Customer mistreatment and employee organizational citizenship behavior: An attributional approach

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INTRODUCTION
Customer mistreatment, defined as low quality interpersonal treatment service employees receive from their customers, has detrimental consequences for service employees and organizations, including increased negative affect, emotional exhaustion, and sabotage against the customer. While previous research has contributed to our understanding of the issues of how customer mistreatment impacts employees’ emotional well-being and customer service, few studies have focused on the potential negative impacts of customer mistreatment on employees’ attitudes and behaviors toward the organization and its members. The purpose of this research is thus to examine the relationships between customer mistreatment, employees’ perceived organizational support (POS), and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB).

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES
Attributional explanation of the impact of customer mistreatment on POS and OCB
Drawing on attribution theory, I looked at customer mistreatment as a negative, unvalued, and important social event that compels employees to determine why the event has occurred. Kelley (1973) contends that people arrive at certain types of causal attributions as a function of three informational factors: consistency, distinctiveness, and consensus. Customer mistreatment is a constant daily hassle and chronic source of stress for service employees (high consistency), who may not experience such a low-quality interpersonal treatment in other social interactions (high distinctiveness). Employees are also likely to witness and hear about many episodes of customer mistreatment from their colleagues (high consensus). Kelley’s theory suggests that an entity attribution is made when consistency, distinctiveness, and consensus are all high. The entity, in the context of customer mistreatment, can include work environment and the company. Customer mistreatment occurs during service interactions, the quality of which is controlled to some extent by the discretionary actions of the organization (e.g., display rule regulation and sanctions). Thus, mistreated employees are likely to hold their organizations responsible for the negative event, which in turn communicates to the employees that their organizations are not committed to their well-being. Social exchange theory further suggests that when employees feel that they are not supported by their organizations, they withhold OCBs as a way to restore the imbalanced exchange relationship. Therefore, employees’ perceptions of unfavorable working conditions resulting from their ascription of customer mistreatment to organizational factors negatively influences POS, which in turn leads to OCB.

Job autonomy refers to the extent to which employees have control over their methods, pace, and effort to perform work tasks (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). When employees with a greater level of job autonomy tend to take greater responsibility for work outcomes (Hackman & Oldham, 1976), low-autonomy employees are likely to perceive that their work is more controlled by the organization. Weiner (1985) suggests that the negative outcome attributed to the external party (e.g., the organization) has greater negative impacts on perceivers’ emotions and behavior when the outcome is perceived to be controllable by the external party. Thus, low-autonomy employees are more likely to attribute customer mistreatment to work environment and their organizations than high-autonomy employees.

H1: Employees’ POS mediates the relationship between customer mistreatment and their OCB.
H2: Employees’ perceived job autonomy moderates the relationship between customer mistreatment and POS such that the negative relationship is stronger for low-autonomy employees than high-autonomy employees.

RESEARCH METHODS
Sample and procedure
- 171 hotel customer contact employees from 19 hotels in a large city in China
- A three-wave, multi-source online survey (each four month time interval)
  - Employee survey at time 1: Customer mistreatment, perceived job autonomy, and trait negative affectivity
  - Employee survey at time 2: POS and participants’ demographic information
  - Direct supervisor survey at time 3: Employees’ OCB
- Translation/back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1980)

Measure
- Customer mistreatment: 18-item scale (Wang et al., 2011)
- Job autonomy: 4-item scale (Hackman and Oldham, 1980)
- POS: 8-item (Eisenberger et al., 1986)
- OCB: A 16-item scale (Lee and Allen, 2002)
- Control variables. Gender (1= female, 0= male), organizational tenure, trait negative affectivity (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Results of simple effect analysis of customer mistreatment on OCB through POS

This research contributes the literature in three ways. First, previous research has mainly focused on employee reactions to customer mistreatment from a customer-employee dyadic perspective (e.g., sabotage against customers or service performance). The possibility that service employees shape their perceptions and behaviors toward the service encounter is a relatively unexplored area of research. Second, previous research has focused on relatively temporal emotional reactions to customer mistreatment. This research moves this line of research forward by uncovering the relatively enduring attitudinal reactions to customer mistreatment. POS develops through employees’ assessment of the accumulated organizational experiences and represents overall exchange quality between employees and the organization. This provides future research direction focusing on the relatively enduring negative effects of customer mistreatment.

Third, previous studies have mainly built on stress and emotion theories to explain the relationships between customer mistreatment and its outcomes. This research used cognitive theories of causal attribution to the consequences of customer mistreatment to identify mediating and moderating mechanisms, which not only extends to the literature examining how and why customer mistreatment is harmful to service organizations, but broadens theoretical frameworks to understand consequences of customer mistreatment.