

How to survive mistreatment by customers

Employees' work withdrawal and their coping resources

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of the present research is to investigate the mechanisms by which conflict with customers (i.e. customer mistreatment) contributes to employees' work withdrawal.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper tests its hypotheses by means of a field study of a sample of front-line health care workers in China. Data were collected in three waves over four months; a total of 398 health care workers completed the questionnaires and represented the final sample. A hierarchical multiple regression analysis was performed to test the proposed hypotheses.

Findings – The results indicate that mistreatment by customers contributes to employees' work withdrawal, and emotional exhaustion serves as a mediator in this linkage. In addition, social support moderates the positive relation between customer mistreatment and employees' emotional exhaustion, whereas conscientiousness moderates the positive relation between emotional exhaustion and withdrawal behavior.

Research limitations/implications – The sample used may not fully justify the generalizability of the research results. Without distinguishing different sources of social support may be another limitation. In addition, this study could be improved by using a multi-source survey design.

Practical implications – To help employees effectively cope with interpersonal conflict with customers, organizations should take action to promote communication between employees and their supervisors and coworkers. It is also advisable for organizations to adjust their selection strategies and hire front-line employees high in conscientiousness.

Originality/value – This research presents a resource-based framework to illuminate the detrimental effects of prolonged exposure to customer mistreatment on health care workers' withdrawal behavior in Chinese context. Furthermore, this study examines factors that may serve to mitigate the harmful effects of customer mistreatment and regards workplace social support and conscientiousness as two different kinds of resources that can play dissimilar roles when employees are coping with customer mistreatment.

Keywords Conscientiousness, Social support, Interpersonal conflict, Customer mistreatment, Emotional exhaustion, Work withdrawal

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Detrimental interpersonal conflict is described as a variety of interpersonal mistreatment behaviors in the workplace, including rude behavior, yelling or other interpersonally deviant



acts (Mulki *et al.*, 2015; Sliter *et al.*, 2011). The type of interpersonal conflict originated from customer mistreatment toward workers such as verbal incivility, insults, threats and even physical attacks has been a major concern for directors and managers who wish to effectively motivate their employees and actively seek for high quality service, especially in the current health care sector of China. However, few studies have provided insights into how practitioners and researchers can approach this long-standing problem.

Customer mistreatment, which refers to low quality interpersonal treatment that employees receive from their customers (Wang *et al.*, 2013; Bies, 2001) as manifested in customer behavior toward employees ranging from making irrelevant demands to engaging in verbal aggression (Baranik *et al.*, 2014; Wang *et al.*, 2013), is one type of interpersonal conflict in the workplace. Customer mistreatment is an annoying problem that confronts all service organizations (Grandey *et al.*, 2004) and previous studies have generally revealed the deleterious effects of customer mistreatment by demonstrating that it can result in employees' emotional exhaustion and negative mood (Wang *et al.*, 2013; Grandey *et al.*, 2007) and employee sabotage against customers or organizations (Wang *et al.*, 2011; Skarlicki *et al.*, 2008).

What is not well established is whether negative customer behavior relates to employees' job outcomes. Though some studies have examined the relation between customer mistreatment and employees' overall job performance (Baranik *et al.*, 2014; Sliter *et al.*, 2010), customer mistreatment might also do serious harm to the organization that remains largely unaddressed. Employees who regularly suffer from customer mistreatment are more likely to experience unfavorable emotional and behavioral reactions. The lack of knowledge about work related responses to negative encounters with customers limits our understanding of how stress resulting from interactions with customers. Considering the concerns stated above, employees' work withdrawal could be an important job-related outcome that is being paid insufficient attention. Work withdrawal comprises behaviors such as putting less effort into one's job, taking longer breaks than institutionally permitted or spending work time on personal affairs (Lehman and Simpson, 1992). Thus, those who withdraw from their work express aversive attitudes and emotions toward their job or workplace, resulting in low levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Sagie *et al.*, 2002). In turn, such negative experience will definitely compromise the quality of service provided by employees. Therefore, work withdrawal is critical for understanding how to motivate employees to dedicate themselves to providing good service in their routine work.

Given the harmful effects of customer mistreatment, it is also crucial to explore factors that may help to mitigate its negative effects. Drawing from conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989), we examine the potential resources that employees can enlist to cope with negative encounters with customers. Specifically, Hobfoll (2002) makes a distinction between contextual resources and personal resources. Contextual resources refer to resources located outside the individual that can be acquired in social contexts (e.g. social support provided by coworkers at work), whereas personal resources are resources that derive from the self, including personal traits and energies (Hobfoll, 2002; ten Brummelhuis and Bakker, 2012). To our knowledge, though some research has discussed contextual social resource variables as buffering factors when employees deal with customer mistreatment, such as supervisory support climate (Wang *et al.*, 2011) and perceived organizational support (Wang *et al.*, 2013), little research has noted the role personal traits may play in this process. In response to calls for theory-based exploration of the differential effects of contextual resources and personal resources (ten Brummelhuis and Bakker, 2012), the current study considers both contextual resources (social support) and employees' personal resources (conscientiousness) as critical moderators of the relation between customer mistreatment and employees' work withdrawal. In doing so, we regard social support and conscientiousness as two different kinds of resources

that might play dissimilar roles in the resource depletion process caused by customer mistreatment. By bringing together research on COR theory and customer mistreatment, we provide employees and organizations with insights into potential buffers against the detrimental effects of customer mistreatment on employees' withdrawal behavior.

This study aims to advance research by exploring the mechanisms through which customer mistreatment contributes to employees' work withdrawal. Drawing upon COR theory, we develop a resource-based conceptual framework that assesses the extent to which emotional exhaustion serves as a mediator in the relation between customer mistreatment and employees' withdrawal behavior. Specifically, we argue that customer mistreatment, as a social stressor, relates to employees' resource loss or depletion, ultimately resulting in a psychological state called emotional exhaustion. In turn, by distancing themselves psychologically or physically from their work, employees conserve their valuable resources and maintain their well-being, which serves as a form of coping. In addition, we examine social support and conscientiousness as two kinds of resources that can play different roles in attenuating the ill effects of customer mistreatment. In doing so, we respond to calls for theory-based predictions about the differential effects of contextual resources and personal resources. In the next section, we will elaborate the theoretical reasoning for our proposed model and delineate our hypotheses.

In particular, we follow this line of reasoning and focus on an occupation that is particularly likely to involve interpersonal conflict with customers, namely, health-care work. Health care workers routinely have frequent and intense face-to-face interaction with patients. Accordingly, they are the victims of misbehaving customers from time to time, which act as an important stressor for them. It is noteworthy that increasing attention is being paid to the conflict and tension between health care workers and patients in China. Due to the lack of an efficient health-care arbitration agency in place to investigate medical accidents, antagonism between health care workers and patients is becoming increasingly prevalent in China (Li *et al.*, 2014). In the health-care context, customer mistreatment of health care workers appears to be a growing problem. According to a recent survey of health care workers, medical disputes have been a main source of social stress for health care workers in China, and nearly 60 per cent of health care workers have reported that they often have to interact with rough or poorly behaved customers (Wang *et al.*, 2016). In addition, health care workers' withdrawal is a major concern for hospitals in China, as they are facing an urgent and continuing need for the improvement of current health-care services, which are characterized by low quality and insufficient supply. Work withdrawal behavior from health care workers could make the situation even worse and lead to a reduction in customer satisfaction and an increase in misbehavior in a vicious circle. Thus, the health-care context in China is highly amenable to our study's theoretical concerns about customer mistreatment.

Theory and hypotheses

According to COR theory, individuals are instinctively stimulated to preserve and defend their internal resources that are needed to effectively manage their work and life. Resources refer to "those objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that are valued by the individuals" (Hobfoll, 1989). If there are any actual or potential loss of resources, they will feel threatened (Hobfoll, 2001). Hobfoll (1989) also posits that everyone will be stimulated to minimize the net loss of resources in response to stress.

Customer mistreatment and emotional exhaustion

Workplace burnout is considered an occupational hazard for front-line service employees, owing to the boundary-spanning characteristic of their work content (Singh *et al.*, 1994). Emotional exhaustion, as the most important dimension of workplace burnout, has received

extensive attention in the burnout literature. In the present study, we draw on COR theory as a fundamental framework for explaining the relations between customer mistreatment and employees' emotional exhaustion. Emotional exhaustion is defined as the loss of one's coping resources, which are necessary to meet performance expectations and to fulfill job requirements (Cole *et al.*, 2010; Shirom, 2003). Emotional exhaustion is marked by a sustained state of physical fatigue and psychological tiredness (Cole *et al.*, 2010). From the perspective of COR theory, everybody possesses a certain quantity of psychological resources and they endeavor to gain, preserve and defend these resources. Furthermore, according to COR theory, the job requirements that employees struggle to meet imply their investment of available personal resources. Once their internal resources are drained or the invested resources cannot generate new resources, employees are probably to undergo an emotional exhausted state (Chi and Liang, 2013; Wright and Cropanzano, 1998).

Workplace stressors can accelerate employees' psychological resource loss or depletion (Hobfoll, 2001, 2002). Customer mistreatment, due to its stressful nature, consumes a great amount of employees' physical, cognitive, psychological and emotional resources (Maslach, 1978). Being targets of frequent verbal hostility from customers, service employees have to struggle to deal with them and try to provide superior customer service rather than questioning customers, which is normally required by the organizational rules. Thus, customer mistreatment, as an irritating stressor to front-line employees, will result in depletion of their internal resources (Brotheridge and Grandey, 2002), which is captured by an employee's emotional exhaustion (Wright and Cropanzano, 1998). In this vein, we predict that customer mistreatment has a positive relationship with emotional exhaustion. Hence, we hypothesize:

H1. Customer mistreatment is positively related to employees' emotional exhaustion.

Emotional exhaustion and work withdrawal

Being cognitively exhausted, these employees are stimulated to analyze the reasons for their weary state and look for possible measures to preserve their existing resources and generate new resources (Li and Zhou, 2013; Siegal and McDonald, 2004). COR theory proposes that employees will react to workplace stress and cope with emotional exhaustion by changing their behavior patterns to minimize further losses of valued resources (Hobfoll, 1989). As Maslach *et al.* (2001) suggest, emotional exhaustion is not just a kind of emotional experience – rather, it encourages exhausted employees to distance themselves psychologically and physically from their workplace. A prevalent way for employees to cope with emotional exhaustion is to withdraw from the current threatening situation (Greenbaum *et al.*, 2014; Chi and Liang, 2013; Cole *et al.*, 2010). Specifically, by engaging in behavior such as putting less effort into one's job or taking longer breaks, employees conserve their valued resources.

This withdrawal coping mechanism is conceptually consistent with the COR perspective. Resource-depleted employees normally adopt a defensive strategy of putting in less effort and energy in their jobs to retain their valued resources (Halbesleben *et al.*, 2014). These resources include the time and energy they spend on their work and the capabilities and patience they utilize in performing their duties (Hobfoll, 1989). By withholding their resources, exhausted employees could prevent further losses (Wagstaff *et al.*, 2015). Work withdrawal is beneficial to emotionally exhausted employees as it helps to reduce the negative emotion to a reasonable baseline level, even though it is harmful to organizations (Scott and Barnes, 2011). In general, employees who report a higher level of resource depletion have been shown to exhibit more work withdrawal in their job (Sliter *et al.*, 2012; Taris *et al.*, 2001). Hence, we hypothesize:

H2. Emotional exhaustion is positively related to employees' work withdrawal.

The mediating role of emotional exhaustion

In regard to the stressor – strain relationship, COR theory proposes that coping with negative encounters with customers in the workplace will result in the depletion of employees' psychological resources. As such, we posit that employees who deal with customer mistreatment routinely in their job will experience symptoms of resource depletion, which is captured by emotional exhaustion. The depletion of resources will weaken employees' ability to cope with future stressful events (Tepper, 2000). Subsequently, these exhausted employees will try to protect their own well-being by withdrawing resources and effort from their work and organizations. By engaging in withdrawing attitudes and emotional detachment, exhausted individuals prevent further resource loss (Cole *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, it is logical to believe that emotional exhaustion will play a mediating role in the relation between customer mistreatment and employees' withdrawal behavior. To the extent that customer mistreatment has an effect on employees' work withdrawal, its influence on employees' emotional exhaustion may act as a bridge between customer mistreatment and employees' work withdrawal. Accordingly, we hypothesize the following:

- H3. Emotional exhaustion mediates the positive effect of customer mistreatment on employees' work withdrawal.

The moderating role of social support

COR theory also provides substantial insights into possible factors that might attenuate the positive relation between customer mistreatment and employees' work withdrawal. Drawing from COR theory, we expect that coping with customer mistreatment will lead to the consumption of individual internal resources, thereby reducing the resources that could otherwise be invested at work. When facing resource depletion, those with more access to replenishment of resources can recover more quickly. For determining resource access, COR theory holds that people can "call on resources available to them from the external environment" (Hobfoll, 1989, p. 517) to buffer the harmful effects caused by resource loss. Among these external resources, social support may play an especially crucial role (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001).

Social support is defined as the extent to which one has the opportunities to receive advice and help from others in the workplace (Morgeson and Humphrey, 2006). In the work environment, coworkers and supervisors are the primary sources of social support for employees. Thoits (1986) proposes some possible ways whereby social support may promote the increase of internal resources. By providing instrumental assistance or advice about how to successfully manage a stressful situation, social support helps to promote employees' ability to exert situational control. Social support also helps employees divert their attention away from a present difficult situation and reinterpret stressors in a more constructive way. Moreover, through the provision of feedback that contains caring, encouragement and understanding, social support can mitigate the stress of employees in threatening situations. Whatever form it takes, the instrumental or socio-emotional support and assistance provided by coworkers and supervisors can contribute to the enhancement of employees' ability to alleviate stress. Accordingly, social support in the workplace can help employees to offset resource depletion and its negative effects in several ways, such as expanding one's pool of internal resources (Hobfoll, 1989), upgrading effective coping skills (Mccarthy *et al.*, 2016) and sharing work task assignments (Ray and Miller, 1994). All these kinds of social support facilitate the replenishment of an individual's resource pool, leading to "positive gain spirals" (Hobfoll, 1989, p. 470). In turn, such positive gain spirals can act to

offset the negative consequences of emotional exhaustion, alleviating an employee's worn-out state (Hakanen *et al.*, 2008).

Thus, employees with greater access to social support will cope with threatening situations better. As customer mistreatment is a difficult situation that results in the consumption of internal resources (Lapierre and Allen, 2006), employees who have access to more social support in the workplace can replenish their depleted resources pool in due time (Kossek *et al.*, 2011). By receiving social support, such as help with job tasks, advice and encouragement, employees feel cared for by others in the workplace and know that they can obtain assistance (Hobfoll, 1989). These extra resources employees gain help them to better cope with the difficult situation caused by customer mistreatment and mitigate the emotional exhaustion resulting from drained psychological resources. In contrast, employees who are less socially supported at work should be less likely to successfully cope with the drain on internal resources, as they are short of resource replenishment. Without a timely external resource supply to replenish their resource pool, employees cannot take customer mistreatment in stride. Therefore, social support can buffer the relation between customer mistreatment and emotional exhaustion so as to help employees mistreated by customers to better cope with threatening situations, and to reduce the possibility of emotional exhaustion. Accordingly, we hypothesize the following:

- H4. Social support moderates the relation between customer mistreatment and emotional exhaustion, such that the positive relation will be weaker when social support is high.

The moderating role of conscientiousness

We also predict that conscientiousness will buffer the effect of emotional exhaustion on employees' withdrawal behavior. COR theory regards individual traits as valuable resources in that they exert an influence on how individuals utilize their internal resources and manage the depletion of resources (Hobfoll and Shirom, 2000). As an important dimension of the Big Five personality traits, conscientiousness reflects the extent to which individuals are diligent, dutiful, achievement-orientated and organized (McCrae and John, 1992). Personal trait resources such as conscientiousness serve as a form of key resource (ten Brummelhuis and Bakker, 2012) or meta-resource (Halbesleben *et al.*, 2009), in terms of that they enable people to take full advantage of other resources and enhance their ability to analyze and solve problems. In particular, compared with contextual resources (e.g. social support), conscientiousness is regarded as a kind of motivation-based personal resources (Perry *et al.*, 2011). Conscientious employees typically have a high level of achievement motivation, and they desire to excel in what they do (Halbesleben *et al.*, 2009; McCrae and Costa, 1996). As demonstrated in research on personal resources, individuals with a high level of motivation are able to concentrate on their jobs even when experiencing emotional exhaustion (McCarthy *et al.*, 2016; Muraven and Slessareva, 2003). Thus, conscientiousness is particularly relevant in mitigating the positive relation between emotional exhaustion and work withdrawal.

According to COR theory, conscientiousness acts as a kind of psychological resource that attenuates the harmful consequences of emotional exhaustion. Employees high in conscientiousness tend to be organized, achievement-oriented, dutiful and hardworking (McCrae and Costa, 1996). They have better skills in utilizing other resources to address challenges and use proactive coping strategies to solve problems (Connor-Smith and Flachsbart, 2007). Thus, when feeling emotionally exhausted, conscientious employees will find ways to deploy other available resources to guarantee the fulfillment of their task responsibility and meet their performance goals (Bordia *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, due to the resource nature of conscientiousness, individuals with high conscientiousness typically

possess a bigger pool of resources to draw upon when they are confronted with resource depletion (Taylor *et al.*, 2014). Thus, they are less likely to conserve internal resources and withhold their effort in their jobs when experiencing emotional exhaustion. On the contrary, employees low in conscientiousness tend to be distracted, disorganized, thoughtless and apathetic (Connor-Smith and Flachsbart, 2007; Taylor *et al.*, 2014). Less conscientious employees generally are in possession of a smaller pool of resources and lack of skills in meeting work demands when experiencing resource depletion (Taylor *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, they normally have no other choice but to withdraw their valued resources from their work, such as effort, energy and time, to protect their own well-being. Therefore, emotional exhaustion will be more strongly related to work withdrawal among less conscientious employees than among those high in conscientiousness. Drawing on the above, we hypothesize the following:

- H5. Conscientiousness moderates the relation between emotional exhaustion and work withdrawal, such that the positive relation will be weaker when conscientiousness is high.

Methods

Sample and procedure

To test the hypothesized theoretical model proposed by our study (Figure 1), we conducted a field study with a sample of front-line health care workers. The health-care context is highly relevant to our research topic and theoretical concerns about customer mistreatment. As front-line health care workers routinely have frequent and intense interaction with patients, they are susceptible to customer mistreatment. This is especially true in the context of the Chinese health-care industry, as the relationship between health care workers and patients has been subject to increasing tension, which is partly due to historical health care policy and institution design. Participants were health care workers, including nurses and doctors, working in 12 public hospitals in southern China. A random sample of 587 health care workers took part in the investigation. They were informed that the purpose of this survey was to investigate health care workers' well-being and job behavior. To ensure the quality of our survey, respondents were guaranteed that the information collected will be kept strictly confidential to their organizations. We then conducted a paper-based survey, and questionnaires were sent to participants by the human resource department at their hospital. Participants were asked to place their completed questionnaires in sealed envelopes and return them to a special mailbox in the office.

We collected the data in three waves over four months to minimize the possibility of common method bias. At Time 1, health care workers completed the first questionnaire, which measured customer mistreatment, conscientiousness and demographic information (gender, age, education and organizational tenure). We received 481 completed

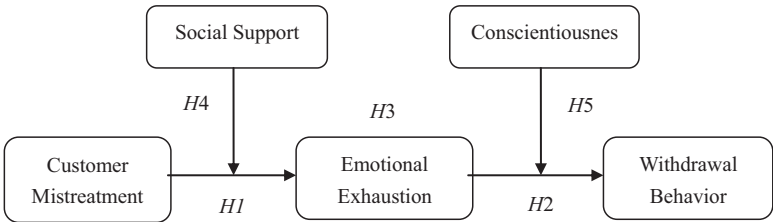


Figure 1.
The proposed
theoretical model

questionnaires (81.9 per cent response rate). At Time 2 (two months later), the 481 health care workers completed a second survey measuring emotional exhaustion and social support. We collected 453 completed questionnaires (94.2 per cent response rate). At Time 3 (two months later), the 453 health care workers completed the last survey, which measured their work withdrawal. Of the 453 participants, we eventually received 398 completed questionnaires (87.9 per cent response rate), which represents our final sample. Females represented 63.9 per cent of the sample. A total of 58.3 per cent had a bachelor degree education or higher, and 90.1 per cent were under the age of 35.

Measures

Respondents were asked to reflect on customer mistreatment they experienced in the past two months and then chose the appropriate response to items in our structured questionnaires.

Customer mistreatment. We measured customer mistreatment using an eight-item scale developed by Skarlicki *et al.* (2008). Items were used to assess the frequency with which health care workers had undergone customer mistreatment in the past two months. Responses for each item range from 1 (never) to 7 (many times). Sample items include “Spoke aggressively to you” and “Yelled at you”. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.95.

Emotional exhaustion. We measured emotional exhaustion using an eight-item emotional exhaustion scale developed by Maslach and Jackson (1981). The response scale for each item range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Sample items include “I feel used up at the end of the workday”. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.94.

Social support. Social support was assessed with a six-item social support scale developed by Morgeson and Humphrey (2006). Respondents rated each item using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Sample items include “People I work with are friendly”. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.92.

Conscientiousness. Conscientiousness was assessed with the eight-item Mini-Markers scale modified by Saucier (1994), which is a shortened version of Goldberg’s Big-Five Markers (Goldberg, 1992). Responses for each item range from 1 (extremely inaccurate) to 7 (extremely accurate). Sample items include four negative adjectives such as “Careless” (reverse coded) and four positive adjectives such as “Organized”. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.94.

Work withdrawal. Work withdrawal was assessed using the 12-item psychological and physical work withdrawal scale developed by Lehman and Simpson (1992). Because work withdrawal can be easily overlooked by colleagues and supervisors (Wagstaff *et al.*, 2015; Chi and Liang, 2013; Sackett and DeVore, 2001), we follow the previous literature and measure employees’ work withdrawal behavior using their self-reports. Participants were required to report the frequency with which they had engaged in the following thoughts or behavior in their jobs in the past two months, such as “Put less effort into job than should have,” “Chat with co-workers about non-work topics.” Respondents were asked to rate a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = ‘never’, 7 = ‘very often’). Cronbach’s alpha was 0.96.

Control variables. Consistent with the previous literature (Shao and Skarlicki, 2014; van Jaarsveld *et al.*, 2010; Sliter *et al.*, 2010), we controlled for four variables: employee’s gender, age, education and organization tenure. Previous studies suggest that women are more likely to be the target of customer aggression (Sliter *et al.*, 2010; Andersson and Pearson, 1999), and they tend to report high levels of anxiety (Grandey *et al.*, 2004). Moreover, meta-analytic studies report that older employees will handle difficult encounters more skillfully and report fewer problems with workplace burnout and that employees with greater tenure tend to be more experienced and have more favorable job attitudes (Ng and Feldman, 2010). In addition, employees with lower levels of education appear to have lower standards for

work environment and show more tolerance for their job (Ng and Feldman, 2010; Moore *et al.*, 1974). Gender was dummy-coded, with 1 for male and 2 for female. Age, organization tenure and education were measured as ordinal variables. Educational level was measured with four possible values: 1 for high school or less, 2 for vocational or community college, 3 for 4-year college or university and 4 for graduate school or higher. Age was assessed with eight categories (e.g. 1 for 20-25 years old, 8 for 55-60 years old). Measure of organization tenure was ranked into six categories from less than one year as the lowest value to more than nine years as the highest value.

Results

In the present study, SPSS22.0 and Mplus7.11 were used for statistical analysis. The means, standard deviations and correlations among all key variables in our study are shown in Table I. As expected, customer mistreatment was positively correlated with emotional exhaustion ($r = 0.58, p \leq 0.01$) and work withdrawal ($r = 0.31, p \leq 0.01$). In addition, emotional exhaustion was positively correlated with work withdrawal ($r = 0.31, p \leq 0.01$).

We first used confirmatory factor analyses to test the fit of our five-factor measurement model. Overall, the results showed that the data fit the proposed measurement model well (RMSEA = 0.07, CFI = 0.90, IFI = 0.90, SRMR = 0.08), indicating that we can further examine the structural model fit. Subsequently, we assessed the fit of our full moderated mediation model. The results demonstrated that the full moderated mediation model provided a good fit to the data (RMSEA = 0.03, CFI = 0.99, IFI = 0.99, SRMR = 0.01).

Hierarchical multiple regression analysis was used to test *H1*, *H2* and *H3* by entering the control variables (demographic variables), independent variable (customer mistreatment), moderator (social support), mediator (emotional exhaustion) and interactions in separate steps. To avoid colinearity effects, all interaction variables were mean-centered (Aiken and West, 1991). *H1* predicts that customer mistreatment will be positively related to emotional exhaustion; this hypothesis was supported ($\beta = 0.57, p \leq 0.01$, Model 2 in Table II). *H2* predicts that emotional exhaustion will be positively related to employees' work withdrawal; this hypothesis was also supported ($\beta = 0.32, p \leq 0.01$, Model 2 in Table III). *H3* predicts that emotional exhaustion serves as a mediator in the linkage between customer mistreatment and employees' work withdrawal; this prediction was supported, as the relation between customer mistreatment and work withdrawal dropped significantly ($\beta = 0.20, p \leq 0.01$, Model 4 in Table III) when emotional exhaustion was included in the

Table I.
Means, standard
deviations and
correlations

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Gender	1.64	0.48									
2. Age	2.02	1.14	-0.03								
3. Education	2.61	1.04	-0.07	0.22**							
4. Tenure	2.62	1.65	0.03	0.70**	0.13**						
5. CM	3.67	1.29	-0.07	-0.01	0.09	0.03	(0.95)				
6. EE	4.16	1.29	0.05	0.04	0.11*	0.09	0.58**	(0.94)			
7. SS	4.96	1.12	-0.01	-0.05	0.07	0.01	-0.11*	0.01	(0.92)		
8. CO	5.02	1.40	-0.14**	0.19**	0.13*	0.21**	-0.08	-0.12*	0.05	(0.94)	
9. WW	2.52	1.24	-0.23**	-0.05	-0.03	-0.07	0.31**	0.31**	-0.17**	-0.55**	(0.96)

Notes: CM = customer mistreatment; EE = emotional exhaustion; SS = social support; CO = conscientiousness; WW = work withdrawal; The number in parenthesis refers to Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for the scales; * $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$ (two-tailed)

Table II.
Results of
hierarchical
regression analysis
for emotional
exhaustion

Variables	Model 1	Emotional exhaustion Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<i>Control</i>				
Gender	0.15	0.04	0.04	0.04
Age	−0.07	−0.02	−0.01	0.02
Education	0.14*	0.06	0.05	0.05
Organization tenure	0.09	0.05	0.05	0.05
<i>Independent</i>				
Customer mistreatment		0.57**	0.58**	0.58**
<i>Moderator</i>				
Social support			0.08	0.03
<i>Interaction</i>				
Customer mistreatment × Social support				−0.15**
R^2	0.02	0.34	0.35	0.38
ΔR^2	0.02	0.32	0.01	0.03
F	2.16	40.38**	34.35**	33.84**
ΔF	2.16	189.10**	3.11	20.52**

Notes: * $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$ (two-tailed)

regression model. We also used resampling-based bootstrapping approach suggested by [Edwards and Lambert \(2007\)](#) to examine the mediating effect by generating 2,000 samples and calculating bias-corrected confidence intervals. Results demonstrated a significant indirect effect of customer mistreatment on employees' withdrawal behavior via emotional exhaustion (the 95 per cent confidence intervals of the indirect effect was [0.03, 0.19]). These results supported *H3*.

Our second set of hypotheses focus on the moderating roles of social support and conscientiousness. *H4* predicts that social support will attenuate the positive relation between customer mistreatment and emotional exhaustion. As shown in [Table II](#), the interaction between customer mistreatment and social support was negatively related to emotional exhaustion ($\beta = -0.15$, $p \leq 0.01$, Model 4 in [Table II](#)). We then further plotted the interaction effects using the procedure proposed by [Aiken and West \(1991\)](#), computing slopes one standard deviation below and above the mean of social support. [Figure 2](#) presents the interaction effect. Specifically, simple slope analyses indicated that customer mistreatment is more strongly related to emotional exhaustion at low level of social support ($\beta = 0.75$, $p \leq 0.01$) than at high level of social support ($\beta = 0.43$, $p \leq 0.01$). Thus, *H4* was supported. *H5* predicts that conscientiousness will mitigate the positive relation between emotional exhaustion and work withdrawal. As shown in [Table III](#), the interaction between emotional exhaustion and conscientiousness was negatively related to work withdrawal ($\beta = -0.15$, $p \leq 0.01$, Model 6 in [Table III](#)). [Figure 3](#) illustrates the conscientiousness interaction pattern. Specifically, simple slope analyses revealed that emotional exhaustion is positively related to work withdrawal when conscientiousness is low ($\beta = 0.49$, $p \leq 0.01$), but is insignificant when conscientiousness is high ($\beta = 0.04$, n.s.). These results supported *H5*.

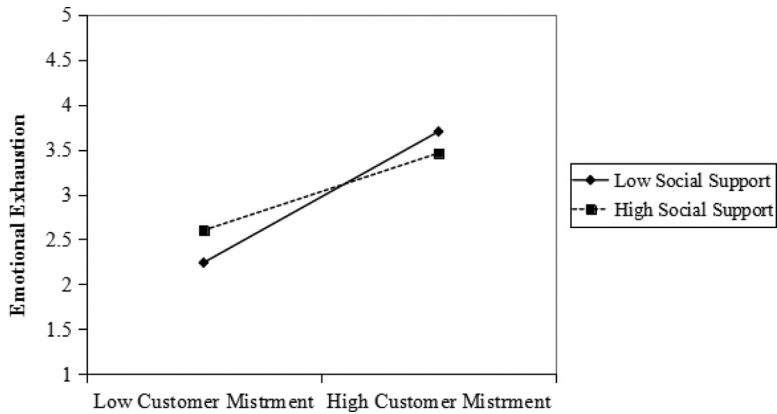
We also examined all hypotheses using PROCESS for SPSS version 2.16 ([Hayes, 2013](#)). As summarized in [Table IV](#), using Model 21 proposed by [Hayes \(2013\)](#) and controlling for employee's gender, age, education and organization tenure, results further supported the all

Table III.
Results of
hierarchical
regression analysis
for work withdrawal

Variables	Work withdrawal					
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
<i>Control</i>						
Gender	−0.58**	−0.63**	−0.64**	−0.65**	−0.45**	−0.36**
Age	−0.03	−0.01	0.00	−0.01	−0.03	0.02
Education	−0.04	−0.08	−0.08	−0.09	−0.01	0.02
Organization tenure	−0.03	−0.06	−0.05	−0.06	0.00	0.01
<i>Independent</i>						
Customer mistreatment			0.32**	0.20**	0.17**	0.17**
<i>Moderator</i>						
Social support					−0.14**	−0.17**
<i>Interaction</i>						
Customer mistreatment × Social support						−0.02
<i>Mediator</i>						
Emotional exhaustion		0.32**		0.21**	0.16**	0.16**
<i>Moderator</i>						
Conscientiousness					−0.44**	−0.43**
<i>Interaction</i>						
Emotional exhaustion × Conscientiousness						−0.15**
R ²	0.06	0.17	0.17	0.20	0.44	0.49
ΔR ²	0.06	0.11	0.00	0.03	0.24	0.05
F	5.81**	15.55**	15.49**	15.80**	37.52**	37.36**
ΔF	5.81**	51.48**	51.23**	14.65**	82.85**	21.15**

Notes: * $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$ (two-tailed)

Figure 2.
Moderating effect of
social support on the
relationship between
customer
mistreatment and
employees' emotional
exhaustion



five hypotheses proposed above. Specifically, the coefficient between customer mistreatment and emotional exhaustion was 1.31 ($CI_{0.95} = 0.98, 1.63$), supporting *H1*. The coefficient between emotional exhaustion and work withdrawal was 0.88 ($CI_{0.95} = 0.63, 1.13$), supporting *H2*. The results also indicated a significant indirect effect of customer

mistreatment on employees' withdrawal behavior via emotional exhaustion (index = 0.02, $CI_{0.95} = 0.01, 0.04$), supporting *H3*. The interaction between customer mistreatment and social support was significantly related to emotional exhaustion (coefficient = -0.15 , $CI_{0.95} = -0.21, -0.08$), supporting *H4*. The interaction between emotional exhaustion and conscientiousness was significantly related to work withdrawal (coefficient = -0.15 , $CI_{0.95} = -0.19, -0.10$), supporting *H5*.

Discussion and implications

By testing our hypotheses based on COR theory, our research advanced the field by demonstrating that emotional exhaustion is an important mechanism underlying the relation between customer mistreatment and employees' work withdrawal. We also have shown that different kinds of resources can mitigate the harmful consequences of customer mistreatment on employees' coping processes: social support moderates the relation between customer mistreatment and employees' emotional exhaustion, whereas conscientiousness moderates the relation between emotional exhaustion and employees' withdrawal behavior. Thus, while customer mistreatment may come at a high cost, employees can apply different coping resources to deal with them.

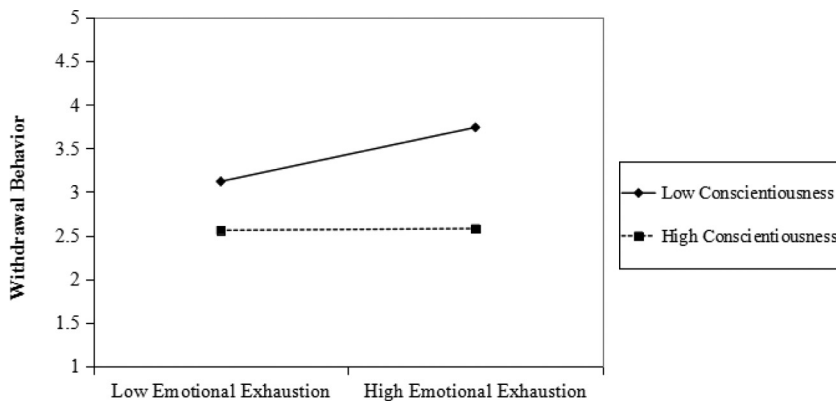


Figure 3.
Moderating effect of
conscientiousness on
the relationship
between emotional
exhaustion and work
withdrawal

Hypothesis	Effect index	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
<i>H1</i> : CM → EE	1.31	0.17	0.98	1.63
<i>H2</i> : EE → WW	0.88	0.13	0.63	1.13
<i>H3</i> : CM → EE → WW	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.04
<i>H4</i> : CM × SS → EE	-0.15	0.03	-0.21	-0.08
<i>H5</i> : EE × CO → WW	-0.15	0.02	-0.19	-0.10

Notes: CM = customer mistreatment; EE = emotional exhaustion; SS = social support; CO = conscientiousness; WW = work withdrawal; SE refers to standard error; LLCI refers to bias corrected lower limit confidence interval; ULCI refers to bias corrected upper limit confidence interval; Bootstrap samples: 5,000

Table IV.
Results of PROCESS
analysis for all
hypotheses

Theoretical implications

Our research makes a contribution to the related literature in the following ways. On the one hand, we draw from COR theory to establish a conceptual framework that delineates the mechanisms by which interpersonal conflict with customers contributes to employees' work withdrawal. In doing so, we integrate insights from several areas of the literature and assess the extent to which emotional exhaustion serves as a mediator in the relation between customer mistreatment and employees' withdrawal behavior. By regarding customer mistreatment as a threatening situation for service employees, we can see that coping with such negative encounters consumes their psychological resources and results in a drain on internal resources. In turn, to avoid further resource depletion and protect their own well-being, exhausted employees distance themselves physically and psychologically from their work.

On the other hand, we further extend the use of COR theory by distinguishing different kinds of coping resources that serve to buffer the customer mistreatment – employee withdrawal behavior association. Specifically, we consider contextual resources, in the form of social support, and personal resources, in the form of conscientiousness, as critical factors that act to mitigate the negative effects of customer mistreatment. We propose that these two kinds of resources play a positive role at different phases of the coping process. We provide a theoretical explanation for the buffering role of social support and conscientiousness. In doing so, we respond to calls for theory-based predictions of the differential effects of personal-based social support and individual conscientiousness.

Practical implications

Customer mistreatment has been a major concern for managers who wish to effectively motivate their employees to provide high-quality customer service, especially in the health-care industry in China. Hence, researchers and practitioners may wish to search for practical ways to mitigate the negative effect of customer mistreatment. The present study provides insights into how researchers and practitioners can approach this problem. Although we test hypotheses with a sample of health care workers, our research also has notable implications for organizations within industries that are susceptible to customer mistreatment, such as insurance, retail and social services.

First, the research results suggest that managers should closely watch the mistreatment by customers toward front-line employees. As showed in our research, customer mistreatment may come at a high cost because mistreated employees will experience emotional exhaustion and in turn engage in work withdrawal behavior. Our findings should be taken as a warning of management to take precautionary initiatives to address misbehaving customers and reduce the occurrence of customer mistreatment. In addition, as emotional exhaustion acts as a mediator in the linkage between customer mistreatment and employees' withdrawal behavior, organizational management should pay close attention to the emotional needs of front-line employees. Managers may keep track of the emotional status of employees and take proper actions to deflect the emotional harm and to prevent the subsequent occurrence of withdrawal behaviors once these employees show possible signs of job burnout.

Second, our study highlights the crucial role of social support in workplace. As demonstrated in our findings, individuals who have access to the support from coworkers and supervisors are less likely to experience the ill effects of customer mistreatment. Thus, organizations should take actions to promote communication and connection between employees and their supervisors and coworkers, such as creating online discussion groups for service employees, through which they can share their encounters with misbehaving

customers and their experiences in coping effectively with these difficult situations. In addition, it will benefit both organizations and employees by promoting employees' social skills in mobilizing useful support from others in the workplace and improving positive work relations.

Third, our findings also have important implications for employee selection and management. As employees high in conscientiousness can deal more effectively with the exhausted state resulting from customer mistreatment, managers should pay more attention to the personal trait of conscientiousness when making selection decisions. It is advisable for organizations to adjust their selection strategies and hire conscientious employees who can maintain high quality service under stress. Moreover, although the present study found that conscientious employees would be less likely to engage in withdrawal behavior when they feel emotionally exhausted at work, it is worth noting that these employees may be more psychologically vulnerable in terms of further resource depletion (Lin *et al.*, 2015). Thus, managers should continuously keep an eye on the physical and mental health state of conscientious employees. Once a sustained state of physical and mental fatigue is found among these employees, supervisors may assist them in replenishing their internal resources. In doing so, managers can help high-potential employees delay the onset of emotional exhaustion and reduce its negative effects.

Limitations and future research directions

Despite the implications stated above, our study still has some limitations. First, the sample we used in this research may limit the generalizability of our conclusions. The sample consisted of health care workers from public hospitals in China, and this could make our finding more culture-specific. Due to the caring and curing nature of the health care industry and the characteristics of Chinese culture, it is less likely for health care workers to reduce their effort and withdraw from their work, even in the face of mistreatment. In addition, as increasing attention is paid to the negative relationship between health care workers and customers in China, health care workers may suffer from even greater stress, which could make them more cautious in deciding to withdraw. In this regard, the linkage between customer mistreatment and employee work withdrawal may be weaker in the Chinese health care industry than in other cultures. However, customer mistreatment in the health care industry is still representative of its kind and the information provided by our sample can be further verified by other studies in the future. Thus, the results of the present study remain crucial to advance our knowledge about the influence of customer mistreatment on employees' emotional and behavioral reactions. Future research that further explores this topic can examine potential cross-cultural differences and use a comparative sample of service employees in other industries, such as salespersons, receptionists and call center employees.

Second, all the variables in our study were measured by self-reporting. Though we collected data from health care workers in three waves to ensure the quality of our data, there is still a concern that the results of this study may be contaminated by common method variance. However, self-reported workplace stressors, emotions, feelings and attitudes are critical variables in literature concerning customer mistreatment, emotional exhaustion, and work withdrawal (Wang *et al.*, 2013; Greenbaum *et al.*, 2014; Wagstaff *et al.*, 2015) and self-reporting is expected to generate more accurate measurements of one's emotional and cognitive state (Chi and Liang 2013; Ganster, 2008). The variables involved in our research, particularly employee work withdrawal, were measured in accordance with most previous studies (Wagstaff *et al.*, 2015; Chi and Liang, 2013). Nevertheless, future research that focuses on related topics might benefit from a multi-source research design

and measure employee work withdrawal behavior by collecting other-reported data (e.g. supervisor-reported or coworker-reported employee work withdrawal). In addition, future research could also use a daily research paradigm to track temporal contingencies that affect the impact of customer mistreatment on employees' work withdrawal.

Third, we do not distinguish different sources of social support, which can come from coworkers, supervisors, family members and friends (ten Brummelhuis and Bakker, 2012). Though we have proved that employees with high social support can generally better cope with customer mistreatment, it is worth noting that each kind of social support may have different effects on this relationship. For example, relationships between employees and colleagues concentrate more upon social reciprocity and mutual trust, whereas relationships between supervisors and subordinates emphasize more on the aspects of economic transactions and job responsibility (Mccarthy *et al.*, 2016). Thus, it is logical to believe that support provided by coworkers and supervisors should function differently. Future research may examine whether different sources of social support differ in mechanisms by which they act to attenuate the detrimental effects of customer mistreatment on employees' well-being and behavior.

Finally, we only focus on social support and conscientiousness as buffers against the negative effects of customer mistreatment. However, employees' coping skills could also play an important role in their encounters of customer mistreatment and should be addressed in future research. In response to verbal abuse, Elgin (1992) suggests that people can develop verbal and psychological skills in self-defense. For example, people can learn to identify different types of verbal attack and choose an appropriate response accordingly. Meanwhile, body language and voice quality can also be useful in promoting effective interaction. Thus, future research may explore the possible impact of employees' coping skills on their reactions to misbehaving customers.

Conclusion

Our study reveals new factors that contribute to front-line employees' work withdrawal behavior. Specifically, we have explored the relation between customer mistreatment and employees' withdrawal behavior by regarding the mistreatment as a workplace stressor and investigating employees' coping mechanisms based on COR theory. Then we have tested our proposed hypotheses by means of a sample of health care workers from public hospitals in China and found that emotional exhaustion serves as a new theoretical link between customer mistreatment and work withdrawal. Our study also provides insights into how different kinds of coping resources (contextual resources and personal resources) can be utilized by employees who are mistreated by their customers. Overall, while demonstrating the detrimental consequence of customer mistreatment, our study has further suggested that social support and conscientiousness can alleviate its negative effects.

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Further reading

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