

The Impact of Customer Incivility on Employee Cheating Behavior: An Explanation of Conservation of Resources Theory

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Abstract. Previous studies have focused on the internal factors of employee cheating behavior, but neglected the external factors, such as customer attitudes and behavior. Based on the conservation of resources theory, this study explores how customer incivility affects employee cheating behavior through harmonious passion and discusses the moderating role of employee rumination in the relationship between customer incivility and harmonious passion. Data was collected from 298 supervisor-subordinate dyads of 4- and 5-star hotels in China. The results show that customer incivility indirectly affects employee cheating behavior, while harmonious passion intermediates the process. Rumination moderates the relationship between customer incivility and harmonious passion, as well as the intermediary role of harmonious passion in the relationship between customer incivility and employee cheating. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: Customer incivility; Cheating behavior; Harmonious passion; Rumination.

1. Introduction

Scholars in the field of marketing have proposed the principle of “the customer is God”; thus, most organizations require employees to maintain a good service attitude (Han et al., 2016). However, they have overlooked the detrimental effects of negative customer behavior on employees. In fact, customer incivility is common. For example, customers may use rude language to insult employees, and such examples are common in catering, medical, hotel, and other service industries. According to a survey that interviewed 9,000 employees from many countries, 99% of participants had seen uncivilized behavior at work, and 96% claimed to have ever experienced customer incivility (Porath & Pearson, 2010). However, managers and scholars often overlook customer incivility as the degree of it is relatively low and does not equate to other egregious and violent behaviors.

Extant research has shown that customer incivility has a negative impact on employees, such as increasing employees’ work pressure, reducing job satisfaction (Koon & Pun, 2018), leading to slacking behaviors (Cho et al., 2016), and even triggering turnover (Han et al., 2016). Furthermore, the negative effects of customer incivility go far beyond these. Treviño et al. (2014) asserted that adverse factors in the work environment could exacerbate employees’ unethical behavior. Customer incivility is the “nutrient” that breeds a lousy work environment. Employees may retaliate against organizations by engaging in unethical behaviors like cheating (e.g., exaggerating working hours) to maintain their self-esteem (Shu et al., 2011). According to the conservation of resources theory (COR; Hobfoll, 1989), the process of individuals facing pain, sadness, and other negative emotions is a typical situation of resource consumption. Under such circumstances, they tend to take a series of actions to obtain and protect their emotional and psychological resources and compensate for the depleted resources accordingly.

Prolonged exposure to customer incivility can impair employees’ short- and long-term emotional health (Li et al., 2017; Sliter & Jones, 2015), resulting in emotional deficits and unethical behavior. Harmonious passion can define individuals who internalize activities into their own identity and are able to freely pursue and enjoy activities (Vallerand et al., 2003). When confronted with customer incivility, the resources of harmonious passion are lost, and employees cannot spontaneously participate in the activity, which eventually induces negative behaviors in employees. Therefore,

based on the COR theory, this study explores the mediating role of harmonious passion between customer incivility and employee cheating behavior.

Cheating behavior has the characteristics of violating recognized standards and bringing benefits to oneself (Moore et al., 2012; Gino et al., 2011), and there may be special boundary conditions in the relationship between customer incivility and this behavior. Requiring employees to maintain positive interactions with customers who behave in bad manners could cause excessive emotional pressure on employees (Diefendorff et al., 2006; Zhu et al., 2021). Rumination refers to the repetitive thinking of one's negative emotions, which is the wrong way of dealing with negative emotions (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). Rumination can aggravate the reaction to negative emotions, making employees more pessimistic and consuming more emotional resources (Porath & Erez, 2007). Therefore, employees' rumination can be regarded as an essential factor affecting the relationship between customer incivility and the adverse behavioral outcomes of employees.

In sum, from the perspective of interpersonal interaction between "employee-customer" in the hospitality industry, this paper intends to explore the impact of customer incivility on employee cheating behavior through a multisource and time-lagged research design based on a sample of 298 supervisor-subordinate dyads in China. Drawing upon the COR theory (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 1989), by focusing on the short-term emotional state of employees in the workplace and their personality, in particular, rumination, we further investigate the mechanism behind this process (i.e., the mediating role of harmonious passion), and whether there is a boundary condition (i.e., the moderating role of rumination). This helps theoretically make up for the lack of research on cheating behavior and unravel the "black box" between customer incivility and employee behavior. Moreover, this study enriches the research on cheating behavior by examining the boundary conditions of this process in the context of China, providing cross-cultural empirical evidence. It also offers practical inspiration and references for improving the service quality of frontline employees in practice and promoting the sustainable development of the service industry.

2. Theory and hypotheses

2.1 COR theory

Hobfoll (1989) first proposed the COR theory based on the perspective of the relationship between stress and resources. This theory describes how individuals face and cope with stress and explains the changes in resources when dealing with stress. As suggested by COR theory, individuals try to acquire, maintain, cultivate and protect the resources they cherish to meet their needs of adapting to the environment and maintaining their survival (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 1989). Whether resources are threatened by potential loss or suffer from actual loss, it can put pressure on individuals and make them nervous (Halbesleben et al., 2014).

COR theory involves two core principles. First, the impact of resource loss is far more critical than resource acquisition, and the effect is faster and lasts longer. The fewer resources an individual has, the more likely an individual is to experience the loss of resources and further fall into the spiral of resource loss. When individuals experience resource loss in the work process, they are more likely to trigger stress and stress responses, including burnout and depression. Second, Individuals are inclined to maintain those resources that they think are extremely valuable and strive to mitigate the loss of resources (Halbesleben, 2010).

According to the COR theory, there is a large amount of resource exchange between employees and customers in the service interaction process. When employees encounter the uncivilized behavior of customers, their resources reduce sharply (Sharma & Mishra, 2021), leading them to fall into negative emotions. Eventually, the employees are unwilling to invest more resources in their work. Therefore, from the perspective of employee resource acquisition and consumption, this study aims to explore the mechanism and boundary conditions of the relationship between customer incivility and employee cheating behavior encountered by frontline employees in the hospitality industry.

2.2 Customer incivility on employee cheating behavior

Customer incivility is the most common form of abuse in the workplace (Sliter et al., 2012; Sharma & Mishra, 2021). Andersson and Pearson (1999) defined customer incivility as behavior that violates workplace norms and disrespects others. Customer incivility in the workplace has three characteristics: the destruction of workplace norms, the vague intention of behavior implementation, and the slight degree of its negative impact. Due to its particular manifestations, this behavior generally undermines workplace norms but does not violate the law (Lim et al., 2008; Li et al., 2021). Customer incivility is a social stressor. Employees who experience customer incivility are more likely to experience negative emotions, and when such negative emotions gradually accumulate, they can have a negative impact on employees (Han et al., 2016; Kim & Bake, 2019).

According to Treviño et al. (2014), adverse factors in the work environment could exacerbate the emergence of unethical behavior among employees. Cheating behavior is related to the social environment in which individuals live (Mitchell et al., 2018). The reasons why individuals cheat their organizations generally include competitive pressure imposed by peers, high expectations of the organization, the desire for others' recognition, fear of failure, and other situations where their resources may be deprived to solve pressing needs.

Cheating behavior in the workplace generally occurs when individuals seek to improve their job performance (Sliter et al., 2012). When employees encounter customer incivility, they need to spend a lot of psychological resources to fill the expectation of recognition, which leads to a decline in employees' performance in the workplace, a gap in the outflow of resources, and even resource exhaustion. At this time, employees need to replenish resources in a timely manner, relieve pressure and improve superficial performance through cheating and retaliating against the organization to maintain the balance of resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Based on this, we propose Hypothesis 1:

Hypothesis 1: Customer incivility is positively related to employee cheating behavior.

2.3 The mediating role of harmonious passion

Harmonious passion emerges when individuals freely accept activities that are important to them without any random attachment, which they voluntarily consider essential because of the nature of the work itself (Vallerand et al., 2003). Customer incivility is a social stressor that consumes employees' emotional and cognitive resources (Han et al., 2016). Moreover, maintaining harmonious passion requires consuming resources. Due to individuals' limited ability and energy to maintain harmonious passion (Lee et al., 2012), when employee resources are damaged, job satisfaction decreases, and adjustment fails, employees cannot freely accept and integrate into their own identity to enjoy work. Employees use psychological resources to adjust their passion involuntarily and accordingly lose these resources, which makes employees lack harmonious passion resources to deal with stress, resulting in resource exhaustion (Barnes et al., 2015). When employees face urgent needs for psychological resources, employees tend to engage in unethical behaviors such as cheating and retaliating against organizations that can address these needs.

We argue that customer incivility reduces the harmonious passion of employees, thereby increasing the probability of employee cheating behavior. According to the COR theory, the loss of individual resources makes it impossible for them to maintain harmonious passion. This means they cannot participate in activities spontaneously and damage their persistence and motivation. Considering the motivation to maintain and protect their emotional and psychological resources, employees make up for their emotional and psychological resources by taking retaliation against the organization through cheating (Halbesleben et al., 2014). We, therefore, hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 2: Customer incivility is negatively related to employee harmonious passion.

Hypothesis 3: Harmonious passion mediates the relationship between customer incivility and employee cheating behavior.

2.4 The moderating role of rumination

As a negative way of thinking, rumination refers to an individual's immersion in sadness for a long time rather than trying to think about solutions (Vallerand et al., 2003). Rumination was first proposed because of depression. Although extant research has shown that rumination can help individuals identify problems, it often leads to adverse outcomes. Being immersed in rumination for a long time could make individuals unable to control their thoughts, which causes health problems (Denson et al., 2009), and eventually affect their work performance, resulting in cognitive barriers (Wang et al., 2013). Customer incivility impairs employees' short- and long-term emotional health (Li et al., 2017; Sliter & Jones, 2015). Thus, employees who experience customer incivility can deplete resources by coping with negative emotions, which may trigger emotional exhaustion (Donahue et al., 2012; Henkel et al., 2017). However, when individuals involuntarily adjust their emotions, a sense of disharmony is likely to occur (Beal et al., 2006). Due to the limited attention resources, when this disharmony is repeatedly experienced through rumination, these negative emotional responses can be exacerbated, making employees more pessimistic, depleting emotional resources, and harming employee satisfaction and performance (Cropanzano et al., 2003).

Drawing from the COR theory, rumination reduces employees' spontaneous participation in activities that make them pleasant, enjoyable, and distracting, decreases harmonious passion, and exacerbates negative emotions (Baranik et al., 2017). Employees immersed in negative emotions tend to have bad moods and reduced performance. Those harmonious passions that should be put into work are occupied by rumination, and emotional resources are even more challenging to supplement when experiencing customer incivility. Thus, we propose the following:

Hypothesis 4: The relationship between customer incivility and employee harmonious passion is moderated by rumination such that a negative relationship is stronger when rumination is higher rather than lower.

Based on the discussion above and existing research, it can be seen that rumination can be regarded as a negative emotional resource, which strengthens customer incivility and harms employees' psychology and behavior. Specifically, customer incivility causes a greater sense of resource deprivation and emotional resource consumption in employees with a higher level of rumination. Thus, their intention to retaliate against the organization through cheating to obtain resources is substantial. By contrast, employees with a lower level of rumination are more likely to experience less sense of resource deprivation, less emotional resource consumption, and less probability of retaliating against the organization through cheating. Based on this, we propose Hypothesis 5:

Hypothesis 5: Rumination moderates the mediating role of harmonious passion between customer incivility and employee cheating behavior and such relationship is stronger when rumination is higher rather than lower.

3. Methods

3.1 Procedure and sample

We collected data from frontline employees of 4- and 5-star hotels in Shanghai, Beijing, Chongqing, and Qingdao, China. Firstly, we contacted the general managers of these 4- and 5-star hotels and introduced the overview and purpose of this survey to them in detail. Then, following the principle of voluntary participation and confidentiality, the general managers issued online announcements to recruit volunteers. We obtained predictors and criterion variables from two different sources and at multiple times considering the potential common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003). More specifically, team members completed a measure of the independent variable, moderator variable, and demographics at Time 1. Meanwhile, when filling in the survey, we provided each participant with a random code as their identification number, which allowed us to match members' survey questionnaires with their leaders. After four weeks, at Time 2,

employees who had participated in the Time 1 survey rated the mediate variable. Team leaders assess their team members' cheating behavior in the Time 3 survey (4 weeks after Time 2). After eliminating invalid samples (i.e., missing data in questionnaires), 298 valid samples were finally matched, with a validity rate of 85.1%. The demographic characteristics of the sample are as follows. 79.2% were male, and 89.3% had completed high school degrees or above. The age was mainly between 31 and 40 years old, the working experience was mainly less than ten years, and the tenure was mainly less than five years.

3.2 Measures

In this study, measurements are based on mature scales developed abroad to ensure their scientificity. The translation/back-translation procedures were employed to translate the original measures into Chinese to avoid misunderstandings and translation bias caused by language and cultural differences (Brislin, 1980). The items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree").

3.2.1 Customer incivility

We employed the 7-item scale developed by Cortina et al. (2001) to measure customer incivility. A sample item is "made demeaning or derogatory remarks about you." The α reliability for our study was .90.

3.2.2 Harmonious passion

We measured harmonious passion using a 7-item scale developed by Vallerand et al. (2003). A sample item is "Running this business is in harmony with the other activities in my life." In this study, the α reliability was .77.

3.2.3 Cheating behavior

We adopted the 7-item scale developed by Mitchell et al. (2018) to measure employee cheating behavior. A sample item is "Misrepresented work activity to make it look as though you have been productive." The α reliability for our study was .90.

3.2.4 Rumination

A 5-item scale developed by Treynor et al. (2003) was used to measure employees' rumination. A sample item is "Go someplace alone to think about your feelings." In this study, the α reliability was .79.

3.2.5 Control variables

Given the potential for demographic variables to influence employee cheating behavior, we controlled for participants' gender, age, education, working experience, and tenure.

4. Results

4.1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Before hypotheses testing, we adopted AMOS 22.0 to conduct a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to examine the distinctiveness of four focal variables included in this study: customer incivility, rumination, harmonious passion, and cheating behavior. As demonstrated in Table 1, the four-factor model offered a satisfactory fit to the data ($\chi^2(293) = 803.30$, CFI = .92, NFI = .91, RMSEA = .07). More importantly, the proposed four-factor model's fitness was much more satisfactory than the alternative models. This suggested that the proposed model fitted the data well and that our focal variables have discriminant validity.

Table 1. Results of CFA

Models	χ^2	<i>df</i>	NLI	CFI	RMSEA
Benchmark model (Four-factor model):	803.30	293	0.91	0.92	0.07

CI;HP;CR;CB					
Three-factor model: CI;HP+CR;CB	1603.62	296	0.60	0.64	0.12
Two-factor model: CI+HP+CR;CB	1965.19	298	0.50	0.54	0.14
One-factor model: CI+HP+CR+CB	2359.00	299	0.38	0.43	0.15

Notes: $N = 299$; “+” represents two factors merged into one;

CI: customer incivility; HP: harmonious passion; CR: employee rumination; CB: cheating behavior.

4.2 Descriptive statistics and correlations

The descriptive statistics are presented in Table 2. Customer incivility was positively related to employee cheating behavior ($r = .39, p < 0.01$), while it was negatively related to harmonious passion ($r = -.23, p < 0.01$). In addition, harmonious passion and employee cheating behavior showed a negative connection ($r = -.23, p < 0.01$). These outcomes provided preliminary support for our suggested hypotheses.

Table 2. Mean, standard deviation and correlation values

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 Age	2.21	0.86	1								
2 Gender	0.79	0.41	0.16*	1							
3 Education	2.81	1.02	-0.38**	-0.28	1						
4 Tenure	1.33	0.58	0.120**	0.09	0.18*	1					
5 Experience	1.66	0.83	0.53*	0.08	-0.20**	0.20*	1				
6 Customer incivility	1.89	0.76	0.07	0.22*	-0.16**	0.08	0.08	1			
7 Cheating behavior	1.78	0.75	-0.04	0.09	-0.01	0.03	-0.01	0.39*	1		
8 Harmonious passion	3.82	0.06	0.09	0.03	0.10	0.07	0.02	-0.23**	-0.23**	1	
9 Rumination	3.49	0.66	0.05	0.02	0.12*	0.05	-0.02	0.01	0.02	0.29*	1

Notes: $N = 298, *p < .05, **p < .01$.

4.3 Hypotheses testing

We conducted a series of hierarchical regression analyses to test the hypotheses above. Hypothesis 1 sought to assess the negative influence of customer incivility on the cheating behavior of hotel employees. As shown in Table 3, customer incivility was negatively related to employee cheating behavior ($\beta = .40, p < .01$; see Model 4), supporting Hypothesis 1. The results further revealed that customer incivility negatively influenced employees’ harmonious passion in the hospitality industry ($\beta = -.24, p < .01$; see Model 2). Hence, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Table 3. The results of parameter estimates

Variables	Harmonious passion		Cheating behavior		Cheating behavior	
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6
Age	0.16	0.14	-0.07	-0.04	-0.03	-0.02
Gender	0.06	0.10	0.10	0.03	0.12	0.05
Education	0.18	0.14	0.01	0.07	0.06	0.09
Tenure	0.07	0.10	0.01	-0.05	0.02	-0.03
Experience	-0.03	-0.02	0.02	-0.00	0.02	-0.01
Customer incivility		-0.24**		0.40**		0.37**
Harmonious					-0.24**	-0.16**

passion							
R ²	0.04	0.01**		0.02**	0.17**		0.07**
ΔR ²		0.06			0.15**		0.12**

Notes: N = 298, *p < .05, **p < .01.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that harmonious passion could mediate the relationship between customer incivility and employee cheating behavior. In the test, we used the classic method given by Baron and Kenny (1986). As shown in Model 4 in Table 3, customer incivility positively affected employee cheating behavior ($\beta = .40, p < .01$). Hypothesis 1 was verified and the first condition of the intermediary effect test is met. Model 2 showed that customer incivility negatively affected harmonious passion ($\beta = -.24, p < .01$), which supported Hypothesis 2 and met the second condition of the intermediary effect test. As shown in Model 6, when independent variables and intermediary variables regressed the dependent variables in the meantime, harmonious passion negatively affected employee cheating behavior significantly ($\beta = -.16, p < .01$), while the impact of customer incivility on employee cheating behavior was verified significantly ($\beta = .37, p < .01$), meeting the third condition of the intermediary effect test. Hypothesis 3 was supported. We then employed a bootstrapping-based mediation test using the PROCESS macro to support further the mediation effects described in Hypotheses 3 (Hayes, 2015). The bootstrapped indirect effect was significant when the bias-corrected 95% confidence interval (CI) excludes zero (indirect effect = .037, 95% CI [.004, .089]), Hypothesis 3 was further supported.

Table 4. The results of moderating effect

Variables	Harmonious passion		
	M1	M2	M3
Age	0.16	0.11	0.09
Gender	0.06	0.09	0.08
Education	0.18	0.09	0.07
Tenure	0.07	0.06	0.07
Experience	-0.03	-0.01	0.02
Customer incivility		-0.25**	-0.27**
Employee rumination		0.27**	0.28**
Customer incivility × Employee rumination			0.15**
R ²	0.04	0.16**	0.19**
ΔR ²		0.12**	0.02**

Notes: N = 298, *p < .05, **p < .01.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that rumination would moderate the relationship between customer incivility and harmonious passion. In order to avoid the problem of multicollinearity, the independent and moderator variables were centered when constructing the interaction term. As can be seen in Model 3 of Table 4, the interaction of customer incivility with harmonious passion played an active role in harmonious passion ($\beta = .15, p < .01$), which supported Hypothesis 4. Moreover, we plotted the interaction effects on harmonious passion (Figure 2) at two conditional values of rumination.

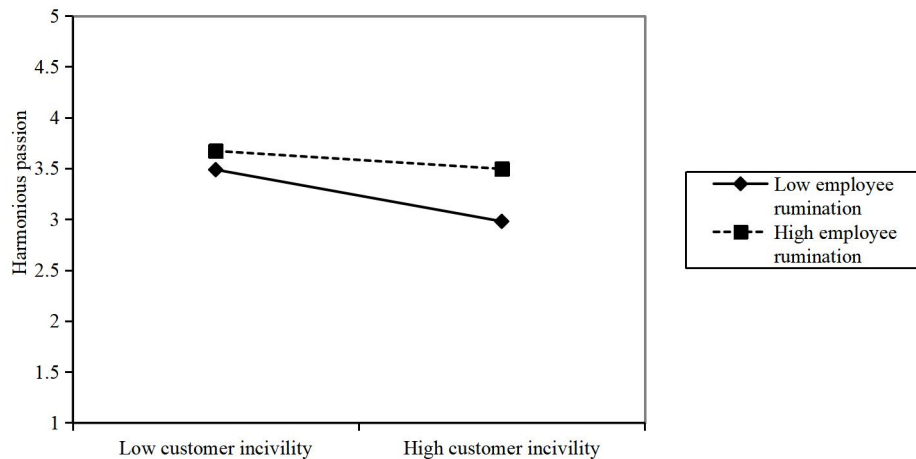


Fig. 1 Interaction effect of customer incivility and employee rumination on harmonious passion

The result in Table 5 showed that harmonious passion had a negative effect on employee cheating behavior when rumination was higher (estimate = 0.022, 95% CI [.001, .076]). By contrast, with a low level of rumination, the effect of harmonious passion was also significant on employee cheating behavior (estimate = 0.062, 95% CI [.013, .127]). The path of moderated mediation was significant at the 95% CI [.006, .086]. Therefore, Hypothesis 5 was verified

5. Discussion

Drawing from the COR theory, this study matched leader-follower dyads from 4- and 5-star hotels in China as the research object to explore the interactions between customer incivility, harmonious passion, and employee cheating behavior. The results showed that customer incivility could directly affect employee cheating behavior and positively impact employee cheating behavior through harmonious passion. In this process, employee rumination not only moderated the relationship between customer incivility and employee harmonious passion but also moderated the intermediary effect of harmonious passion between customer incivility and employee cheating behavior. When there was higher employee rumination, the negative effect of customer incivility on employee harmonious passion was stronger. Additionally, the intermediary effect of harmonious passion on the relationship between customer incivility and employee cheating behavior was also stronger.

5.1 Theoretical implications

This study makes three theoretical contributions. First, within the hospitality industry context, this study demonstrates that customer incivility has a significant positive impact on employee cheating behavior and enriches the research content of the influencing factors of cheating behavior. Although extant research has focused on factors within organizations that may influence employee cheating behavior, such as performance pressures exacerbating unethical behavior, the impact of customer incivility on employee cheating behavior has been ignored. In this study, we theoretically and empirically investigate the impact of customer incivility on employees cheating behavior by a multisource and time-lagged research design based on a sample of 298 supervisor-subordinate dyads in the hospitality industry. This strengthens the understanding of the influencing factors of cheating behavior and provides a beneficial supplement to previous research.

Second, based on the COR theory, this study discusses the mechanism of the influence of customer incivility on employee cheating behavior with the introduction of harmonious passion as a mediator, uncovering the “black box” between the two. Indeed, Kim & Baker (2019) specifically called for research to examine the intermediary mechanism of customer incivility. We respond to this call and deepen the understanding of how customer incivility affects employee cheating

behavior. Customer incivility can reduce the harmonious passion of employees, which in turn leads employees to commit cheating to retaliate against the organization. This study enriches the application scope of COR theory and provides a valuable theoretical framework for the in-depth understanding of the mechanism of customer incivility to employee cheating behavior.

Third, by introducing rumination as a moderator, this study discovers the boundary of the effect of customer incivility on harmonious passion. The empirical analysis results reveal the moderating effect of rumination on the relationship between customer incivility and harmonious passion. That is, customer incivility brings a greater sense of resource deprivation and emotional resource consumption to employees with high rumination, further enhancing the positive impact of customer incivility on employee cheating behavior through harmonious passion. Our study findings discuss a vital boundary between customer incivility and employees' harmonious passion, making an essential supplement to the existing research.

5.2 Practical implications

The findings of this study have implications for human resource management in the hospitality industry. First of all, formulate measures that can effectively deal with customer incivility. This study introduces customer incivility as a new factor influencing employee cheating behavior and proves that customer incivility can lead to employee cheating behavior. Therefore, this study provides a new idea on how to prevent the cheating behavior of frontline employees effectively. As customer incivility is characterized by a relatively light degree of harm and ambiguous intent to harm (Kim & Qu, 2019; Torres et al., 2017), employees have to face all kinds of customers every day, making it challenging to avoid customer incivility (Cheng et al., 2020; Torres et al., 2017). This enlightens that hotel managers should take appropriate measures to prevent customer incivility as much as possible, thus reducing the harm caused by customer incivility. Hotel managers should pay close attention to the occurrence of customer incivility. They can also encourage employees to proactively report any difficulties encountered in the service process, such as vexatious customers and improper requirements beyond the scope of their duties. Moreover, when encountering customer incivility, employees should seek help from leaders. Leaders should actively provide assistance and psychological counseling to help them adjust their psychological state.

Second, hotel managers should establish an employee- and customer-centered management concept rather than a single "the customer is God" service concept. Our study shows that harmonious passion plays a mediating role between customer incivility and employee cheating behavior. This finding suggests that hotel managers should pay more attention to the emotional state of employees and try to block negative emotions from the source as much as possible. On the one hand, hotel managers can consider giving frontline employees more autonomy to deal with customer incivility to reduce employee pressure (Cheng et al., 2020). On the other hand, hotels can carry out team-building activities to help employees maintain their passion for work, understand the actual thoughts of employees, help them eliminate negative emotions, and reduce the probability of cheating behavior.

Third, hotel managers can strengthen the personality test when recruiting employees. Our study confirms the moderating effect of rumination between customer incivility and employee harmonious passion. This finding enlightens the hospitality industry could hire employees with low levels of rumination within the scope permitted by laws and policies in talent recruitment to decrease the adverse impact of customer incivility on their work status. For employees with high levels of rumination, managers need to provide them with training to enhance their ability of communication and mutual understanding, which enhances their empathy ability when dealing with "unintentional" customer incivility. Meanwhile, for those "intentional" customer incivility, employees are encouraged to take positive measures to deal with it, such as effective communication with these customers, seeking to minimize the detrimental effects of customer incivility.

5.3 Limitations and future research

This study contains several limitations. First, we adopted a data collection method that lagged one month for its outcome variable (i.e., employee cheating behavior), which might lead to measurement deviation due to the stateful variable of harmonious passion. In particular, data was collected in three phases (each with a one-month interval), during which there may be other factors. Thus, the data collected in each phase does not truly reflect the relationship between variables. Future research can eliminate possible adverse factors through a more practical design to ensure rigor.

Second, this study only verifies the partial mediating effect of harmonious passion between customer incivility and employee cheating behavior. Future research can use other theoretical frameworks, such as social exchange theory and affective events theory, to further explore the intermediary mechanism between customer incivility and employee cheating behavior, such as job burnout, emotional exhaustion, occupational identification, and organizational identification.

Third, although the moderating effect of rumination is demonstrated in this study, it is unknown whether there are other boundary conditions. In particular, our study only examines the moderating effect from the perspective of individual personality traits. It does not involve the broader level of testing, such as co-workers support, leader support at the team level, and organizational climate at the organizational level. More research from multiple perspectives should be considered to enrich the research model further.

6. Conclusion

Based on the COR theory, this study finds that customer incivility is an essential antecedent for employee cheating behavior, which displays a positive impact on breeding employee cheating behavior via harmonious passion. Employee rumination moderates the relationship between customer incivility and employee harmonious passion. Managers from the hospitality industry investigated said customer incivility would exacerbate frontline employees' unethical behavior. Our study supports the influence mechanisms of customer incivility for employee cheating behavior, which makes some theoretical and practical contributions. As a whole, our results extend the research on customer incivility and its effects on employees' emotional experience and work behavior in new directions and suggest some promising areas for future work that are highly relevant to the potentially harmful effects of customer incivility.

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