



The relationship between customer incivility, restaurant frontline service employee burnout and turnover intention



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ABSTRACT

Employee turnover continues to represent one of the most significant challenges faced by the U.S. restaurant industry, and customer incivility is regarded as being related to this phenomenon. In order to obtain a better understanding about the relationships between customer incivility, restaurant frontline service employee burnout and their turnover, information was obtained from 228 frontline service employees working in 28 independent Florida-based restaurants. Employees provided details of their experiences and attitudes regarding customer incivility as well as information on their job burnout and turnover intention. Hierarchical linear modeling was used for data analysis. Results confirmed that customer incivility has a positive relationship with restaurant frontline service employee job burnout. Further, this study found that the relationship between customer incivility and turnover intention through job burnout was fully mediated. The moderating roles that organizational support and supervisory support play upon the relationships between customer incivility and burnout were also investigated. Results confirmed that organizational and supervisory support moderates the relationship between customer incivility and burnout. Managerial implications for developing effective employee management strategies are provided for restaurant managers.

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1. Introduction

Service-oriented businesses, including restaurants, frequently train their frontline service providers under the overemphasized philosophical position that “the customer is always right”, or “the customer is King” and that employees should “always provide service with a smile” (Rafaeli et al., 2012). Although uncivil customer behavior is endemically reported in various hospitality business situations (Aslan and Kozak, 2012), most existing academic literature has focused on how to increase customer satisfaction operating under the assumption that customers behave rationally. Therefore, frontline service industry employees are required to follow very strict organizational policies and regulations regarding how their emotions are expressed, even in situations involving customers whom are perceived to be acting in an uncivil manner (Sliter et al., 2010).

A recent research study (Human Performance, 2014) conducted a survey of 438 restaurant employees (servers, hosts, bartenders, cashiers, and managers) to examine their experience involving customer uncivil behavior. This study reports that most respondents disproportionately relate their high levels of stress to customers exhibiting rude or unpleasant behavior, often about situations in which the restaurant service provider has no control. This stressful workplace environment would be related to high levels of employee distress (Adams and Webster, 2013), psychological and job-specific strain (Wilson and Holmval, 2013), emotional exhaustion (Kern and Grandey, 2009; van Jaarsveld et al., 2010) and further associated with high employee turnover rates. As evidence, employee turnover rates specific to the U.S. restaurant industry continue to remain much higher (62.6%) annually, compared with the overall private sector turnover rate of 42.2% (Restaurantengine.com, 2014). This is an extremely critical issue for the U.S. restaurant industry, which must continuously invest revenue to recruit, select and train new employees that are replacing those former employees having terminated their restaurant frontline service positions (Mueller, 2011).

In consideration of this situation, recent academic literature has begun to pay attention to incivility that occurs when customers

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mistreat employees. While negative workplace behavior has been addressed in the existing organizational behavior literature, Kern and Grandey's (2009) study was the first attempt to encompass incivility by customers and focused on the negative impact of customer incivility upon employees. Incivility is defined as "low intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect" (Andersson and Pearson, 1999, p. 447). Research documents acts of customer incivility that includes situations where employees perceive customer rudeness such as when customers ignore employees and/or speak to employees in a disrespectful and/or insulting manner (Sliter et al., 2010; van Jaarsveld et al., 2010). Additional research suggests that uncivil customer behavior directed to employees may represent the most frequently experienced form of workplace mistreatment (Sliter et al., 2012).

Although less than ten years of scholarly attention has focused upon customer incivility, it has received growing interest as a research topic in a variety of industries including educational service and engineering firms (Adams and Webster, 2013), retail sales service (Hur et al., 2015; Wilson and Holmval, 2013), banking (Sliter et al., 2010, 2012) and insurance (Walker et al., 2014). However, despite insights from previous organization behavior research, past and current research appearing in the hospitality literature has neglected to investigate issues related to customer incivility when specifically applied within the context of restaurants and how these issues regarding customer incivility may be overcome.

To obtain a better understanding of customer incivility in the restaurant business setting, this study adopts the Conservation of Resource (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989). COR theory suggests that individuals attempt to acquire, maintain and protect their physical, emotional, social and psychological resources. Individuals being placed in situations where customer incivility occurs, at a minimum, feel distress, sadness, rejection, irrationality and hostility (Liu et al., 2008). In particular, frontline service employees are frequently exposed to situations involving customer incivility. Consequently, employee defense mechanisms must become enacted to guard and protect their personal resources as a direct result of customer incivility, often leaving them emotionally strained. Supporting this theory, this current study suggests that customer incivility may make restaurant employees consume their emotional and psychological resources, which represents job burnout and further results in employees leaving jobs.

Early research studies regarding job stress focused on a variety of factors including emotional support, organizational rewards and job conditions in order to examine how to alleviate employee stress levels (Kottke and Sharafinski, 1988; Shore and Shore, 1995). Subsequent studies have demonstrated that support from other individuals and/or organizations can buffer consequences related to employee stress (Andrews and Kacmar, 2001; Demerouti et al., 2014; Miner et al., 2012; Sakurai and Jex, 2012; Randall et al., 1999). Based upon this body of knowledge, our study expects to find that support from restaurant organizations and supervisors can play an important role to moderate workplace stress caused specifically by customer incivility.

With this in mind, the main study objectives are to investigate (a) the relationship between customer incivility and restaurant frontline service employee burnout and also, the mediating role burnout plays upon the relationship between customer incivility and employee turnover intention, and (b) the moderating role support by restaurant organizations and supervisors has upon the relationship between customer incivility and frontline service employee burnout. This study expects to discover that restaurants can develop and implement effective strategies to assist employees with burnout by controlling and managing their job stress related specifically to customer incivility.

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1. Customer incivility

Early incivility studies focused upon incivility from the standpoint of employee-to-employee interactions within the workplace (e.g., Cortina et al., 2001; Ben-Zur and Yagil, 2005), while more recent attention has been devoted to customer incivility (Bunk and Magley, 2013). Although customer behavior related to incivility can be seemingly innocuous, such uncivil behavior may represent an overwhelming situation to an employee involved with experiencing perceived customer incivility (Cortina et al., 2001; Bunk and Magley, 2013). Additionally, customer incivility could be looked upon by employees as being a daily hassle, or as part of the job expectations. In reality, a single incident of incivility might not be perceived as stressful, but an accumulation of perceived incivility incidents may lead to negative outcomes (Kern and Grandey, 2009; Sliter et al., 2012).

Existing research regarding customer incivility has been almost exclusively limited to the organizational behavior area. These studies provide evidence that customer incivility increases the emotional exhaustion of retail employees (Kern and Grandey, 2009) and the stress levels of bank tellers (Sliter et al., 2010). Significant effects of customer incivility were also found to increase stress levels of engineering firm employees (Adams and Webster, 2013) and department store sales employees (Hur et al., 2015), and was also responsible for contributing to bank teller absenteeism (Sliter et al., 2012). Other research studies found that employees who experience customer incivility may feel exhausted, and consequently misbehave toward their coworkers (van Jaarsveld et al., 2010; Walker et al., 2014).

As seen in Table 1, existing customer incivility literature focuses upon the identification of customer incivility and factors that negatively impact employee emotions and behavior. In particular, three studies found that racial identity among minorities (Kern and Grandey, 2009), coworker incivility (Sliter et al., 2012), entity incivility and negative affectivity (Walker et al., 2014) significantly increase the negative effect customer incivility has upon employees. However, no research study has yet to explore factors that may reduce the negative impact customer incivility has upon employees. Therefore, it is necessary to explore this research void with respect to restaurant frontline service employees.

2.2. The relationship between customer incivility and burnout

Adopting the Conservation of Resource (COR) theory, Kern and Grandey (2009), suggested that customer incivility can be regarded as a social stressor that can drain emotional and cognitive employee resources. Another incivility study found that it can increase employee job demands, requiring efforts to correct psychological resource depletion (van Jaarsveld et al., 2010). Generally, employee experiences involving the depletion of emotional and physical resources, represents job 'burnout' (Karatepe and Aleshinloye, 2009; Lee et al., 2012). Supporting this logic, it could be possible that customer incivility applied to the hospitality industry may also result in psychological resource depletion which could be considered a leading factor including employee burnout. Because restaurant frontline employees have frequent contact with customers compared with other industries, it makes them more prone to emotional burnout (Karatepe, 2015).

Originally, Maslach and Jackson (1981) suggested that burnout is a multidimensional concept comprised of three components: emotional exhaustion (feeling tired and fatigued), depersonalization (feeling callous and/or uncaring) and reduced accomplishment (a feeling of not accomplishing anything). Existing literature (van Jaarsveld et al., 2010; Sliter et al., 2012) focusing on the negative

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