



# Returning good for evil: A study of customer incivility and extra-role customer service

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Customer incivility  
Service encounters  
Extra-role customer service  
Work engagement

## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the conditions under which service employees can react positively after encountering customer incivility. Building on the work engagement theory, we hypothesize that customer incivility interacts with workplace social support (i.e., perceived supervisor and co-worker support) to influence work engagement, which in turn leads to extra-role customer service. We test our model within the context of hotels. The results of a two-wave survey with a sample of 198 frontline service employees provide support for most of the hypotheses. In particular, the findings show that employees encountering uncivil customer interactions provide extra-role customer service *only when* they have high (vs. low) supervisor support. Work engagement mediates the conditional effect of customer incivility on extra-role customer service. The results thus suggest that supervisors play a vital role in encouraging employees' positive reaction toward customer incivility. This work has notable implications for hospitality management research.

## 1. Introduction

Customer interaction is at the heart of everyday life of frontline hospitality employees. With ever increasing level of service expectations, customers can easily get upset at the slightest delay of service delivery, such as waiting to check-in, slow Wi-Fi, tardy room service, etc. Frontline service employees are usually the punching bags of the dissatisfied customers and become targets of customers' impolite and uncivil treatment (Cortina et al., 2001; Wilson and Holmval, 2013).

Customer incivility, a violation of social norms (e.g., respect and courtesy), is a mild but one of the most frequent hassles service employees experience on a daily basis (Kern and Grandey, 2009; Wilson and Holmval, 2013). More than 70 percent of employees have come across incidents of uncivil customers (Cortina et al., 2001; Sliter et al., 2010). This phenomenon is disconcerting given the wide array of deleterious outcomes to both service employees and organizations as a result of customer incivility (Sliter et al., 2010, 2012; Walker et al., 2014). To avoid negative impacts of customer incivility, organizations need to be vigilant about employees' reactions so that effective interventions can be designed (Cortina and Magley, 2009).

Since prior studies have primarily focused on the adverse consequences for targets of customer incivility, such as emotional exhaustion and burnout (e.g., Kern and Grandey, 2009; Sliter et al., 2010; Han et al., 2016), we know remarkably little about what factors may

fuel employees' positive reactions. This dearth is unfortunate because coping actions of service employees have been found to result in better service quality, positive word-of-mouth, and customer loyalty (Lewis and McCann, 2004). As such, it is vital for organizations to find ways to encourage their frontline employees to defuse potentially escalating situations by proactively working with customers, such as offering prompt assistance (Bettencourt and Brown, 1997; Hoffman et al., 1995; Mohr and Bitner, 1995). Prior research has also shown that some employees are willing and able to respond constructively to workplace hostility (Lam et al., 2018; Tepper et al., 2001). The first objective of this study is thus to investigate the conditions in which employees will provide constructive behaviors (i.e., extra-role customer service) despite being treated uncivilly. Extra-role customer service refers to employees' discretionary behaviors in serving customers that go beyond role requirements (Bettencourt and Brown, 1997). When dealing with difficult customers, providing extra-role customer service may help employees correct service failure and prevent negative word of mouth (Raub, 2008). For hospitality service employees, offering extra help to customers may ameliorate the already-heated situation and, in turn, enable them to achieve personal accomplishments at work. Therefore, going the extra mile for customers may prevent the aggravation or even the occurrence of customer incivility.

To shed more light on this phenomenon, our second objective is to examine under what situations and through which mechanism

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2019.03.004>

Received 14 April 2018; Received in revised form 12 December 2018; Accepted 5 March 2019

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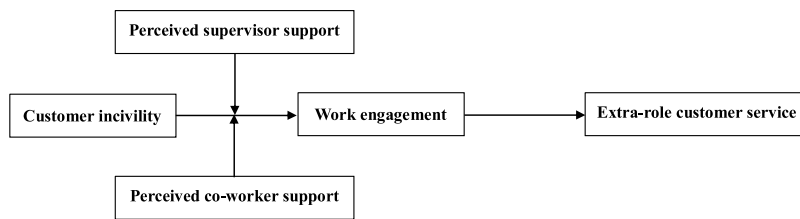


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework.

hospitality employees can react positively toward customer incivility. Social support is arguably one of the most investigated buffers against job strain (Bakker et al., 2004). As supervisors and co-workers represent two major work-related sources from which employees can acquire social support in the hospitality industry (Susskind et al., 2003), we investigate how both forms of social support will encourage employees to take initiatives to help customers. Guided by Kahn's (1990) work engagement theory, we propose that work engagement mediates the relationship between customer incivility and extra-role customer service under high rather than low supervisor and co-worker support. Fig. 1 illustrates our proposed moderated mediation model.

This study makes three contributions to hospitality management literature. First, customer incivility has caught considerable attention among scholars of workplace incivility due to its detrimental outcomes (Sliter et al., 2012; Walker et al., 2014). Employees' improper response toward customer incivility can result in a negative spiral and eventually lead to more service failure and damaged customer relationships for service organizations (Groth and Grandey, 2012; Porath and Pearson, 2009; Sliter et al., 2010; Van Jaarsveld et al., 2010). Since uncivil customers can turn an unpleasant experience into a major catastrophe (Hoffman et al., 1995), frontline service employees' constructive behaviors (e.g., service recoveries, customization, helping) can potentially minimize the occurrence of such catastrophic events by reinforcing high-quality service interactions with customers (Huang and Miao, 2016). By investigating positive outcomes such as extra-role customer service, our study extends the literature of customer incivility by devising strategies to improve the service quality of hospitality organizations and thus enriching understanding of whether and how service employees can turn incivility into civility.

Second, our study clarifies the conditions under which the positive reaction to customer incivility could emerge. Social support is a valuable source from which employees can acquire resources to engage in emotional labor (Skarlicki et al., 2016). According to Xanthopoulou et al. (2009), resources such as social support can be employed to alleviate the strain caused by work stressors (e.g., Mayo et al., 2012). On the other hand, interpersonal contact with supportive others can also help employees to devise constructive responses with demanding and threatening situations at work (Cohen and Wills, 1985; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). We are thus interested to know, with the presence of supervisors' and coworkers' support, whether employees can handle customer interactions more constructively after encountering customer incivility.

Third, while recent research has shown that work engagement is a distinct factor accounting for employees' positive work performance (e.g., Karatepe, 2013; Rich et al., 2010), relatively little is known about the boundary conditions in which work engagement is more likely to take place (Christian et al., 2011; Kang and Busser, 2018). Our study enriches such understanding by examining the effect of customer incivility on work engagement, especially when employees experience high supervisor and co-worker support.

## 2. Theory and hypotheses

### 2.1. Customer incivility

Customer incivility refers to "low-intensity deviant behavior, perpetrated by someone in a customer or client role, with ambiguous intent

to harm an employee, in violation of social norms of mutual respect and courtesy" (Sliter et al., 2010, p. 468). Compared with more overt forms of customer misbehaviors, such as customer mistreatment (e.g., physical aggression), which are openly malicious and more intense, customer incivility tends to be milder but more frequent (Schlipzand et al., 2016), and is referred to customer misbehaviors characterized by rudeness (e.g., rolling eyes; talking loudly) and disrespect (e.g., neglecting to say "thank you" or "please"; addressing a service employee inappropriately) (Andersson and Pearson, 1999; Porath and Pearson, 2009; Sliter and Jones, 2016; van Jaarsveld et al., 2010). Prior research has identified customer incivility to be the more minor form of customer misbehaviors and workplace aggression (Kern and Grandey, 2009; Porath and Pearson, 2009; Wilson and Holmval, 2013). In addition, a distinguishing characteristic of customer incivility is that the intention of inflicting harm is ambiguous "through the eyes of the instigator, the target, and/or the observers" (Andersson and Pearson, 1999, p. 456). Since the uncivil behaviors are not clearly or entirely intentional, customer incivility in this research is studied as the perception of the recipients of such acts.

While sometimes the inconsiderate customers do not intend to hurt service workers (e.g., by not offering compliments after receiving good services), frequent encounters with disrespectful and rude customers however have negative bearings on employees' outcomes (e.g., Han et al., 2016; Kern and Grandey, 2009). Empirical studies, for example, have shown employees' well-being (e.g., physical health) and work outcomes (e.g., service performance) to suffer after dealing with uncivil customers (Arnold and Walsh, 2015; Han et al., 2016; Kern & Grandey, 2009; Sliter et al., 2012). Furthermore, employees tend to react to customer incivility treatment by acting uncivilly towards other customers (van Jaarsveld et al., 2010; Walker et al., 2014). Although these studies show us the possible negative outcomes of customer incivility, we know little regarding whether and when service employees can manage customer interaction more constructively after encountering customer incivility.

While few employees welcome workplace mistreatment such as customer incivility, when it happens, most may not want the situation to change "from bad to worse". Some will manage the demands by increasing their efforts and maintaining their performance level (van Jaarsveld et al., 2010). Others may invest their energy to cope with the stress as a result of the encounter using constructive problem-solving (Zapf and Gross, 2001), perspective taking (Grandey et al., 2004), constructive resistance (Greenbaum et al., 2013), etc. As such, present research seeks to remedy the gaps in the literature by linking customer incivility to work engagement and extra-role customer service, as well as exploring the conditions that fuel employees' engagement.

### 2.2. Theoretical framework of work engagement

To understand why employees direct their attention and energies to the performance of work roles, Kahn (1990) developed a theory on the motivation for work engagement. Kahn, 1990 (p. 694) conceptualized work engagement as the harnessing of employees' selves to their work roles, or the extent to which people "employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performance." Three focal psychological conditions that determine the willingness to engage in work are meaningfulness, safety, and availability (Kahn, 1990; Lam et al., 2016; Rich et al., 2010).

### 2.3. Social support

Social support in organizations can stem from both supervisors and co-workers, infusing a positive work environment with emotional resources, instrumental assistance, and recognition (Karatepe et al., 2010). Employees usually have distinctive relationships with their supervisors versus their peers in terms of exchange content and frequency (Guchait et al., 2014). Susskind et al. (2003) argue that the major difference between perceived supervisor and co-worker support is that the former involves hierarchical differences and supervisors are in charge of directing and evaluating subordinates (Eisenberger et al., 2002). Conversely, interactions between employees and co-workers are less likely to be influenced by differing status, which allows them to experience warmth and friendliness and vocalize troubles more freely (Babin and Boles, 1996; Turner et al., 2010).

Perceived supervisor support represents the extent to which employees believe that their supervisors appreciate, value, and care about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 2002). Supervisors usually offer support to subordinates by offering constructive feedback and helping them fulfill their job responsibilities (Bakker et al., 2004; Guchait et al., 2014; Li et al., 2012; Liaw et al., 2010). By contrast, perceived co-worker support refers to the extent to which employees have confidence that their co-workers will assist them in executing service-based duties through the provision of task-related information and care (Loi et al., 2014; Rousseau et al., 2009; Susskind et al., 2003). Co-worker support, which includes behaviors such as showing empathy, venting emotions together, and helping each other (Liaw et al., 2010; Rousseau et al., 2009), may enhance employees' sense of comfort by fulfilling needs for esteem, affiliation, and belongingness (Tafvelin et al., 2014).

### 2.4. Interaction effect of customer incivility and social support on work engagement

According to the work engagement theory, employees are able to place increasing depths of themselves and direct energies into role performance when they see clear benefits and protective guarantees, and believe themselves to possess necessary resources (Kahn, 1990, 1992). Highly engaged employees are more eager and active, and handle their jobs with mastery and learning orientation (Einarsen et al., 2018). Crawford et al. (2010) argue that job resources including social support are important for employees to achieve their goals and stimulate personal growth. We thus expect customer incivility to interact with perceived supervisor and co-worker support, to drive work engagement by heightening the perceptions of the three focal conditions of work engagement: availability, meaningfulness, and safety.

First, psychological availability represents a person's belief about the amount of resources he or she has to perform a work role (Kahn, 1990). If employees have confidence in their access to necessary resources, they will then be more willing and able to immerse themselves in the work roles to overcome challenges (Crawford et al., 2010). Supportive supervisors provide valuable resources to subordinates through instrumental aid and emotional concern for handling difficult service encounters (Carlson and Perrewé, 1999; Sakurai and Jex, 2012). For example, service employees confronting uncivil customers need to recognize their actual demands and find solutions immediately. If customers' requirements are difficult to satisfy, service employees will need to manage customers' expectations by showing what is available and making agreements on the shortfall (Bailey, 1994). Because supervisors are more experienced, they can offer training to bolster subordinates' perceived abilities and coping strategies under those circumstances (Babin and Boles, 1996; Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2013). In addition to instrumental aid, supervisors can provide psychological resources to subordinates by offering appreciation and showing concern with their well-being (Babin and Boles, 1996). A supportive supervisor can also empower subordinates to make necessary decisions to resolve difficult situations (Corsun and Enz, 1999). For example, in the hotel context, an employee who has the discretion to authorize a refund, a free room

upgrade and so on, is more likely to handle customer incivility efficiently than one who has to wait for supervisor's approval. In addition to supervisors, employees may obtain useful knowledge and information from colleagues to deal with difficult customers (Joiner, 2007; Karatepe, 2012). For example, supportive colleagues often share their experience in resolving work problems for which solutions are not readily available (Guchait et al., 2014). A group of supportive colleagues also fosters an environment in which grievances and worries can be shared freely and sympathy is provided (Guchait et al., 2014). Such a work context has the potential to refuel the energy level of employees and enables them to dedicate themselves to interaction with customers after uncivil service encounters.

Second, according to Kahn (1990), psychological meaningfulness fosters work engagement because of the possible return after individuals have invested their energies. Frankl (1992) suggests that, in general, individuals are motivated to attain meaning in their jobs, such that work-related challenges have the potential to promote meaningfulness and engagement (Crawford et al., 2010; May et al., 2004). When employees perform difficult but challenging work, they will also experience a sense of competence and learning (Kahn, 1990). Supportive supervisors give service employees confidence that their efforts and contributions in managing demanding customers will be appreciated and rewarded (Eisenberger et al., 2002). Coworkers can further help others appreciate and internalize core values of their jobs, and raise their psychological identification and involvement in their service's work roles (Chiaburu and Harrison, 2008). Frequent exchanges with coworkers promote a sense of belonging so that employees may believe that their contributions will be appreciated by the groups (May et al., 2004). As a result, hospitality service employees under high supervisor and co-worker support may be motivated to devote their energy when handling demanding work such as customer incivility.

Third, psychological safety refers to a person's belief that he or she can express his or her self without fearing the possible negative outcomes (Kahn, 1990). Since gauging the intent of uncivil customers is difficult, employees are likely to experience uncertainty when interacting with such customers. Receiving adequate support from supervisors can assure employees that they will be assisted and protected when exposed to these challenging situations (Deci and Ryan, 1987; Edmondson, 1999), such that they may feel autonomous and safe to deal with customers' uncivil treatment. Previous research indicates that service employees may feel threatened when working alone, without immediate access to helpful others (Boyd, 2002). The presence and assistance of co-workers are thus crucial in maintaining a safe and supportive working environment in the hotel context (Turner et al., 2010) so that employees will feel more confident during their interaction with uncivil customers.

Compared with low customer incivility, service interactions characterized by high customer incivility demand greater attention and efforts as customers with poor attitudes are signals of dissatisfaction and potential service problems (Groth and Grandey, 2012). In other words, the task of handling uncivil customers imposes greater challenges to service employees (van Jaarsveld et al., 2010), which according to Kahn (1992), describes the context in which employees with abundant job resources will be more psychologically present and readily summon their attention to their work. Thus,

**Hypothesis 1a.** *Perceived supervisor support moderates the effect of customer incivility on work engagement, such that the effect is positive only when the level of perceived supervisor support is high (vs. low).*

**Hypothesis 1b.** *Perceived co-worker support moderates the effect of customer incivility on work engagement, such that the effect is positive only when the level of perceived co-worker support is high (vs. low).*

### 2.5. Work engagement and extra-role customer service

Building on prior research on work engagement (e.g., Crawford et al., 2010; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004), we further expect work

engagement to be related to extra-role customer service. Work engagement as a motivational state is activated by simultaneous investment of cognitive, emotional, and physical energies and can increase employees' willingness and autonomy to step outside the bounds of their formally defined jobs (Rich et al., 2010). Empirical evidence shows that work engagement contributes to extra-role customer service (Karatepe, 2013) and personal initiative (Hakanen et al., 2008).

First, work engagement is an indicator of employees' willingness to take on a wider array of discretionary behaviors to achieve their own goals (Christian et al., 2011; Rich et al., 2010). Kahn (1990) also suggests that engaged employees are likely to have a broader conception of their work role and thus may feel worthwhile to expend extra efforts to benefit the organization at large and the people within it (Christian et al., 2011; Rich et al., 2010). Second, because extra-role service is often discretionary, employees may be reluctant to start and/or persist in it when they are in a sub-optimal state (Bakker et al., 2004). Work engagement in this case provides a mental frame of having sufficient physical, cognitive, and emotional energies that enables hospitality employees to help customers proactively. Thus:

**Hypothesis 2.** *Work engagement and extra-role customer service are positively related.*

While interacting with customer demands attention in the hospitality context, immersing oneself in serving difficult customers is even more challenging and requires considerable efforts (Karatepe and Olugbade, 2009; van Jaarsveld et al., 2010). We have thus previously proposed that compared with low customer incivility, employee engagement will be stronger under high customer incivility if there is sufficient perceived supervisor and co-worker support.

Engagement theorists believe that engaged employees are more eager and able to contribute to organizations, more open and empathetic to others, and more capable of achieving personal growth (Bakker and Leiter, 2010; Kahn, 1992). We therefore further expect that the more engaged employees are under high supervisor and co-worker support, the more likely they will develop proactive strategies in interacting with customers (e.g., to provide extra-role customer service). Without the support from the supervisor and co-worker, however, service employees will be less able to do so due to low engagement. Taken together, we propose:

**Hypothesis 3a.** *Perceived supervisor support moderates the indirect effect of customer incivility on extra-role customer service through work engagement, such that the indirect effect is positive only when the level of perceived supervisor support is high (vs. low).*

**Hypothesis 3b.** *Perceived co-worker support moderates the indirect effect of customer incivility on extra-role customer service through work engagement, such that the indirect effect is positive only when the level of perceived co-worker support is high (vs. low).*

### 3. Research Methods

#### 3.1. Data and sample

We conducted a two-wave survey for this research to collect data from service employees working in six integrated resorts in Macau, People's Republic of China. The hospitality industry involves a high degree of face-to-face interaction between service employees and customers, so it is an ideal context to evaluate our hypotheses (Karatepe and Kilic, 2007). We distributed questionnaires to the target participants (i.e., full-time service employees) through the assistance of human resources departments and administrators in frontline and customer services departments. The cover letter of the survey assured employees that their participation was voluntary and that their responses would be kept confidential and used for research purposes only. Moreover, it provided contact information of the researchers in case

participants had any inquiries. Follow-up calls were made two to three weeks after the first- and second-round survey distributions. To solicit participation and boost the response rate of the second-round survey, participants who completed both rounds were rewarded with a cash coupon valued at MOP40 (approximately USD 5.00).

At Time 1, we sent the questionnaire to 420 target participants to measure their demographic information, perceived supervisor support, perceived co-worker support, and customer incivility. In total, 263 employees returned completed questionnaires, at a response rate of 63 percent. Three months later (Time 2), we sent another questionnaire to the 263 employees again and received 198 valid questionnaires, at a response rate of 70 percent. In this second phase, we asked the employees to rate their work engagement and extra-role customer service.

#### 3.2. Measures

All survey items were written in Chinese following the translation-back translation procedures outlined by Brislin (1983). Except for the demographic variables, customer incivility, and extra-role customer service, all items were measured on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree).

##### 3.2.1. Customer incivility

We measured the frequency of uncivil customer encounters with three items developed by van Veldhoven and Meijman (1994) and Bakker et al. (2005) on a 6-point scale (1 = never, 6 = always). An example item is "I have to deal with clients who do not treat me with the appropriate respect and politeness" (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.88$ ).

##### 3.2.2. Work engagement

We assessed work engagement with an 18-item scale adopted from Rich et al. (2010). Following Rich et al. (2010), work engagement was measured as an average of eighteen items so that it reflects the investment of one's physical, cognitive, and emotional energy in work role. Example items are "I devote a lot of energy to my job", "I try my hardest to perform well on my job" (physical), "At work, my mind is focused on my job", "At work, I devote a lot of attention to my job" (cognitive), and "I am proud of my job" (emotional) (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.91$ ).

##### 3.2.3. Extra-role customer service

Employees rated the frequency of their extra-role customer service on a 5-item scale developed by Bettencourt and Brown (1997) on a 6-point scale (1 = never, 6 = always). Example items include "I voluntarily assist customers even if it means going beyond job requirements", "I willingly go out of the way to make a customer satisfied" and "I frequently go out of the way to help a customer" (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.88$ ).

##### 3.2.4. Perceived supervisor support

Participants rated their perceived supervisor support using the 7-item scale established by Eisenberger et al. (2002). Example items include "Help is available from the supervisor when I have a problem" and "The supervisor really cares about my well-being" (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.81$ ).

##### 3.2.5. Perceived co-worker support

We measured the level of perceived co-worker support with four items adopted from the scale of Caplan et al. (1975). Example items are "My co-workers will help when things get tough" and "My co-workers make my work life easier" (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.85$ ).

##### 3.2.6. Control variables

Consistent with previous studies on service performance, we controlled for age group, gender, and length of service in our analyses (Chow et al., 2006; Liao and Chuang, 2004).



### 3.3. Analytical strategy

We employed LISREL 8.70 to estimate the fit of the measurement model by confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Bentler (1985) recommends maintaining a proper ratio between the sample size and the number of items in order to derive reliable estimates of the parameters. Compared with item-level data, CFA models based on parceled items are considered to be more parsimonious, have less correlated residuals (Little et al., 2002) and have more reliable indicators (Hall et al., 1999). Based on Brooke et al. (1988) procedures, we reduced the number of observed indicators to three items each according to the factor loadings of the variables from the CFA. Specifically, we averaged the items with the highest and lowest loadings to form the first indicator; we then averaged items with the second highest and lowest loadings and so forth. A reasonable overall model fit was evaluated through the indicators of incremental fit index (IFI), Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), the comparative fit index (CFI) (Bentler and Bonett, 1980), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) (Browne and Cudeck, 1992).

We employed SPSS 19.0 to test the hypotheses. To evaluate the moderating roles of perceived supervisor support and perceived co-worker support, following Aiken and West's (1991) approach, we mean-centered all independent variables to reduce multicollinearity. The moderating effect is supported when the beta coefficient of the interaction term (customer incivility  $\times$  perceived supervisor support/perceived co-worker support) is significant. In Hypotheses 3a and 3b, we predicted that the hypothesized indirect (mediation) effect would be conditional on the level of perceived supervisor and co-worker support. We used the SPSS PROCESS macro (Model 7) with 1000 bootstrapped samples to derive bias-corrected confidence intervals, to evaluate the significance of the conditional indirect effects on the basis of Edwards and Lambert's (2007) first-stage moderated mediation model.

### 4. Analyses and results

The CFA results indicated that the five-factor measurement model (i.e., customer incivility, perceived supervisor support, perceived co-worker support, work engagement, and extra-role customer service) had a good fit ( $\chi^2(80) = 116.76$ , IFI = 0.98, TLI = 0.98, CFI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.042). We compared the five-factor measurement model with the one-factor model and obtained a significant chi-square difference ( $\Delta\chi^2(10) = 1761.96$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that respondents were able to distinguish the measures of our constructs.

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations among the variables. Cronbach's alpha values of the independent, mediator, moderator, and dependent variables were between 0.81 and 0.91. The mean of customer incivility was 3.97 with a 6-point Likert scale, which shows that such interactions were common among our sample respondents. As expected, extra-role customer service was

**Table 2**

Customer incivility and extra-role customer service: the mediating role of work engagement and the moderating role of perceived supervisor and co-worker support.

|                                    | Work engagement |         |         | Extra-role customer service |         |
|------------------------------------|-----------------|---------|---------|-----------------------------|---------|
|                                    | Model 1         | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4                     | Model 5 |
| Intercept                          | 4.15***         | 3.86*** | 2.51*** | 3.43***                     | 1.14    |
| <i>Control variables</i>           |                 |         |         |                             |         |
| Age group                          | .09             | .09*    | .11*    | -.05                        | -.10    |
| Gender                             | -.03            | -.02    | .03     | .11                         | .13     |
| Length of service                  | -.03            | -.04    | -.04    | .08                         | .10*    |
| <i>Independent variable</i>        |                 |         |         |                             |         |
| Customer incivility                |                 | .07     | .07     | .11*                        | .06     |
| <i>Mediator</i>                    |                 |         |         |                             |         |
| Work engagement                    |                 |         |         |                             | .57***  |
| <i>Moderator</i>                   |                 |         |         |                             |         |
| Perceived supervisor support (PSS) |                 |         | .14*    |                             | .00     |
| Perceived co-worker support (PCS)  |                 |         | .16*    |                             | .01     |
| <i>Interaction</i>                 |                 |         |         |                             |         |
| Customer incivility $\times$ PSS   |                 |         | .11*    |                             | .04     |
| Customer incivility $\times$ PCS   |                 |         | -.06    |                             | -.01    |
| R <sup>2</sup>                     | .02             | .04     | .15     | .04                         | .22     |
| Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>            | .00             | .02     | .11     | .02                         | .18     |
| F-statistic                        | 1.22            | 1.87    | 4.02*** | 2.00                        | 5.50*** |
| R <sup>2</sup> change              |                 | .02     | .11     |                             | .17     |
| F-statistic change                 |                 | 3.77    | 5.98*** |                             | 8.00*** |

Note. N = 198 (missing data were handled with listwise deletion). Unstandardized regression coefficients were reported.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$  (two-tailed tests).

positively correlated with work engagement ( $r = 0.43$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Table 2 reports the results of the mediating and moderating regression tests. Hypothesis 1a states that perceived supervisor support moderates the relationship between customer incivility and work engagement. The results presented in Model 3 of Table 2 reveal that perceived supervisor support significantly and positively moderated the relationship between customer incivility and work engagement ( $\beta = 0.11$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

Following Aiken and West's (1991) procedure, we then plotted the interaction effect of (high and low perceived supervisor support at one standard deviation above and below the mean (see Fig. 2). A simple slope analysis (Aiken and West, 1991; Bauer and Curran, 2005) shows that at high levels of perceived supervisor support, the simple slope was positive and significant ( $\gamma = 0.15$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), while at low levels of perceived supervisor support, the simple slope was not significant ( $\gamma = -0.01$ ,  $ns$ ). These results support Hypothesis 1.

**Table 1**

Means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliabilities for all variables.

| Measurement Item                | Mean | SD   | 1      | 2    | 3    | 4      | 5     | 6     | 7      | 8     |
|---------------------------------|------|------|--------|------|------|--------|-------|-------|--------|-------|
| 1. Age group                    | 3.66 | 1.03 | –      |      |      |        |       |       |        |       |
| 2. Gender                       | 1.49 | .50  | -.09   | –    |      |        |       |       |        |       |
| 3. Length of service            | 3.48 | 1.37 | .38*** | .06  | –    |        |       |       |        |       |
| 4. Perceived supervisor support | 4.01 | .72  | .01    | -.02 | -.02 | (.81)  |       |       |        |       |
| 5. Perceived co-worker support  | 4.43 | .73  | -.15*  | -.11 | -.07 | .44*** | (.85) |       |        |       |
| 6. Customer incivility          | 3.97 | 1.19 | -.07   | -.06 | .01  | -.02   | .12   | (.88) |        |       |
| 7. Work engagement              | 4.31 | .65  | .12    | -.04 | -.00 | .26*** | .25** | .14*  | (.91)  |       |
| 8. Extra-role customer service  | 4.10 | .90  | -.01   | .06  | .12  | .11    | .13   | .18*  | .43*** | (.88) |

Variables 1–6 were measured at Time 1; variables 7–8 were measured at Time 2, approximately three months later.

n = 263 for correlations involving variables 1–6, n = 198 for correlations involving variables 7–8.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$  (two-tailed tests).

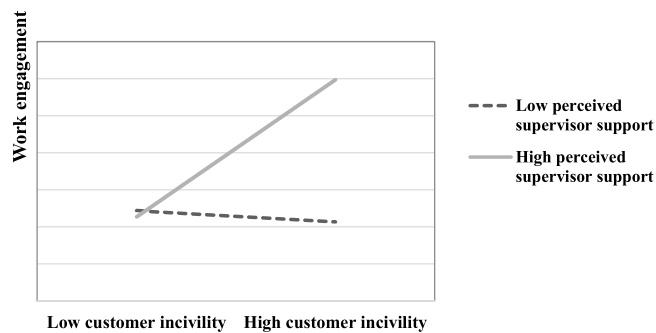


Fig. 2. Perceived supervisor support as a moderator on the relationship between customer incivility and work engagement.

Hypothesis 1b proposes that perceived co-worker support moderates the relationship between customer incivility and work engagement. Model 3 of Table 2 indicates that the moderation effect of perceived co-worker support on the relationship between customer incivility and work engagement was not statistically significant ( $\beta = -0.06$ , *ns*). Thus, Hypothesis 1b was not supported.

Hypothesis 2 proposes a positive relationship between work engagement and extra-role customer service. According to Model 5 in Table 2, work engagement was significantly related to extra-role customer service ( $\beta = 0.57$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), in support of Hypothesis 2. Hypothesis 3a predicts that perceived supervisor support moderates the indirect effect of customer incivility on extra-role customer service through work engagement. As the bootstrap confidence intervals show, the conditional indirect effect was positive and significant at high perceived supervisor support (indirect effect = 0.09; 95% confidence interval = 0.027 to 0.167) but not significant at low perceived supervisor support (indirect effect = -0.01; 95% confidence interval = -0.090 to 0.049). Thus, Hypothesis 3a was supported. As moderation is a necessary condition for a conditional indirect effect to arise, Hypothesis 3b was not supported, as the interaction term was not significant ( $\beta = -0.06$ , *ns*).

## 5. Discussion

Customer incivility is ubiquitous in the hospitality industry. Unless employees are able to react constructively toward uncivil customer encounters, such daily hassle can be costly to organizations (Walker et al., 2014). Our study investigates the conditions under which employees can provide sustained efforts to handle customer incivility proactively. Consistent with our hypotheses, the findings provide evidence that under high perceived supervisor support, customer incivility is positively associated with extra-role customer service, and work engagement mediates the indirect effect. Perceived co-worker support received no such support however.

### 5.1. Theoretical implications

The findings offer several meaningful theoretical contributions to the literature on customer incivility, work engagement, and social support in the workplace. First, compared with studies focusing on either the positive reactions triggered by positive service environment (e.g., Tsaor and Lin, 2004) or the negative reactions to emotionally taxing encounters (Walker et al., 2014), our study is among the first to provide empirical evidence on the conditions under which service employees can react positively in the face of customer incivility. Arnold and Walsh (2015) found that under transformational leadership, employees tended to re-appraise customer incivility as a less stressful experience. While they expected that leaders may help employees to “perceive customer incivility as a challenge with potential benefits” (p. 368) and subsequently to “interpret customer incivility in a positive way” (p. 373), their study

offered no empirical evidence of such conjecture. Our study shows the specific role of perceived supervisor support to be the condition of when employees could react constructively toward customer incivility. This finding extends current thinking on interpersonal incivility by suggesting that the negative spiral of incivility can be halted (Andersson and Pearson, 1999). While not all customer incivility incidents will be handled properly, our results reveal the proper condition when employees are able to break the possible negative spiral by engaging with customers in a constructive manner.

Second, previous research indicated that the findings of moderating effects of social support were rather tenuous, inconsistent, and unclear (Beehr et al., 2003). Scholars have thus called for a more thorough examination of context in resolving these inconsistent findings (Beehr et al., 2003). Our study adds to the literature by investigating the roles of social support in managing customer incivility in the context of hospitality. In addition, Beehr et al. (2003, p.220) described social support as an enigma that “the specific ways in which (social support) might work have remained a mystery”. It is also not clear which form of social support is more effective in facilitating employees’ service performance. Our analyses show that perceived supervisor support (but not perceived co-worker support) significantly interacted with customer incivility to promote extra-role customer service through engagement.

A possible explanation for the non-significant result of perceived co-worker support is that these two types of social support have different functions in controlling employees’ reactions toward incivility. De Boer et al. (2011) proposed a framework consisting of two forms of self-control: “start” control, which is a reflective process fueled by concentration in order to initiate desirable behavior; and “stop” control, which is a reflexive process fueled by calmness to inhibit problematic behavior. Supportive supervisors help employees concentrate on constructive behaviors by offering instrumental assistance, communicating positive regard, and enhancing their customer orientation (Eisenberger et al., 2002; Liaw et al., 2010). By contrast, co-workers’ support may be characterized more by its calming and comforting nature (e.g., chatting, showing sympathy). As a result, perceived supervisor support boosts beneficial behavior (i.e., extra-role customer service) as a constructive coping response, while perceived co-worker support may be more helpful in buffering negative impacts such as instigated incivility and withdrawal behaviors. We thus encourage future studies to build on the framework of self-control to examine the distinct roles of supervisors and co-workers in managing customer incivility.

Third, given the positive effects of work engagement (Halbesleben, 2010), it is important to investigate factors that can enhance employees’ engagement. Our findings illustrate that while resources such as supervisor support are conducive to sustain one’s engagement, the job nature itself is also important to understand when engagement will take place (e.g., the need to interact with demanding and rude customers). Our study thus answers Crawford et al.’s (2010) call for clarifying the conditions in which job demands will prompt work engagement. With adequate supervisor support, it is possible that employees may appraise customer incivility as a controllable challenge rather than a hindrance, such that they are more willing to channel their efforts to addressing customers’ needs actively.

### 5.2. Practical implications

Our study also provides several practical implications for hospitality management. Frontline service employees play a pivotal role in delivering high-quality service but are often subjected to uncivil behaviors in service encounters. Our findings indicate that uncivil encounters do not always translate into negative outcomes. By obtaining sufficient supervisor support, frontline employees who frequently deal with uncivil customers can mobilize their cognitive, physical, and emotional energies to react positively.

Organizations in the hospitality industry may consider further reminding supervisors of their potential influence on subordinates’

engagement and encouraging them to provide adequate instrumental and psychological support to assist their subordinates. More specifically, organizations and supervisors can debrief emotional jobs in a more positive way to their frontline staff (e.g., helping subordinates to reframe unpleasant service encounters as challenge stressors rather than hindrance stressors). They can also consider developing subordinates' problem-solving skills and cultivating a safe work climate. Clear guidance from supervisors may reduce the ambiguity regarding how to respond to customer incivility, e.g., offering an indication of what type of behavior is appropriate, and, in turn, help employees prevent resource loss (Huang and Miao, 2016). Furthermore, consistent with Kahn's (1990) theory of engagement, hospitality managers should consider transmitting psychological resources to subordinates by communicating and showing empathy (Zellars and Perrewé, 2001), being regularly present in the front-line service areas and be clearly visible to their subordinates (Han et al., 2016).

### 5.3. Limitations and future research directions

This study has several limitations that must be considered. First, we conducted the survey in the hotel industry in Macau, which limits the generalizability of our findings to other contexts. Future research could use non-hotel samples and areas outside Macau to test whether our findings are supported. Second, all our variables were assessed via self-reports, and thus common method variance may have affected the observed relationships (Podsakoff et al., 2003). While the results of the CFA suggest that respondents could discriminate among constructs, future research might invite other informants such as supervisors and co-workers to rate extra-role customer service to alleviate this potential bias. Third, we divided the data collection procedure into two periods. While such design helps to deal with common method bias, it cannot completely rule out reverse causality among the variables. Future research employing a longitudinal design can capture the dynamic nature of the proposed causal relationships over time. In addition, an experimental design would also help establish the causality of the relationships.

Given the utmost importance of employees' extra-role customer service in enhancing customer relationships in the hospitality industry, this study contributes to extant research by demonstrating the link between customer incivility and extra-role customer service through work engagement. It further highlights the high levels of perceived supervisor support as a crucial boundary condition in strengthening the relationship. We hope our findings provide an impetus for further investigations into the bright side of customer incivility.

### Acknowledgement

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. We thank Xenia Cheng for her efforts in collecting this data and conducting preliminary analyses for this paper.

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