory support climate moderates the indirect relationship between customer mistreatment and work disengagement through employee frustration. That is, the positive indirect relationship is stronger among the employees working in a low supervisory support climate compared to those working in a high supervisory support climate.

3. Method

3.1. Participants and procedure

In order to examine how customer mistreatment influences employees' discrete negative emotions and behavioral reactions, a mixed-method approach was applied. In this study, questionnaire surveys followed by semi-structured in-depth interviews were performed to collect both of quantitative and qualitative responses from hotel employees and managers. The triangulation methods with quantitative and qualitative can help neutralize bias and validate the results (Kwok, 2012).

In quantitative part, data were collected from six hotels located in southern China. We contacted the heads of human resource management departments in these six hotels and introduced the purpose of our study to them. Department heads help us to identify the employees whose daily work routines involve regular interaction with customers. A letter stating the purpose of the study and ensuring voluntary participation and confidentiality was distributed to 605 hotel employees. After receiving participation consent from 450 employees, we sent the Time 1 survey to the respondents, asking them to complete it and return it using the enclosed preaddressed envelope. The survey measured demographic information, customer mistreatment, anger, frustration, internal attribution, and supervisory support climate. Since data would be collected at two time points, participants were required to leave last four digits of their phone number for matching purpose. All 450 participants returned the Time 1 survey. One month later, we sent the Time 2 survey to these same 450 participants. This survey measured employee sabotage against customers and work disengagement. Completed surveys were returned in the same manner as for the Time 1 survey. In total, 405 pairs of surveys were valid and matched, resulting in an effective response rate of 90%. Among these 405 employees, 61.2% were female, 40% work in front office, 47.9% work in food and beverage department, and 12.1% work in guest relationship department. Most of them aged between 20 and 50. They had an average organizational tenure of 22.91 months.

In the qualitative part, based on the findings of the hypotheses tested from questionnaire surveys, hotel department heads and managers in different frontline departments were identified and approached, finally, 15 interviewees (who did not participate in the quantitative part of this study) from different departments in the same six hotels were selected to participate in the follow-up in-depth interviews. The participants aged between 35 and 55 years, 8 are men and 7 women, and all of them have at least ten-year working experiences in the hotel industry. The interviewees were firstly asked by following a basic interview guideline related to the topic with questions like 'what kinds of emotions

employees may have when facing customer mistreatment?', or 'what practices will the hotel do to eliminate employees' sabotage against customers?', and more extended questions will be asked according to interviewees' responses, in order to validate the quantitative results and offer insights into the hotel practices regarding customer mistreatment and employees' negative reactions. The follow-up interview lasted 1 h on average.

3.2. Measures

As all the measurement items were developed in English, we followed Brislin (1970)'s translation/back-translation process to ensure proper translation of all measurement items from English to Chinese.

Customer mistreatment. Customer mistreatment was measured with an 18-item scale developed by Wang et al. (2011). Participants were asked to recall and indicate how often customers treated them in a hostile and impolite manner in the past month, using a five-point Likert scale (1 = never, 5 = all the time). A sample item is "Demanded special treatment." The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.96.

Employee anger. Anger was assessed with a 6-item scale developed by Watson and Clark (1994). Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they experienced the following six emotions when interacting with customers in the past month: hostile, scornful, loathing, angry, disgusted, and irritable. Participants responded using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = very slightly or not at all, 5 = extremely). The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.94.

Employee frustration. We adopted a 3-item scale developed by Burton et al. (2014) to measure frustration. Participants were asked to rate their frustration based on their interactions with customers in the past month via a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). A sample item is "Trying to get this job done is a very frustrating experience." The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.89.

Internal attribution. A 4-item scale developed by Burton et al. (2014) was adapted to assess employees' internal attribution for customer mistreatment encounters. Since the original scale was designed to measure employees' internal attribution for abusive supervision, we replaced "supervisor" with "customer" for all the items to reflect customer mistreatment. Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they ascribed the cause of the unpleasant interaction with customers to themselves using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). A sample item is "I need to look in the mirror to examine why customers treat me that way." The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.88.

Supervisory support climate. We used a 4-item scale from Bacharach and Bamberger (2007) to assess supervisory support climate. Participants rated the frequency of supportive behaviors displayed by their immediate supervisors using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never, 5 = always). A sample item is "How often can your supervisors be counted on to listen, show understanding or show they care when things get tough at work?" The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.83. Given that the 405 employees surveyed were overseen by a total of 73 supervisors, subordinates working with the same supervisor may perceive a similar level of supervisory support climate. Hence, we operationalized supervisory support climate as a higher-level factor, computed by the aggregated score from subordinates under the same supervisor. The aggregation of individual ratings to the supervisory level was justified, as the mean and median of r_{wg} were 0.81 and 0.88, respectively. ICC(1) was 0.18, and ICC(2) was 0.55.

Employee sabotage against customers. We assessed customer sabotage with a 9-item scale developed by Harris and Ogbonna (2006). Participants were asked to recall how often they engaged in customer-directed sabotage behaviors in the past month using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never, 5 = always). A sample item is "I took revenge on rude customers." Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.87.

Work disengagement. An 8-item scale by Demerouti et al. (2003) was adopted to measure employees' work disengagement. Participants

were asked to indicate whether they disengaged from work in the past month, using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). A sample item is "It happened more and more often that I talked about my work in a negative way." Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.90.

Control variable: Organizational tenure. The effect of employees' organizational tenure was controlled for when we tested the hypotheses, because organizational tenure was found to attenuate the negative impacts of work obstacles on individuals (Gip, Guchait, Pasamehmetoglu, & Khoa, 2022). Prior study consistently indicated that employees with longer organizational tenure are more able to adapt the work stressors and have more experiences in dealing with the difficult customer interaction (Liu, Ma, Li, Peng, & Li, 2022). Accordingly, employees reported their organizational tenure as the number of months they have been employed by their current organization.

3.3. Analytical strategy

First, to justify the appropriateness of conducting multilevel analysis, we tested whether there was sufficient variance at the group level (supervisor-level) for the outcome variables. For employee sabotage against customers, ICC(1) was 0.12, and the one-way ANOVA F-test was 1.76 ($p < .01$). For work disengagement, ICC(1) was 0.36 and the one-way ANOVA F-test was 4.11 ($p < .01$). These results suggest sufficient between-group variance. Given that the present study focuses on testing the mediating effects at the subordinate level as well as the cross-level moderating effects, we followed the recommendation of Preacher, Zyphur, and Zhang (2010) and used path analysis in the multilevel structure equation modeling (MSEM) framework, which is designed to test the mediation hypothesis with hierarchically clustered data, in Mplus 7.2 (Muthén & Muthén, 2012). For the centering strategy, we grand-mean centered supervisory support climate, the only supervisor-level variable.

We also checked for normality by conducting the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, which did not support the univariate normality assumption. Following the suggestion by Muthén and Muthén (1998–2012, Mplus user guide version 7), we employed maximum likelihood with robust standard errors (MLR) for parameter estimation. MLR provides robust estimation for standard errors and chi-square test statistic for the non-normal data and non-independent observations.

Additionally, to ensure the generalizability of the findings of this study, non-response bias was tested by adopting "time trend extrapolation test" (Armstrong & Overton, 1977). The basic assumption behind this test is that the characteristics of the late respondents are very similar to the nonrespondents (e.g., they were less interested in the study topic or they needed more prodding to answer). Accordingly, we classified the data in to two groups based on the amount of time taken we received second survey. We performed multivariate general linear modeling (GLM) to test the null hypothesis of no difference between two groups with respect to gender, age, organizational tenure, sabotage against customers, and disengagement. This analysis indicated no difference (Wilks' Lambda = 0.99, $p > .10$). Although the non-response bias cannot be ruled out, the result indicated our sample was still representative.

4. Results

4.1. Preliminary analyses

Mean, standard deviation, reliability, and within-group correlations among all the study variables were reported in Table 1. We further performed two additional checks on the quality of the data before testing the hypotheses. The first assessed the multicollinearity among the independent variables. All the variance of inflation factor (VIF) values were below 2, which were lower than the threshold for multicollinearity recommended by Chatterjee and Price (1991). Result indicated that multicollinearity was not a problem. The second tested the common

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and correlations among study variables.

Variables	M	SD	AVE	CR	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Organizational tenure	22.91	29.01			–							
2. Customer mistreatment	2.09	.75	.75	.96	.02	.87						
3. Internal attribution	2.49	.97	.66	.97	.09	.35**	.81					
4. Supervisory support climate	3.46	.81	.58	.84	–.01	–.06	.17**	.76				
5. Employee anger	1.84	.80	.73	.87	.13**	.34**	.13**	.04	.85			
6. Employee frustration	1.69	.80	.69	.87	.12*	.41**	.19**	–.01	.28**	.83		
7. Employee sabotage against customers	1.16	.31	.43*	.87	–.02	.07	.03	–.16**	.10	.02	.66	
8. Work disengagement	1.75	.66	.56	.91	.06	.26**	.04	–.20**	.14**	.26**	.36**	.75

Note. Within-group correlations are presented. N = 405. Square root of AVE appears on the diagonal. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

^a Fornell and Larcker (1981) note that AVE is a more conservative index, the convergent validity is evidenced even when value of AVE is lower than .5 but CR is adequate.

method variance. Harmon’s single-factor was performed. The factor analysis revealed that the first factor only accounted for 26 percent of the total variance, and expected seven factors accounted for over 65 percent of the total variance. Results indicated the common method of variance was not a severe problem in our study.

Prior to test the hypotheses, we conducted confirmatory factor analysis to assess the fit of the measurement model. Given the nested nature of the data, we followed Liu et al. (2015) procedure and used the sandwich estimator to account for the supervisor-level clustering by including “TYPE = COMPLEX” in Mplus. Furthermore, to obtain an adequate indicator-sample size ratio, parceling strategy was adopted for customer mistreatment (Little, Cunningham, Shahar, & Widaman, 2002). The “item-to-construct balance” strategy was employed by continuously parceling the highest loaded item with the lowest loaded item from the list of 18 items. Therefore, 9 parcels were created (i.e., nine parcels with two items in each). Results showed that our hypothesized seven-factor model fits the data well ($\chi^2 = 1554.73$, $df = 839$, CFI = 0.92, TLI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.05, SRMR = 0.05). We also tested two alternative models: a two-factor model (items measured at Time 1 loaded on one factor and items measured at Time 2 loaded on the other factor), and a one-factor model (all the items loaded on a general factor). Both the two-factor model ($\chi^2 = 5434.61$, $df = 859$, CFI = 0.49, TLI = 0.46, RMSEA = 0.12, SRMR = 0.13, $\Delta\chi^2 = 3879.88^{**}$, $\Delta df = 20$) and the one-factor model ($\chi^2 = 6729.50$, $df = 860$, CFI = 0.35, TLI = 0.31, RMSEA = 0.13, SRMR = 0.17, $\Delta\chi^2 = 5174.77^{**}$, $\Delta df = 21$) fit significantly worse than the seven-factor model. In addition, all the items significantly loaded on their respective latent variables, and standardized factor loadings were greater than 0.04 (see Appendix 1).

Besides, we also conducted average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR) for each construct (see Table 1). Results showed that all the values of AVE and CR were adequate and above the recommended levels. The square root of AVE for each construct was greater than the correlation coefficients involving that construct, which satisfying Fornell and Larcker’s (1981) for discriminant validity criterion. Taken together, these results demonstrated the convergent validity and discriminant validity of our measures.

4.2. Hypotheses testing

Unstandardized coefficient estimates were reported in Table 2. At the within-group level, the interaction between customer mistreatment and internal attribution significantly predicted employee anger ($b = -.19$, $p < .01$) and employee frustration ($b = -.14$, $p < .01$). We further conducted simple slope analyses and plotted the interaction effects at high (1 SD above the mean) and low (1 SD below the mean) levels of internal attribution in Figs. 2 and 3. As shown in Fig. 2, customer mistreatment had a stronger positive relationship with employee anger (estimate = 0.32, $p < .01$) among employees with lower internal attribution, compared to those with higher internal attribution (estimate = –0.04, ns). Similarly, Fig. 3 also showed that, customer mistreatment had a stronger positive relationship with employee frustration (estimate =

Table 2
Unstandardized coefficients of multilevel structure equation modeling in mplus.

Effect types	Estimate	S.E.
Within-group effects		
<i>Fixed slopes</i>		
Organizational tenure → Employee sabotage against customers	.00	.00
Organizational tenure → Work disengagement	.00	.00
Internal attribution → Employee anger	–.08	.04
Customer mistreatment × Internal attribution → Employee anger (H1a)	–.19**	.05
Internal attribution → Employee frustration	–.00	.05
Customer mistreatment × Internal attribution → Employee frustration (H1b)	–.14**	.05
<i>Random slopes</i>		
Customer mistreatment → Employee anger	.14*	.06
Customer mistreatment → Employee frustration	.21**	.08
Employee anger → Employee sabotage against customers (H3)	.05*	.03
Employee frustration → Work disengagement (H4)	.11*	.05
Between-group and cross-level effects		
Customer mistreatment → Employee anger	.51**	.17
Internal attribution → Employee anger	–.07	.12
Customer mistreatment × Internal attribution → Employee anger	.27	.19
Supervisory support climate → Employee anger	.74**	.28
Customer mistreatment × Supervisory support climate → Employee anger (H2a)	–.36**	.12
Customer mistreatment → Employee frustration	.45**	.15
Internal attribution → Employee frustration	.06	.10
Customer mistreatment × Internal attribution → Employee frustration	–.11	.14
Supervisory support climate → Employee frustration	–.57	.31
Customer mistreatment × Supervisory support climate → Employee frustration (H2b)	.27	.15
Employee anger → Employee sabotage against customers	–.08	.05
Employee frustration → Work disengagement	.59	.31
Simple slopes test (H1 & H2)		
Customer mistreatment → Employee anger		
High internal attribution	–.04	.08
Low internal attribution	.32**	.08
High supervisory support climate	–.02	.09
Low supervisory support climate	.31**	.08
Customer mistreatment → Employee frustration		
High internal attribution	.07	.09
Low internal attribution	.34**	.09
Residual variances		
Employee anger, within	.28**	.02
Employee anger, between	.16**	.05
Employee frustration, within	.36**	.03
Employee frustration, between	.04	.04
Employee sabotage against customers, within	.08**	.01
Employee sabotage against customers, between	.01	.01
Work disengagement, within	.26**	.02
Work disengagement, between	.07*	.03

Note. Sample sizes at level 1 and at level 2 are 405 and 73, respectively. $P < .05^*$, $p < .01^{**}$.

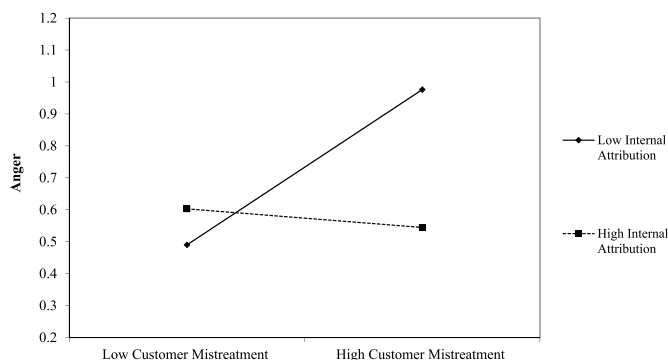


Fig. 2. Moderating effect of internal attribution on the customer mistreatment – employee anger relation.

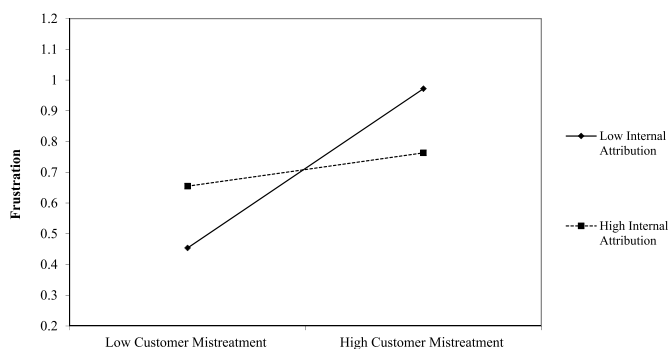


Fig. 3. Moderating effect of internal attribution on the customer mistreatment – employee frustration relation.

0.34, $p < .01$) among employees with lower internal attribution, compared to those with higher internal attribution ($estimate = 0.07, ns$). Thus, both Hypotheses 1a and 1b were supported. Moreover, employee anger was positively related to customer sabotage ($b = 0.05, p < .05$) and employee frustration was positively related to work disengagement ($b = 0.11, p < .05$), providing support for Hypotheses 3 and 4.

At the between-group level, the cross-level moderating effect of supervisory support climate on the within-group relationship between customer mistreatment and employee anger was significant ($b = -.36, p < .01$), whereas the moderating effect on the relationship between customer mistreatment and employee frustration was not significant ($b = .27, ns$). As Fig. 4 showed, the relationship between customer mistreatment and employee anger was stronger when supervisory support climate was low ($estimate = .31, p < .01$), but not significant when it was high ($estimate = -0.02, ns$). Thus, Hypothesis 2a was supported, whereas Hypothesis 2b was not supported.

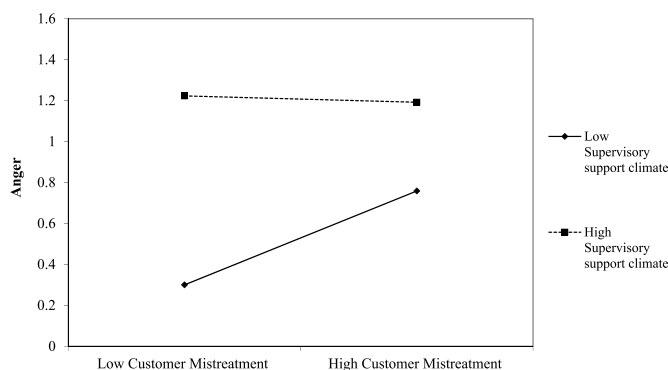


Fig. 4. Moderating effect of supervisory support climate on the customer mistreatment – employee anger relation.

To test Hypothesis 5-6, we employed the Monte Carlo simulation method in the “R” software (Tofighi & MacKinnon, 2011) to generate the confidence intervals around the estimated effects. We found that the indirect effects of customer mistreatment on employee sabotage against customers through employee anger were 0.02 (95% CI [0.000,0.037]) and 0.02 (95% CI [0.000, 0.035]), when employees’ internal attribution and supervisory support climate was low respectively, whereas the indirect effects were -0.002 (95% CI $[-0.012,0.006]$) and -0.001 (95% CI $[-0.012,0.009]$) when employees’ internal attribution and supervisory support climate were high respectively. These findings provided support for Hypotheses 5a and 6a. Also, the indirect effect of customer mistreatment on work disengagement through employee frustration was 0.038 (95% CI [0.004,0.082]) when employees’ internal attribution was low, whereas the indirect effect was 0.008 (95%CI $[-0.012,0.035]$) when employee’ internal attribution was high, supporting Hypothesis 5b. Lastly, we did not find evidence to support Hypothesis 6b, because the moderating effect of supervisory support climate on the relationship between customer mistreatment and work disengagement through employee frustration was not significant (the difference between two indirect effects = .03, ns).

4.3. Follow-up interviews

The quantitative survey results addressed that customer mistreatment significantly influence employee’s sabotage against customers through employee anger, and significantly influence employee work disengagement through employee frustration; the results partially confirmed the moderating roles of internal attribution and supervisory support climate. Follow-up interviews were performed to validate the results and attempt to provide insights to better explain the results from hotel management perspectives.

In terms of customer mistreatment, the follow-up interviews revealed that customer mistreatment is happening almost every week in hotel industry. Managers acknowledged that anger and frustration were the two most common emotions mistreated employees may experience, and observed employees engaged in more sabotage behaviors and disengaged from work when they were exposed in an uncivil environment. The interview results are consistent with the survey results. The most challenging part is that they cannot avoid customer mistreatment, and sometimes it is not easy to identify employee’s emotional changes. As one manager said: “customer mistreatment is something we cannot prevent, as we cannot choose our customers and we never know when they will mistreat our staff ...”. However, many respondents reflected that they would try their best to train up employees themselves, and develop a supportive atmosphere within the hotels, which also confirm the moderating roles of internal attribution and supervisory supportive climate.

In terms of internal attribution, the interview results indicated that hotel should not be in a passive position in the issues of employee’ internal attribution. Regular training should be arranged for hotel employees to identify and adjust their negative emotions. Many respondents also addressed the importance of team building activities as it is one of the effective ways to remind their staff that they work as a team, as one manager stated, “we need to keep reminding our staff through various forms of team-building activities, to pass them the message that the responsibilities are for the whole team, so employees would reduce attribute the negative events into their own responsibilities”.

In terms of the supervisor support, follow-up interviews reflected that it is more difficult to support an employee who feel frustrated than an employee who feel angry. The first reason is that anger is more explicit compared to frustration, so hotel management can easily notice that and provide them immediate support and encouragement. On the other hand, frustrated employees cannot be easily noticed, and sometimes they are too introverted to express their feelings, as one respondent said, “they may think the image of frontline employees is low, so even supervisors show their supports, the situations will not be changed, and

therefore they would keep their negative emotions (frustration) and become work disengagement.”

Conclusively, the research model is supported by the results of both qualitative interview and quantitative survey.

5. Discussion

We developed and tested our research model which specifies the employee's different emotional and behavioral responses to customer mistreatment, and also considered how the contextual factor mitigates the relationship between customer mistreatment and employee outcomes. We found that employees who are mistreated by customers and make less of an internal attribution are more likely to experience anger (frustration) and engage in more sabotage against customers (disengage from work) than are those who make more of an internal attribution. Moreover, supervisory support climate buffers part of the negative effects of customer mistreatment on employees. Mistreated employees working in a high supervisory support climate experience a lesser degree of anger and engage in less sabotage against customers than do those working in a low supervisory support climate.

However, supervisory support climate fails to buffer the indirect effect from customer mistreatment to work disengagement via employee frustration. [Ilies et al. \(2012\)](#) proposed that individuals experience the feeling of frustration when they attribute the cause of a negative event to an external factor and also believe that “no any external party” can help to improve the situation. Accordingly, one possible explanation for this unexpected finding is that mistreated employees conceive their immediate supervisors are unable to prevent customer mistreatment from happening again, owing to a lack of power to change such a hostile working environment. Hence, supervisory support climate would be ineffective in dealing with customer mistreatment and reducing employee's frustration.

5.1. Theoretical implications

Our research model contributes to the study of customer mistreatment and hospitality management in three ways. First, our study introduces and highlights the important role of discrete emotions linking the relationship between customer mistreatment and employees' behavioral reactions. The discrete emotion perspective provides a fresh understanding of why and how customer mistreatment elicits a wider range of employee reactions. While past research has investigated a variety of employee reactions to customer mistreatment (e.g., employee sabotage: [Skarlicki, van Jaarsveld, & Walker, 2008](#); withdrawal behavior: [Chi et al., 2018](#); customer-directed helping behavior: [Garcia et al., 2019](#); emotional labor: [Rupp & Spencer, 2006](#)) and has considered the mediating role of negative emotion in the relationship between customer mistreatment and employee outcomes ([Chi et al., 2018](#); [Song et al., 2018](#); [Wang et al., 2013](#)), there is an increasing need to organize these piecemeal studies into an integrative framework. Hence, the present study joins this line of research and takes a further step to decompose the general negative emotion into multiple discrete negative emotions, and proposes that a certain negative emotion is more likely to induce a certain behavior.

Second, the present research not only proposes that different negative emotions will be induced by customer mistreatment, but also tries to explain why and when a discrete emotion will be induced. Therefore, we regard employee attribution style as a moderator. Attribution theory portrays how an individual's attribution of the cause of an event determines the emotions experienced by that individual ([Weiner, 1985](#)). Workplace incivility studies posit that employee attribution style is one of the main reasons why employees respond to workplace aggression differently. [Oh and Farh \(2017\)](#) proposed a theoretical framework delineating how the subordinate's attribution style gives rise to distinct emotions (i.e., anger, fear and sadness) and drives a range of behavioral responses to abusive supervision (i.e., supervisor-directed aggression

and withdrawal behaviors). Nevertheless, few studies have considered how the attribution style of employees mistreated by customers affects subsequent employee-related outcomes ([Garcia et al., 2019](#)). Our study demonstrates how the perception and evaluation of customer mistreatment determines the employee's subsequent emotions and behaviors.

Third, in addition to discussing the occurrence of diverse employee responses to customer mistreatment, we further propose a solution to mitigate the negative influence of customer mistreatment on employees. Supervisory support climate is introduced as a second moderator, conceptualized and operationalized at a higher level in the present research. Our results imply that supervisory support climate is an effective factor that can resolve employees' common work problems. Essentially, the perceptions and behaviors of employees working in a team are inevitably influenced by some common factors. This study adopted the triangulation of quantitative questionnaire survey and qualitative follow-up interviews. The multilevel quantitative research design and analytical approach allowed us to scientifically clarify the extent to which the variance in employee perception/behavior is affected by the shared environmental factor, as well as the extent to which the variance in employee perception/behavior is affected by individual differences. The qualitative follow-up interviews helped us further confirm the importance of the customer mistreatment and the discrete emotions, employee reactions and two key moderators. Moreover, the triangulation analysis provides new insights of how to deal with different situations from both of hotel employee and management sides. This kind of triangulation analysis in this study is not limited to customer mistreatment, and it can be used in other contexts for further hotel research. Taken together, the present research advances our understanding of how individual differences and contextual factors collectively shape employees' idiosyncratic emotional and behavioral responses to customer mistreatment.

5.2. Practical implications

Our research indicates that employees react to customer mistreatment differently because of the different emotions they experience. In fact, individuals' negative emotions can be highly aroused, especially when the negative encounter is unexpected. In other words, if hotel employees can have a better understanding of how customer mistreatment occurs, and can be taught how to deal with it properly, they will receive less of an impact from each occurrence. In light of this, training is one good way to develop the employee's job knowledge regarding customer mistreatment. For example, the organization can adopt the role-playing method to simulate the kinds of uncivil customer behaviors which hotel frontline employees often face at work. Trainer demonstration and employee practice will better prepare employees psychologically, and can equip them with the necessary skills to handle impolite customers. We also encourage organizations to require hotel frontline employees to keep a work diary, so that they can collect more behavioral examples of customer mistreatment which can be used in employee training.

Our findings also show that supervisor intervention (i.e., supervisory support climate) can also help to reduce the negative impact of customer mistreatment on employees. Since supervisor support serves as a crucial coping resource, it would be better if employees can receive the supervisor's emotional and instrumental support on a regular basis. Hence, in addition to the routine performance meeting during the rating period, we suggest that supervisors conduct more frequent formal or informal meetings with employees to actively understand the work problems employees currently face, and provide immediate assistance. For example, organizations can implement management by walking around (MBWA), which requires supervisors to observe the work situations of hotel frontline employees by visiting them in an unstructured manner. This helps the supervisor to accurately identify the employee's problems at work and the kinds of help that are needed most.

5.3. Limitations, and directions for future research

Despite these strengths, our research has limitations that should be noted. While the current research design assessed the general perception of customer mistreatment and its subsequent outcomes at two different times about one month apart, (a) causal relationships among the study variables were unable to be confirmed yet; (b) how the episodes of customer mistreatment alter hotel employee's daily temporary fluctuations of emotional state and behaviors is still unknown. Therefore, future research may test the present research model using an experimental design, by manipulating the customer's behaviors and immediately measuring participant's reactions, to better evidence the causal links. Moreover, adopting an episodic approach allows researchers to examine the emotional and behavioral reactions in response to the specific customer mistreatment episode on the short-term basis, and to further compare whether the effects between customer mistreatment episode-acute reactions and chronic customer mistreatment-subsequent outcomes are different.

Additionally, while our study explored two outward-focused emotions (i.e., employee anger and frustration), inward-focused emotions such as guilt or shame warrant attention in future studies of customer mistreatment. It is possible that employees feel guilty or ashamed because they infer that their personal undesirable characteristics cause customer mistreatment. Particularly, research has suggested that guilt induces reparative behaviors (e.g. helping behaviors) which aim to repair the damaged relationship (Ilies et al., 2012; Liao, Yam, Johnson, Liu, & Song, 2018). In line with this notion, Yue et al. (2017) found that although customer mistreatment is associated with negative emotions, mistreated employees tend to engage in helping behaviors to cope with their negative feelings. Future research examining inward-focused emotions arising from customer mistreatment can help us expand our current understanding of employees' constructive reactions to customer mistreatment.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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Both authors contributed to this article equally.

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