

THE INFLUENCE OF CUSTOMER INCIVILITY ON HOTEL FRONTLINE EMPLOYEES' RESPONSES AND SERVICE SABOTAGE: DOES CO-WORKER SUPPORT MATTER?

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Abstract: Customer incivility poses a difficulty for service industries since employees' negative responses to such customers may threaten the organization's success. Service industries implement stringent display guidelines and keep an eye on how Frontline Employees' Responses (FLEs) engage with customers. This study aims to investigate the impact of customer incivility on FLEs' negative responses and service sabotage, and to evaluate the moderating effect of co-worker support. The data is collected from 386 Sharm El-Sheikh hotel employees. The PLS-SEM results revealed that customer incivility positively affects service sabotage, FLEs rumination, and retaliation intention. Similarly, the study findings proved that FLEs' rumination and retaliation intention positively affect service sabotage behavior. Accordingly, both FLEs' rumination and retaliation intention, based on the results, succeeded in mediating the linkage between customer incivility and service sabotage behavior. In addition, the current study strived to use co-worker support as a strategy to mitigate customer incivility consequences by investigating its influence as a moderator on the relationships of customer incivility towards both FLEs' rumination and retaliation intention, and the result demonstrated that co-worker support succeeded in mitigating the customer incivility negative impacts. The study's results broaden our understanding of the effect of customer incivility on two different types of employee responses (psychological and behavioral). The practical contributions recommend the need to train FLEs to give them sufficient experience and skills to deal with customer incivility behaviors, and mutual support behaviors must be developed among workers.

Keywords: customer incivility, employees' responses, co-worker support, service sabotage, hotel frontline employees

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INTRODUCTION

People tend to respond more positively to individuals who exhibit polite and courteous behavior compared to those who demonstrate uncivilized and impolite conduct. This inclination originates from the innate self-defense mechanism inherent in human nature (Mason, 1994; van Quaquebeke et al., 2009). Conversely, incivility can be described as low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms of mutual respect. Uncivil behaviors are typically rude and discourteous, indicating a lack of consideration for others (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Shoukat et al., 2024). Customer incivility can trigger a desire for retaliation or revenge against the offender, particularly in service industries where the offender is the customer and the victim is the employee (Hu et al., 2017). Such retaliation adversely impacts the quality of service and thereby customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction serves as the guidelines

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imposed by the hospitality sector to uphold service quality. The nature of the hospitality industry creates a barrier that inhibits frontline employees (FLEs) from expressing dissatisfaction with a particular behavior. Consequently, various reactions are provoked from the employee and manifested in different forms, adversely impacting the quality of service, customer satisfaction, and the psychological well-being of FLEs (Koopmann et al., 2015).

Customer incivility (CI) can be defined as “the low-quality interpersonal treatment that employees receive from their customers during service interactions” (Koopmann et al., 2015: 213). Such incivility deteriorates the psychological wellbeing of FLEs, resulting in a downgrade in service quality and consequently a decrease in customer loyalty due to their dissatisfaction with the provided services (Koopmann et al., 2015). These responses greatly harm the performance and eventually the profitability of the service enterprise. Several hospitality research focused on the antecedents and the triggering conditions of the CI towards FLEs, as well as their effects and consequences (Cortina et al., 2017; Gong et al., 2014; Kadić-Maglajlić et al., 2024). Nevertheless, there is a lack of studies and empirical evidence on the nature and various responses that the FLEs can manifest as a result of being subjected to CI. Also, limited research investigated how negative responses of FLEs can affect the business, work environment, guest experience, and the FLEs’ well-being (Myrden & Kelloway, 2015). Perceived co-worker support refers to the employees’ realization of their co-workers’ practical and emotional support (Ng & Sorensen, 2008). Previous studies indicated that co-worker support can have a significant influence on employees’ working actions such as knowledge sharing (Lee et al., 2015). Moreover, strong professional relationships in the work environment can be used as strategy to lessen stress and work-related problems (Park et al., 2016; Tews et al., 2013). So, further research is required to understand how employees can benefit from the support of their co-worker to alleviate the consequences of customer incivility (Ng & Sorensen, 2008; Irawan et al., 2024; Srivastava et al., 2024).

The theory of social exchange, one of the key theories of social behavior, conceptualizes societal interaction as a process of exchange (Honeycutt, 1981). According to this theory, the exchange of benefits between two parties fosters social relations in organizations and serves as transactional platforms (Blau, 2017; Cropanzano et al., 1997; Moorman & Byrne, 2005). When service staff witnesses disrespectful behavior from customers, they feel mistreated and become driven to seek revenge. A fundamental reciprocal response, often characterized as “tit for tat” involves retaliating against the individual who caused harm (Skarlicki et al., 2008). This constitutes a significant breach of the service guidelines which mandate that clients should receive professional and courteous treatment. Instead, it typically results in compromised service as a means of seeking equality (Solomon et al., 2015). Likewise, this perspective aligns with the theory of organizational (in) justice, which asserts that individuals often react to perceived unfairness directly (Malatesta & Byrne, 1997; Masterson et al., 2000). When employees perceive unfair treatment from the organization, they may respond by exhibiting negative behaviors towards the organization, such as diminishing their job performance or disengaging in corporate citizenship activities (Moorman et al., 1998; Rupp & Cropanzano, 2002; Hussein et al., 2024; Skarlicki & Folger, 1997; Zellars et al., 2002). Accordingly, employees who encounter unfair treatment from a colleague, manager, representative, or customer may respond with retaliatory actions toward them (Bies et al., 1997; Jawahar, 2002; Jones, 2009; van Jaarsveld et al., 2010).

Previous studies on customer incivility (CI) have predominantly focused on the hotel industry in specific regions and ignored diverse geographical regions and culture contexts (Bani-Melhem et al., 2020; Cheng et al., 2020). Cultural disparities may contribute to employees’ engagement in retaliatory behavior toward customers (Bedi, 2012; Boukis et al., 2020; Sliter et al., 2012; Elnasr et al., 2021; Obradović, 2024). Likewise, most studies have primarily addressed the direct and indirect effects of CI on employees’ job satisfaction, work effort, and turnover intentions, and neglected the reactions or responses of FLEs toward uncivil customers (Sloan, 2012; Walker et al., 2017), including the acts of service disruption in retaliation against these customers (Abubakar & Arasli, 2016; Cheng et al., 2020; Skarlicki et al., 2016). Moreover, Boukis et al. (2020) suggested that support from co-workers could significantly alleviate the adverse effects of CI on the psychological and behavioral responses of frontline employees (FLEs). Thus, employees’ desires for revenge and retaliatory actions may be influenced by co-workers’ support of encounters with rude customers (Bedi, 2012; Khanam & Tarab, 2024).

Hence, this study aims to investigate how and when employees’ perceptions of supportive co-worker behavior reduce their tendencies to ruminate and retaliate against uncivil customers. This research addresses a central issue, that is the direct impact of customer misbehavior on service staff in the hospitality industry and the potential outcomes of co-worker support in this context. We hypothesize that co-worker support alleviates rumination and retaliation intentions, as supported individuals experience reduced job stress (Mazzetti et al., 2016). Surveys spanning 14 years and encompassing thousands of participants revealed that 98% had encountered repeated instances of uncivil behavior (Porath & Pearson, 2012). Such an alarming statistic underscores the need to examine the impact of customer incivility (CI) on employee service performance in the hospitality sector. It’s crucial to understand how CI influences and motivates frontline employees’ (FLEs) responses, given the established correlation between employee satisfaction and the delivery of high-quality service to guests which in turn sustains customer satisfaction and loyalty and ensures sustained profitability for the organization (Solnet et al., 2018). Thus, further investigation of this issue is necessary, particularly regarding the effects of CI on service sabotage and the extent to which it influences the responses of restaurant FLEs. To address these gaps, this study aims to employ the social exchange theory and organizational (in) justice theory to explore the interaction between CI and service sabotage in hotels in Egypt. Additionally, it seeks to examine the mediating effects of FLEs’ responses and the moderating role of co-worker support in mitigating these responses. Accordingly, we propose the following research questions:

RQ1: How does customer incivility (CI) impact the responses and service sabotage of frontline employees (FLEs) in restaurants?

RQ2: What responses are prompted from FLEs due to CI? What is the anticipated range of these responses? How do these responses influence service sabotage?

RQ3: To what extent does co-worker support alleviate the adverse effects of CI on FLEs?

RQ4: What strategies can help hospitality leaders to mitigate and address CI issues with their FLEs?

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

1. Customer Incivility and Service Sabotage

In service-oriented fields, impolite customers represent a substantial and recurrent cause of job-related stress (Sliter et al., 2010; Grandey et al., 2007; Srivastava et al., 2024). This is particularly evident among employees engaged in roles requiring emotional labor, i.e. displaying positive emotions to customers. Prior studies indicated reported several employee attributes and negative outcomes have been positively associated with customer incivility, including emotional exhaustion (Kern & Grandey, 2009; Sliter et al., 2010), underperformance (Sliter et al., 2010), tension (Adams & Webster, 2013), surface acting (Hur et al., 2015), and absenteeism (Adams & Webster, 2013; Sliter et al., 2012).

Hence, uncivil customers are a major source of stress for service frontline service employees (Kern & Grandey, 2009), causing diminished performance and ultimately leading to decreased service quality or even a complete sabotage of service (Sliter et al., 2010; Kadić-Maglajlić et al., 2024; van Jaarsveld et al., 2010). Prior research suggested that inadequate customer demeanor may predict service sabotage behaviors among FLEs (Cheng et al., 2020).

In the service sector, service sabotage extends from workplace sabotage (Skarlicki et al., 2008), that is the deliberate actions by frontline service staff to disrupt customer service and compromise client interests (Chi et al., 2015; Harris & Ogbonna, 2002; Lee & Ok, 2014; Wang et al., 2011; Yiamjanya et al., 2024). The tension created by customer incivility can invoke employees to engage in acts of service sabotage (Skarlicki et al., 2016). Viewed through the lens of the equity theory, customer incivility reflects a diminished social exchange between employees and customers (Walker et al., 2014) fostering a sense of unfairness among employees (Nguyen-Viet & Nguyen, 2024; Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Wang et al., 2011) and leading to acts of service sabotage as a form of retaliation (Bedi & Schat, 2017; Skarlicki et al., 2008). Consequently, we can hypothesize the following:

H1: Customer incivility has a positive effect on Service Sabotage.

2. Customer Incivility and Frontline Employees' Responses

The thermodynamic theory of retaliation (Bies et al., 1997) proposes that responding aggressively to an offense is not an automatic reaction but rather involves a series of cognitive processes to evaluate the specific incident. Retaliation may provide the victim with a symbolic and emotional release for constrained negative emotions such as anger, disgust, or resentment to satisfy their desire for revenge (Aquino et al., 2001; Srivastava et al., 2024; Robinson & Bennett, 1997). Furthermore, the emotional contagion theory (Hochschild et al., 1983) argues that individuals tend to unconsciously imitate the body language of others and can even experience the same emotions as those they are watching.

Research indicates that negative customer service interactions are prevalent in numerous service firms (Harris & Reynolds, 2003; Reynolds & Harris, 2006). Essentially, customer satisfaction plays a crucial role in determining the performance of a service organization. However, frequent emphasis on this concept may result in a power imbalance between customers and FLEs, potentially leading to instances where customers mistreat and abuse service personnel (Akkawanitcha et al., 2015; Hur et al., 2015). The drain on emotional and psychological resources caused by uncivil consumers renders FLEs unable to self-regulate, eventually causing them to mimic such behaviors (Vancouver, 2000; Shoukat et al., 2024; Skarlicki et al., 2008). Understanding the dynamics of how FLEs deal with customers' rude behavior is capturing more scholarly interest (Alola et al., 2019). The psychological (emotional and cognitive) and behavioral responses of FLEs to customers' uncivil behaviors are the two main categories that were established in the relevant literature (Boukis et al., 2020; Cortina et al., 2017). This study focuses on both rumination as a psychological reaction and retaliation as a behavioral response of FLEs to examine how customer incivility impacts them.

Rumination is the state of constantly obsessing and thinking about something (Martin & Tesser, 2013). It refers to the continuous concentration on ideas and emotions related to a particular experience (Garnefski et al., 2001), draining attentional resources that would otherwise have been used for task performance (Porath & Erez, 2007). Customer impoliteness deters FLEs' ability to retain customer-related knowledge and diminishes their capacity for innovative problem-solving and complex thinking (Miron-Spektor et al., 2011; Rafaeli et al., 2012; Ayele & Singh, 2024). Despite the lack of studies on the cognitive effects of uncivil customer behaviors on frontline employees (FLEs), related research examined employee rumination, focusing on distress symptoms and their potential causes and consequences rather than on solutions (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). Frontline employees (FLEs) may perceive incidents of customer incivility as a failure to fulfill their primary duty of serving the customer. Consequently, such occurrences can be viewed as personal failures by FLEs, causing them to re-experience the failure and associated bad emotions over time (Koopmann et al., 2015; Srivastava et al., 2024). Specifically, in the context of the hospitality industry, encounters with uncivil or rude customers prompt customer service representatives to engage in more rumination the night after such incidents, with longer-lasting consequences (Baranik et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2013; Yakupova et al., 2024). Consequently, the following hypothesis is postulated:

H2: Customer Incivility has a positive effect on Rumination.

Employees who frequently encounter inappropriate customer behavior (such as rudeness, demeaning, or aggression) exhibit unfavorable job performance, including revenge, weariness, and withdrawal intention (Han et al., 2016). One way of coping is forming intentions of retaliation against a rude customer (Bedi & Schat, 2017; Wang et al., 2011). A behavior that has been provoked by others in revenge for actual or perceived injustice is known as retaliation (Aquino et al., 2001). In a similar context, (Sliter et al., 2010) outlined that employees become unkind and more prone to make deliberate

mistakes when they get exposed to customers' impolite behavior. To restore their sense of integrity and self-esteem, employees may deviate from expected norms of service behavior by seeking retaliation (Elshout et al., 2015). The responses of employees are likely to vary due to their feelings and thoughts of retaliation. While some employees might use covert strategies to balance the odds, such as withholding benefits and assistance; others might take an overt vengeance approach and act aggressively towards rude customers and other patrons (Hur et al., 2015; Vancouver, 2000; Kadić-Maglajlić et al., 2024). Consequently, we expect that employees who perceive the actions of customers as unfair and contrary to principles of fairness and respect will be more inclined to hold intentions of retaliation. This anticipation is supported by existing theoretical and empirical evidence provided by precedent studies (Bani-Melhem et al., 2020; Boukis et al., 2020). Therefore, we developed the following hypotheses:

H3: Customer Incivility has a positive effect on Retaliation Intentions.

3. Frontline Employees' Responses and Service Sabotage

As noted in the previous paragraphs, service sabotage constitutes damaging actions directed towards customers, stemming from perceived unfair treatment of both the company and its clients (Harris & Ogbonna, 2009; Lyu et al., 2024). In other words, service sabotage encompasses any deliberate, planned overt, or covert deviant behavior by service employees aimed to negatively impact efficient service interactions with customers (Harris & Ogbonna, 2009; Lin et al., 2022). The saboteur in certain situations has a specific target in mind (Ambrose et al., 2002). Jokes made by FLEs about customers for their amusement or to amuse co-workers are common examples of employee service sabotage (Lee & Ok, 2014). Other examples include failing to follow company policies and regulations; expressing employee hostility, indignation, or rumination towards customers; intentionally delaying service based on employee mood and emotion; and taking revenge on a customer. Employees may also interfere with regular operations by being uncooperative, concealing pertinent information, disseminating false information, or damaging service tools (Ambrose et al., 2002; Skarlicki et al., 2008; Nguyen-Viet & Nguyen, 2024).

Within the service settings, inappropriate customer behavior adversely affects the mental well-being of customer-facing service personnel, potentially eliciting negative emotional reactions (Hwang et al., 2021). FLEs perceive a customer's incivility as a personal insult because it constitutes psychological perceptions that negatively affect their responses, or even lead to service sabotage (Cheng et al., 2020; Alhemimah et al., 2024). According to frustration-aggression theory, frustration can prompt aggressive behavior (Berkowitz, 1983; Kadić-Maglajlić et al., 2024). Within this framework, rumination, considered a form of frustration, arises from a negative emotional state (Breuer & Elson, 2017). According to Wang et al. (2011), a significant proportion of the stress experienced by employees in the service sector stems from inappropriate interactions with customers. Consequently, it is plausible that a substantial portion of their rumination arises from the tension and unfavorable feelings caused by these customer encounters. Given the clear origin of this rumination, there is a decent chance that employees may express their negative emotions, stemming from rumination, towards customers during subsequent interactions, potentially resulting in service sabotage behaviors (Luo & Bao, 2013; Skarlicki et al., 2016; Singtuen & Galka, 2024). Grounding on these arguments, we propose the following hypothesis:

H4: Rumination has a positive effect on Service Sabotage.

Prior research revealed that when an employee experiences unfair treatment or encounters an uncivil customer, they may resort to retaliatory actions (Walker et al., 2014; Shoukat et al., 2024). By the time employees reach the stage of retaliation, they may have already begun the process of emotional and physical disengagement from their jobs (Yeh, 2015). This retaliation behavior towards uncivil customers can lead to customer dissatisfaction and escalated negative interactions (Groth & Grandey, 2012) leading to damaging work behaviors such as service sabotage (Bedi & Schat, 2017; Hutagalung et al., 2024). Hence, the following hypothesis can be proposed:

H5: Retaliation Intention has a positive effect on Service Sabotage.

4. The mediating role of Rumination and Retaliation

Based on previous literature and the arguments given above that illustrate the direct connections between, the first hand, customer incivility, rumination, and service sabotage and, on the other hand, between customer incivility, retaliation intentions, and service sabotage, the following two hypotheses are proposed:

H6: Rumination mediates the relationship between Customer Incivility and Service Sabotage.

H7: Retaliation Intention mediates the relationship between Customer Incivility and Service Sabotage.

5. Co-worker Support as a Moderator in the Relationship between Customer Incivility and Frontline Employees' Responses

Exploring the factors that can mitigate the impact of customer incivility on frontline employees' (FLEs) responses is a focal point of this study. From this perspective, our research views customer incivility as a failure in the social relationship between FLEs and customers, leading to unfavorable service outcomes such as sabotage. To address and potentially mitigate these outcomes, we investigate the role of co-worker support as a moderator, aiming to offset employees' negative reactions to customer incivility. In this context, co-worker support refers to the level of confidence an employee feels in their colleagues' willingness to offer assistance and support, both emotionally and practically, in carrying out job responsibilities and tasks (Ibrahim, 2014; Ng & Sorensen, 2008; Mulyadi et al., 2024; Khanam & Tarab, 2024).

This support can take many forms, such as friendliness, sympathy, cooperation, and respect in performing daily tasks and handling upsetting workplace situations (Susskind et al., 2003; Agina & Abuelnasr, 2021). Previous studies have shown that co-worker support significantly affects employees' workplace behaviors, including knowledge-sharing and

problem-solving (Karatepe & Olugbade, 2017; Lee et al., 2015). According to the theory of conservation of resources (COR), supportive relationships with co-workers are crucial in alleviating employees' negative perceptions of organizational functioning when faced with resource-depleting circumstances. This is because such circumstances reinforce the perceived value of these relationships (De Clercq et al., 2020; Shin et al., 2024). This theory posits that the benefits of resource-generating work environments in reducing employees' stress levels are remarkably significant in the presence of unfavorable circumstances that pose a risk of further resource losses (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000). For instance, during a role conflict, the personal resource of tenacity boosts positive work behaviors (De Clercq & Belausteguigoitia, 2017). Similarly, relying on supportive co-worker relations may become principally critical for coping with the stress associated with daily work tasks, as incidents of customer incivility or mistreatment can create ambiguity in employees' responses.

We anticipate a moderating effect of employees' perceptions of co-worker support on the relationship between customer incivility and their negative responses. Supportive co-workers' competence enhances employees' confidence in their ability to overcome work problems and effectively fulfill their job responsibilities (Amarneh et al., 2010 ; Kadić-Maglajlić et al., 2024) such as well-being and willingness to help (Sliter et al., 2012). Therefore, employees feel more motivated and self-assured due to this support for their objectives, which enables them to better handle work challenges such as uncivil customers (Karatepe & Olugbade, 2017).

Additionally, co-worker support may result in positive behavior (Salanova et al., 2006; Wang, 2024), alleviating colleagues' psychological stress (Ma & Qu, 2011), fostering a sense of being valued (Lee et al., 2015), and enhancing overall coping strategies for work stress (Quinn et al., 2012; Wang & Chen, 2014). Similarly, co-worker assistance can enhance employees' energy levels and reduce their fixation on the negative aspects of their work situations, as they can rely on each other to accomplish their tasks effectively (Hofstetter & Cohen, 2014). The proposed model (Figure 1) reflects our prediction that co-worker support diminishes the positive effect of customer incivility on FLEs negative responses, which in turn reduces service sabotage. Based on the previous arguments, this study suggests the subsequent hypotheses:

H8: Co-worker Support moderates the influence of Customer Incivility on Rumination, such that the relationship will be weaker when Co-worker Support is high.

H9: Co-worker Support moderates the influence of Customer Incivility on Retaliation Intention, such that the relationship will be weaker when Co-worker Support is high.

In light of the above literature, this study developed an integrated model to investigate the impact of customer incivility on frontline employees' responses and service sabotage. It also examines the moderating influence of co-worker support on these relationships. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework of the study.

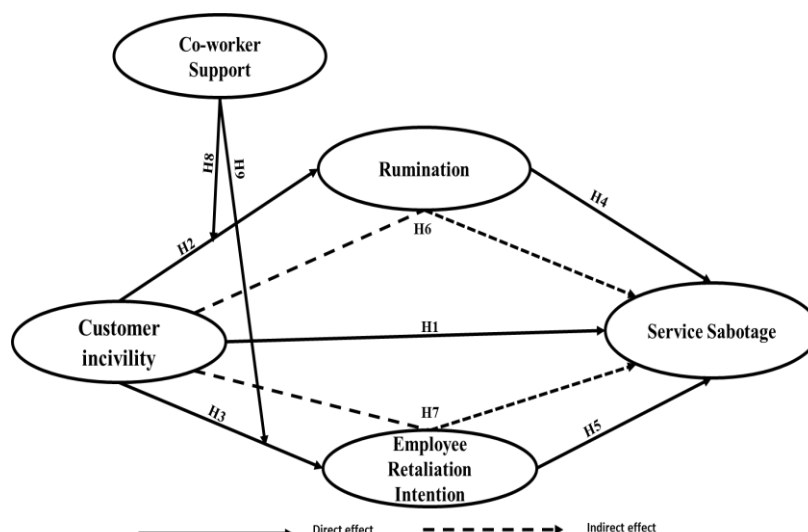


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

METHODOLOGY

1. Participants and procedures

The city of Sharm El-Sheikh, a major tourism destination in Egypt, was chosen to be the focus of the field study due to its abundance of highly rated hotels. From a pool of the city's top 43 hotels, 25 five-star properties were randomly selected for this study. To mitigate common method bias, we employed questionnaires for "multi-wave and multi-source surveys" as outlined by (Podsakoff et al., 2012). Adopting a time-lagged study approach, data were collected in two waves at two-month intervals from guest-contact employees in Sharm El-Sheikh hotels, spanning from December 2022 to April 2023. In the initial survey wave, employees assessed customer incivility, rumination, employee retaliation intentions, co-worker support, and provided demographic information.

The second wave, conducted a month later, gathered data on service sabotage. A total of 500 questionnaire responses were obtained across both survey rounds. After filtering out ineligible responses, 386 were deemed suitable, resulting in a response rate of 77.2%. The study sample comprised predominantly male participants (314 participants, 81.4%) and 72 female participants (18.6%), with ages ranging from 23 to 56 years.

2. Measures

After conducting a thorough review of the existing literature, a questionnaire form with measurement scales was developed. The initial form underwent further refinement through personal interviews with a total of nine academics and eight professionals who have extensive experience in interacting with hotel customers. The substance of the survey remained unchanged throughout this process. Customer incivility (CI) was operationalized using a five-item scale taken from the study of Martin and Hine (2005) (Martin & Hine, 2005). Examples of the items used include, “*Customers use body language to show me their impatience*” and “*Customers complain that my service is too slow at the peak of the hotel reception.*” The rumination (RUM) construct was measured using a three-item scale recommended by Yperen (1996). Sample items included “*I have difficulty relaxing after work*” and “*Even at home, I often think of my problems at work*”. For employee retaliation intentions (ERI), items were adopted from Balaji et al. (Balaji et al., 2020). Sample items involved: “*I feel that I should do something to get even*” and “*I intend to get revenge*”.

The measurement items for the service sabotage (SS) were adopted from Harris (Harris, 2006). The scale items included “*I take revenge on rude customers*” and “*I hurry customers when I want to.*” Finally, the co-worker support (CS) variable was operationalized using the five-item scale proposed by Hammer et al., 2004. CS’s items included, for example, “*I slow down service when I want to*” and “*I receive help and support from my co-workers.*” All scale measurements items were empirically measured on a 5-point Likert scale (where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree).

3. Data Analysis

To evaluate the proposed model, the researchers employed Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using Partial Least Squares (PLS) approach enabled by Smart PLS 4.0 software. When the primary aim of a study is to predict one or more dependent variables instead of validating an established theoretical model, the use of PLS is suitable and viable (Hair et al., 2017). Hence, the utilization of PLS-SEM is deemed suitable for our research as it enables the examination of the relationships between customer incivility (CI) and service sabotage (SS), considering the mediating influence of rumination (RUM) and employee retaliation intentions (ERI), and examining the moderating effect of co-worker support (CS). Moreover, PLS method demonstrates efficacy across a broader spectrum of sample sizes, represents a more sophisticated model with less constraints on data, and serves as a valuable analytical approach (Hair et al., 2011). In contrast to alternative statistical methodologies, PLS-SEM allows for the inclusion of a greater number of reflective components inside each construct. To that end, the current study applies SEM-PLS and adheres to the data analysis procedures outlined by Leguina (2015) encompassing two primary phases, i.e. assessing the measurement model and examining the structural model.

4. Common method bias

Scholars widely agree that social desirability poses a significant risk of bias in behavioral studies, particularly when utilizing single-informant surveys to collect data across multiple companies (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

This paper utilized various methodologies to objectively assess the potential impact of common technique bias on the interpretation of the findings. The study employed two main approaches: a) the Harman one-factor test; and b) a confirmatory factor-analytic approach to the common latent factor approach. Initially, the researchers employed factor analysis, a widely suggested method for assessing bias existence. All constructs were subjected to analysis to ascertain the presence of a singular significant component. The results revealed five components with eigenvalues surpassing 1.0, justifying a total variance of 69.21%. Subsequently, a confirmatory factor-analytic method was employed to support the evaluation of the Harman one-factor test, following the suggestion of Chang et al. (2010).

If the one-factor model is inadequate, it implies that common method variance doesn't pose a significant risk. The one-factor model yielded a Satorra-Bentler χ^2 (218) = 510.41; χ^2 /d.f = 2.34 (compared with the Satorra-Bentler χ^2 (201) = 311.79; χ^2 /d.f = 1.56). The one-dimensional model demonstrates a notably inferior fit compared to the measurement model, indicating the absence of significant common method bias.

Table 1. Psychometric metrics

	Loadings	<i>α</i> Value	C.R	AVE		Loadings	<i>α</i> Value	C.R	AVE
Customer Incivility (CI)		0.847	0.891	0.621	Service Sabotage (SS)		0.914	0.929	0.595
CI_1	0.816				SS_1	0.792			
CI_2	0.856				SS_2	0.811			
CI_3	0.819				SS_3	0.818			
CI_4	0.720				SS_4	0.809			
CI_5	0.720				SS_5	0.824			
Rumination (RUM)		0.882	0.927	0.809	SS_6	0.698			
RUM_1	0.900				SS_7	0.747			
RUM_2	0.926				SS_8	0.720			
RUM_3	0.872				SS_9	0.708			
Employee Retaliation Intention (ERI)		0.931	0.951	0.829	Co-worker Support (CS)		0.883	0.914	0.679
ERI_1	0.922				CS_1	0.787			
ERI_2	0.923				CS_2	0.828			
ERI_3	0.918				CS_3	0.832			
ERI_4	0.878				CS_4	0.848			
					CS_5	0.825			

RESULTS

1. The evaluation of the outer model

The measuring (outer) model evaluates both the convergent validity (CV) and discriminant validity (DV) to ensure the quality of the data. Convergent validity utilizes multiple assessment criteria such as factor loading (λ), Cronbach's alpha (α), composite reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) to assess the association between indicators. These criteria require values higher than 0.50 for (α) (Leontitsis & Pagge, 2007), higher than 0.60 for CR (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), higher than 0.50 for AVE (Hair et al., 2011), and higher than 0.50 for λ (Afthanorhan, 2013). Furthermore, discriminant validity (DV) posits that observed values should be distinguishable when different methodologies are used to evaluate alternative concepts. According to (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), a construct is deemed to have fulfilled the statistical requirement for discriminant validity if the square root of its Average Variance Extracted (AVE) exceeds the correlation between that construct and other constructs within the model (Tables 2, 3). Bold items: “for discriminant validity, the outer factor loading of the reflective items should have a higher value than the cross-loading related scale measures”.

Table 2. Fac. Cross-loadings

	CI	RUM	ERI	SS	CS		CI	RUM	ERI	SS	CS
CI_1	0.816	0.243	0.325	0.550	0.494	SS_2	0.503	0.498	0.522	0.811	0.458
CI_2	0.856	0.281	0.354	0.556	0.474	SS_3	0.554	0.458	0.516	0.818	0.457
CI_3	0.819	0.267	0.342	0.485	0.357	SS_4	0.493	0.448	0.506	0.809	0.475
CI_4	0.720	0.244	0.299	0.386	0.233	SS_5	0.552	0.519	0.558	0.824	0.512
CI_5	0.720	0.267	0.313	0.428	0.327	SS_6	0.465	0.555	0.576	0.698	0.342
RUM_1	0.315	0.900	0.728	0.642	0.150	SS_7	0.464	0.552	0.527	0.747	0.336
RUM_2	0.310	0.926	0.738	0.626	0.135	SS_8	0.360	0.605	0.577	0.720	0.241
RUM_3	0.262	0.872	0.717	0.577	0.135	SS_9	0.359	0.648	0.640	0.708	0.261
ERI_1	0.387	0.732	0.922	0.640	0.157	CS_1	0.439	0.074	0.133	0.413	0.787
ERI_2	0.385	0.731	0.923	0.642	0.133	CS_2	0.413	0.106	0.134	0.406	0.828
ERI_3	0.367	0.743	0.918	0.643	0.156	CS_3	0.380	0.122	0.129	0.401	0.832
ERI_4	0.370	0.737	0.878	0.676	0.168	CS_4	0.412	0.165	0.163	0.453	0.848
SS_1	0.512	0.449	0.518	0.792	0.475	CS_5	0.379	0.152	0.131	0.434	0.825

Table 3. Fornell–Larcker criterion matrix

	CS	CI	ERI	RUM	SS
Co-worker Support	0.824				
Customer Incivility	0.488	0.788			
Employee Retaliation Intention	0.169	0.415	0.910		
Rumination	0.156	0.330	0.809	0.899	
Service Sabotage	0.513	0.616	0.715	0.685	0.771

Table 4. HTMT Matrix

	CS	CI	ERI	RUM	SS
Co-worker Support					
Customer Incivility	0.557				
Employee Retaliation Intention	0.184	0.467			
Rumination	0.170	0.381	0.893		
Service Sabotage	0.569	0.694	0.773	0.760	

Bold scores: “for a proper discriminant validity, AVE values (bold) have to show values that are higher than the inter-variable correlation coefficient”. Additionally, in response to the considerable criticisms directed towards Fornell and Larcker's criterion, a number of scholars recommended an assessment of the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio of correlation (HTMT) as a means to ascertain the discriminant validity (Sarstedt & Cheah, 2019). According to (Gold et al., 2001), the established threshold value for HTMT is 0.9. The CV values presented in Table 4 demonstrate that all of the recommended minimum and/or maximum levels were met, suggesting that the proposed outer model is suitable. Regarding the dimensions of the DV, both the $\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$ and heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) values, as presented in Table 4, met the specified criteria. This indicates that the scale exhibits adequate discriminant validity. HTMT: To ensure enough discriminant validity, all HTMT values must be less than 0.90.

Table 5. VIF, R2, and Q2 results

Items	VIF	Items	VIF	Items	VIF	Items	VIF	Items	VIF
CI_1	2.665	RUM_1	2.494	ERI_1	3.943	SS_1	2.759	CS_1	2.412
CI_2	3.385	RUM_2	3.106	ERI_2	3.955	SS_2	2.956	CS_2	2.939
CI_3	2.210	RUM_3	2.236	ERI_3	3.758	SS_3	3.408	CS_3	2.338
CI_4	2.319			ERI_4	2.563	SS_4	3.284	CS_4	2.312
CI_5	2.239					SS_5	3.104	CS_5	2.101
						SS_6	1.998		
						SS_7	2.537		
						SS_8	3.378		
						SS_9	3.034		
Service Sabotage				R ²	0.668	Q ²	0.389		
Rumination				R ²	0.265	Q ²	0.193		
Employee Retaliation Intention				R ²	0.296	Q ²	0.227		

2. Hypotheses Testing (inner model assessment)

To mitigate the potential impact of variables on the model's predictive capacity, this study examines collinearity by utilizing the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) as a diagnostic tool to evaluate the presence of collinearity among the

examined variables. According to the recommendations outlined by Hair et al. (2011), addressing multicollinearity is unnecessary when the VIF values remain below 5. The evaluative metrics used to assess the explanatory quality of the regression model include the R^2 and Stone-Geisser's (Q^2). In the field of behavioral studies, an R^2 value of 0.20 is commonly considered to be a significant threshold (Hair et al., 2011). In a similar vein, the Q^2 results exceeded the recommended threshold value of 0.0 (Hair et al., 2014). The results for VIF, R^2 , and Q^2 are presented in Table 5.

PLS-SEM, in contrast to CBSEM, does not provide a diverse range of statistical measures for model validation. These measures include X^2 , and other metrics used to assess model fit (Henseler & Sarstedt, 2013). The goodness-of-fit (GoF) gives an operational answer to this difficulty as it can be interpreted as an index for validation purposes (Tenenhaus et al., 2005). The GoF calculation approach, as described Tenenhaus et al. (2005) and by Mital et al. (2018) is calculated using the following formula:

$$\text{Gof} = \sqrt{\text{AVE}_{\text{avy}} \times R^2_{\text{avy}}}$$

Note: Gof → The goodness-of-fit; AVE → Average Variance Extracted; R^2 → coefficient of determination; avy → Average

In accordance with Tenenhaus et al. (2005), the values for the goodness-of-fit (GOF) measures are as follows: GoF small = 0.1, GoF medium = 0.25, and GoF high = 0.36. The results showed that the proposed model has a GoF value of 0.535, suggesting a substantial GoF index for our model. In addition, the study evaluates the adequacy of the model by examining the discrepancies in observed correlations through the utilization of the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR). An SRMR value below 0.08 indicates an acceptable level of model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1998). The SRMR value of the proposed framework, which is 0.078, suggests that the model exhibits a favorable level of fit.

Table 6. Hypotheses testing (inner model results)

Hypotheses	β	T-Value	p-Values	Results
Direct Paths				
H1- Customer Incivility → Service Sabotage	0.387	9.045	0.000	Confirmed
H2- Customer Incivility → Rumination	0.290	5.079	0.000	Confirmed
H3- Customer Incivility → Employee Retaliation Intention	0.398	7.194	0.000	Confirmed
H4- Rumination → Service Sabotage	0.315	4.016	0.000	Confirmed
H5- Employee Retaliation Intention → Service Sabotage	0.299	4.148	0.000	Confirmed
Indirect mediating Paths				
H6- Customer Incivility → Rumination → Service Sabotage	0.091	3.286	0.001	Confirmed
H7- Customer Incivility → Employee Retaliation Intention → Service Sabotage	0.119	3.800	0.000	Confirmed
Moderating Effects				
H8- Customer Incivility x Co-worker Support → Rumination	-0.346	6.895	0.000	Confirmed
H9- Customer Incivility x Co-worker Support → Employee Retaliation Intention	-0.306	7.129	0.000	Confirmed

After confirming the accuracy of both the outer and inner models, the proposed hypotheses of the study were thoroughly examined. The researchers utilized Smart PLS4 software to conduct a bootstrapping procedure with 5000 repetitions. This procedure was used to estimate the regression weights (β), t -statistics, and significance levels (P) of the direct, indirect, and moderating effects. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 6. Based on the findings offered in Figure 2 and Table 6, customer incivility (CI) exerted a significant and positive influence on service sabotage (SS) ($\beta = 0.387$, $t = 9.045$, $p < 0.000$), rumination (RUM) ($\beta = 0.290$, $t = 5.079$, $p < 0.000$), and employee retaliation intention (ERI) ($\beta = 0.398$, $t = 7.194$, $p < 0.000$). Such results provide support for H1, H2, and H3.

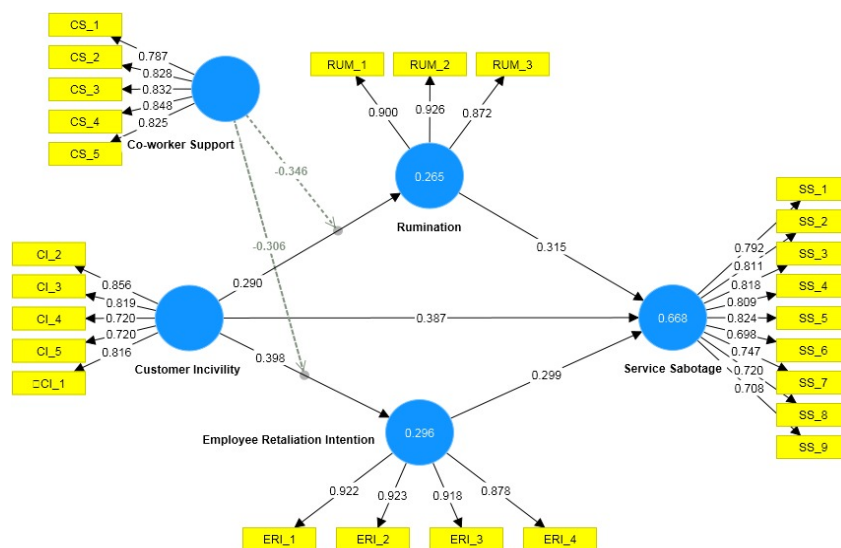


Figure 2. Research model

The results furthermore demonstrated that rumination (RUM) and employee retaliation intention (ERI) significantly and positively affected service sabotage (SS) ($\beta = 0.315$, $t = 4.016$, $p < 0.000$; at $\beta = 0.299$, $t = 4.148$, $p < 0.000$; respectively).

These findings support both H4 and H5. Moreover, the construct of rumination (RUM) and employee retaliation intention (ERI) were found to mediate the link between customer incivility (CI) and service sabotage (SS), with coefficients of $\beta = 0.091$, $t = 3.286$, $p < 0.001$, and $\beta = 0.119$, $t = 3.800$, $p < 0.000$, respectively. These results provide support for hypotheses H6 and H7. Based on the analysis of moderating effects, as depicted in Figures 3 and 4, co-worker support (CS) has a notable impact on the intended linkages. Specifically, the findings indicate that co-worker support (CS) mitigates the significant influence of customer incivility (CI) on rumination (RUM) ($\beta = -0.346$, $t = 6.895$, $p = 0.000$), thereby confirming support for H8. Furthermore, co-worker support (CS) alleviates the significant effect of customer incivility (CI) on employee retaliation intention (ERI) ($\beta = -0.306$, $t = 7.129$, $p = 0.000$), providing further evidence for H9.

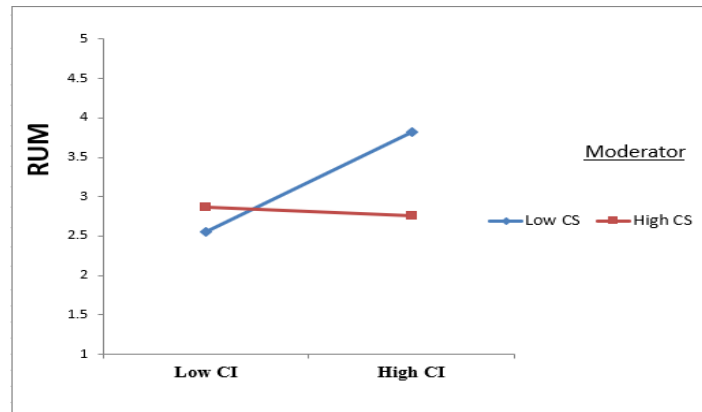


Figure 3. Interaction plot for the co-worker support (CS)

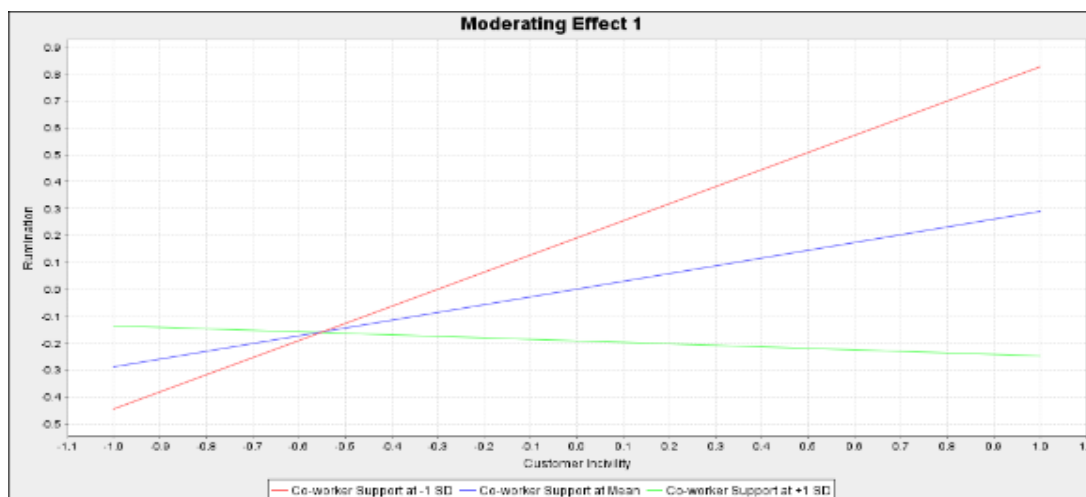


Figure 4. Moderation influence on customer incivility (CI) towards employee retaliation intention (ERI)

3. Robustness tests

Several robustness checks were conducted to validate and ensure the replicability of our study findings. First, we tested the effect of rumination and employee retaliation intention on service sabotage without including customer incivility in our model. The analysis revealed the same or stronger significance levels of significance. Moreover, a longitudinal analysis was performed to address the reverse causality of the service sabotage on rumination and employee retaliation intention. That is, data was collected at two distinct points in time in 2023. In the first wave, we received 308 valid responses. Subsequently, in the second wave, six months later, we re-administered the questionnaire to the same respondents from the first wave, resulting in 259 valid responses for further analysis. In line with our theoretical model, the findings underscored the substantial influence of customer incivility on both rumination and employee retaliation intention.

CONCLUSION

The current study aims to investigate the impact of customer incivility on FLEs' negative responses and service sabotage, and to evaluate the moderating effect of co-worker support. The study findings proved that FLEs' rumination and retaliation intention positively affect service sabotage behavior. Accordingly, both FLEs' rumination and retaliation intention, based on the results, succeeded in mediating the linkage between customer incivility and service sabotage behavior. The results revealed that customer incivility positively affects service sabotage, which supports the findings of earlier research (Cheng et al., 2020; Chi et al., 2015; Hwang et al., 2021; Pu et al., 2024).

Customer incivility has a positive impact on FLEs retaliation intention. This agrees with the theories mentioned previously, such as equity theory, the results state that customer incivility offers a situation where respect norms are unfairly violated, triggering negative emotions customer incivility has a positive effect on FLEs retaliation intention. In

line with the theories mentioned earlier, such as organizational (in)justice theory and equity theory, our results suggest that customer incivility represents a situation where respect norms are unfairly violated, triggering negative emotions. The findings of this study also showed that frontline employees may view their motivation, time, and energy as inputs to be compared to the returns they receive from customers (Cheng et al., 2020; Akram et al., 2024).

Therefore, our study contributes to equity theory by empirically confirming that when employees' expectations of fair treatment from customers are violated due to encountering rudeness, they perceive this as unfair treatment. Consequently, there is an increased likelihood that they may retaliate or undermine customer interactions (Bedi & Schat, 2017; Luo & Bao, 2013; Skarlicki et al., 2008). In this case, hotel managers might offer psychological assistance to employees who encounter uncivil customers to boost their self-assurance in facing such situations (Kim & Qu, 2019). In the same vein, the findings of this study indicated that co-worker support moderates the positive impact of customer incivility on rumination and customer incivility on employee retaliation intention.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATION

Frontline employees (FLEs) serve as the face of service organizations through their commitment to delivering satisfactory service and expressing their friendly and positive conduct to foster customer loyalty (Maria Stock et al., 2017). Customer incivility presents a challenge for service industries because employees' hostile reactions to experiencing such behaviors from customers can jeopardize the organization's prosperity (Bani-Melhem et al., 2020). As a result, service industries implement stringent display guidelines and control how FLEs engage with customers. Even with these rigorous guidelines and oversight mechanisms, some attitudes such as rumination and retaliation intention can remain hidden, which in turn result in deviant behaviors such as service sabotage (Alola et al., 2019; Cho et al., 2016). Previous studies reported various negative impacts of uncivil customers on service employees' responses and subjective wellbeing, which are supported by FLEs' elevated levels of occupational stress and psychological withdrawal (Lim & Cortina, 2005; Schilpzand et al., 2016), work effort (Boukis et al., 2020), Job satisfaction, and participative climate (Pap et al., 2021; Penney & Spector, 2005), and turnover intentions (Bani-Melhem et al., 2020; Wilson & Holmval, 2013).

These observations serve as the driving force behind our research, contributing to the existing literature by initially exploring the impact of customer incivility on frontline employees' (FLEs) negative reactions and service sabotage. Subsequently, we assess the moderating influence of co-worker support on these effects. The outcomes of our empirical investigation effectively fulfilled their intended aims and met their objectives, particularly within the context of Egyptian hotel industry, which offers insights into cultural distinctions not extensively studied in prior research. Additionally, our study makes a theoretical contribution through the application of the equity theory framework. The results of the study enhance our understanding of the effect of customer incivility on two different types of responses, psychological and behavioral, across different levels. This underscores that customer responses are not uniform and vary depending on factors such as cultural background, psychological well-being, and past experiences of employees. Furthermore, other factors, such as the involvement of co-workers in challenging situations, may also influence the intensity of these reactions.

Precedent studies indicated that service sabotage is linked to rude customers behaviors. This is because service providers often perceive ill treatment from customers in a negative way, resulting in elevated levels of service sabotage (Alola et al., 2019). Within the service sector, more than 85% of employees have engaged in acts of service sabotage, creating various ways and actions for sabotaging services (Harris & Ogbonna, 2009). Consequently, it falls upon hoteliers to monitor these occurrences among their staff and take proactive measures to protect them rather than leaving them to address such issues independently. Additionally, managers must come up with plans to lessen the reason behind a customer's abnormal behavior. For instance, customers can earn a price reduction or a free drink if they welcome customer-contact personnel politely and treat them with respect, strengthening the relationship between the two parties (Hwang et al., 2021). Drawing from psychological theories such as the frustration-aggression theory, unfair treatment tends to provoke negative responses characterized by frustration (Berkowitz, 1993).

In this context (Boukis et al., 2020) argued that the customer's uncivil behavior negatively affects the psychological state of the FLEs, causing a state of rumination. With this knowledge in hand, hotel managers may consider whether their enterprises are prone to any kind of customer incivility and provide FLEs training opportunities on how to handle such incidents without receiving unfavorable responses. Moreover, managers should use mindful activities to help employees avoid personally absorbing the stress related to their roles and instead repurpose this energy in a more positive way. In line with this, our study proved that customer incivility positively affected FLEs rumination.

On the same note, customer incivility has a positive effect on FLEs retaliation intention. In line with the theories mentioned earlier, such as organizational (in)justice theory and equity theory, our results suggest that customer incivility represents a situation where respect norms are unfairly violated, triggering negative emotions, and fostering unfavorable attitudes towards the source of the unfairness (Ahmed et al., 2023; Huang et al., 2019). DeCelles et al. (2019) further argued that customer abuse is a significant contributor to workplace injustice, and it appears that many service industries frequently experience both hostile customers and uncooperative employees as well. These findings hold great significance not only for service organizations in general but also for the hospitality industry specifically, as both sectors commonly encounter a high volume of uncivil customers (Torres et al., 2017; Zhou et al., 2018). Hence, hotels need to take a more pro-active stance when handling incidents of rude consumer behavior. In this context, service managers can support frontline employees in handling such circumstances constructively rather than harboring retaliation intents that grow over time and lead to retaliatory behavior. Hotel managers can create a supportive environment for staff to voice their concerns and actively involve them in devising solutions to effectively manage interactions with uncivil customers.

Additionally, managers can help victimized employees understand why incivility occurred and determine if it was a result of customers' ignorance, to alleviate the negative responses (Cheng et al., 2020). Moreover, hotel managers can think about providing their service employees more freedom to handle impolite circumstances. Doing so will strengthen the staff members' sense of control over ongoing customer interactions and lessen the stress they experience while dealing with such scenarios (Kim & Qu, 2019).

In line with the significance of the direct relationship between customer incivility and rumination and between rumination and service sabotage, the results also confirmed that rumination succeeded in mediating the link between customer incivility and service sabotage. This confirms that negative rumination about customer incivility generates a skeptical perspective for putting forth more effort and dedication at work. Therefore, employees are inclined to adopt withdrawal behaviors, reducing their work effort and commitment (Shin et al., 2023) or aggravate their response to instances of service sabotage behaviors (Alola et al., 2019). Similarly, employee retaliation intentions mediate the connection between customer incivility and service sabotage because of the significance of the direct relationships between customer incivility and employee retaliation intentions and between employee retaliation intentions and service sabotage. This result can be explained by adopting the frustration-aggression theory (Breuer & Elson, 2017) which suggests that encounters with uncivil customers hinder the attainment of hospitality service objectives. This triggers frustration among employees, potentially leading to the conversion of this frustration into aggressive energy. Consequently, employees may seek outlets for their frustration, manifesting in intentions to retaliate against misbehaving customers (Balaji et al., 2020) and ultimately in service sabotage behaviors (Chan et al., 2022).

The direct and indirect link between customer incivility, rumination, employee retaliation intentions, and service sabotage challenges the common adage, particularly within the hospitality industry in developing countries, that "the customer is always right." Findings indicate that if hotel managers and supervisors fail to address customer incivility fairly—without bias against employees—it can lead to employees exhibiting negative behaviors, both intentional and unintentional, as a form of service sabotage. This retaliation stems from the mistreatment they endure, highlighting the critical need for equitable handling of customer interactions.

The concept of resource replacement posits that the depletion of one resource can be offset by the acquisition of another resource (Hobfoll, 1989). In the same vein, the findings of this study indicated that co-worker support moderates the positive impact of customer incivility on rumination and customer incivility on employee retaliation intention. That is, employees offset losing resources due to customer incivility behaviors by gaining alternative resources stem from co-workers' emotional and instrumental support (Shin et al., 2022). Specifically, frontline employees in the hospitality and tourism sector rely on co-worker support when dealing with customer incivility, a concept that also has not received enough academic attention (Baker & Kim, 2021). In this context, hotels should provide support to employees and foster mutual co-worker support to effectively manage situations involving misbehaving customers. The mitigating role played by co-worker support in the relationships between customer incivility and rumination and between customer incivility and employee retaliation intentions encourages supervisory levels to abandon the principle of "divide and conquer" and create a cooperative climate among workers to support each other in facing the pressures that may arise from interacting with undesirable customer behaviors.

Limitations and future research directions

The current study has some limitations. First, our analysis of Egyptian hotels did not incorporate diverse grouping algorithms, such as size or value distinctions. This suggests a potential opportunity for future research to investigate these variables based on a more comprehensive and inclusive dataset. Second, our study focused on hotels industry in Egypt. Future study could conduct a comparative study encompassing multiple countries with different cultures, Eastern and Western for instance, to consider the potential impacts of cross-culture issues.

Additionally, organizational culture could play a significant role in shaping employee responses to incivility and service sabotage, and variations in culture across different hotels may limit the applicability of the findings. Third, our study utilized cross-sectional examination to explore the relationships between the study variables and to test its hypotheses. Future studies could utilize secondary research data to measure the study variables. Further studies in this area can adopt a qualitative approach to investigate employees' perception of customer incivility behaviors to provide rich information that enables a profound understanding of the employees' potential reaction behaviors. Lastly, future studies can consider examining other moderators that can potentially alleviate negative FLEs' response provoked by uncivil customers such as organizational support, employee promotion focus, and employee prevention focus.

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