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Customer Incivility and Deviant Behavior Directed at Customers: Burnout and the Customer Orientation Paradox

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Abstract

Background: Customer incivility has become a pervasive stressor in hospitality. Repeated exposure to rude or disrespectful customer behaviors depletes emotional resources, increasing burnout and deviant behavior directed at customers. However, the underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions remain unclear.

Objective: Drawing on conservation of resources theory and the customer orientation paradox, this study examines whether burnout mediates the relationship between customer incivility and deviant behavior directed at customers and whether customer orientation moderates this mediation.

Design and Methodology: Using a cross-sectional survey design and purposive quota sampling, data were collected from 548 hotel employees in medium- and large-sized hotels in a southern province of Thailand. Structural equation modeling with latent moderated mediation was employed to test hypotheses.

Results: Customer incivility was positively associated with employees' deviant behavior directed at customers through burnout (standardized indirect effect = .06, 95% CI [.03, .10]). Customer orientation strengthened the relationship between customer incivility and burnout (standardized interaction effect = .10, 95% CI [.02, .18]). The indirect effect via burnout was stronger among employees with high customer orientation (standardized indirect effect = .14, 95% CI [.03, .26]) but nonsignificant among those with low customer orientation (standardized indirect effect = .01, 95% CI [-.04, .07]).

Conclusion and Implications: The findings highlight emotional resource depletion and cognitive dissonance as key mechanisms explaining why highly customer-oriented employees are vulnerable to customer incivility. Organizations should complement customer-oriented service values with emotion regulation training, supervisory support, and clear boundary-setting policies to protect employee well-being and prevent deviant service behaviors.

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In today's highly competitive hospitality and service environment, organizations increasingly emphasize employees' delivery of superior service quality and the creation of memorable experiences that go beyond customer expectations (Kandampully et al., 2018). To achieve this, many organizations instill customer orientation as a core value to encourage employees to understand and respond to customer needs with empathy and dedication to excellent service (Brown et al., 2002). While this strategic emphasis on customer orientation elevates employees' roles as value deliverers, it can also increase their emotional vulnerability, particularly when they are required to deal with difficult customers. In environments where customer satisfaction is prioritized above all else, some customers may develop a sense of entitlement to

incivility, believing that employees are obligated to meet their every demand and tolerate such behavior (Torres et al., 2017). As a result, employees who are most strongly committed to service excellence may experience heightened emotional strain when confronted with disrespectful customer treatment.

Customer incivility refers to low-intensity deviant behaviors by customers that violate norms of mutual respect, such as rude remarks, condescending tones, or unreasonable demands (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Sliter et al., 2010). Such encounters are becoming increasingly common in hospitality settings and pose a serious threat to employee well-being (Fisk & Neville, 2011; Kim et al., 2021). Unfortunately, management or supervisors often perceive customer incivility as a normal part of service work and neglect to provide appropriate solutions, leaving employees to cope with pressure alone (Booyens et al., 2022). Prior research has consistently linked customer incivility to increased emotional exhaustion (Alola et al., 2019; Im et al., 2024; Khanam & Tarab, 2025), decreased service performance (Im et al., 2024; Khanam & Tarab, 2025), reduced job satisfaction (Alola et al., 2019), and increased turnover intention (Alola et al., 2019; Im et al., 2024). Most critically, repeated exposure to customer incivility may trigger retaliatory or deviant behavior directed at customers (Im et al., 2024).

Deviant behavior directed at customers is defined as intentional actions by employees that violate expected service conduct, such as being blunt with customers, raising their tone of voice, or intentionally slowing down their service to a customer (Shao & Skarlicki, 2014; van Jaarsveld et al., 2010). This behavior represents a violation of organizational service norms and negatively affects the delivery of an excellent customer experience (Daunt & Harris, 2014). From a behavioral perspective, such actions should not be viewed merely as individual misconduct but as maladaptive coping responses that may emerge when employees' emotional resources are depleted by sustained work stressors.

In Thailand, the hospitality industry remains a significant contributor to the national economy and labor market, yet it continues to face persistent workforce challenges. Prior research in the Thai hotel sector has shown that hotel employees report elevated turnover intentions linked to poor mental well-being and work-related stress, indicating that psychological strain is a salient concern in this industry (Weerakit et al., 2025). Empirical studies have further identified heightened burnout among hotel employees as a consequence of sustained emotional labor demands, particularly in luxury hotel contexts in Bangkok, the capital of Thailand (Srisakun et al., 2024). Together, these findings reinforce the practical importance of examining customer incivility as a salient work stressor and its behavioral consequences in the Thai hospitality industry.

To explain how customer incivility translates into employees' deviant behavior directed at customers, this study draws on the conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989). According to the COR theory, individuals strive to obtain, retain, and protect valued resources, and stress occurs when these resources are threatened or lost. Employees repeatedly exposed to customer incivility must expend emotional and cognitive resources to regulate their reactions and maintain professional service standards. When such resource loss continues without sufficient replenishment, employees are more likely to experience chronic stress and burnout. Burnout thus represents a central psychological mechanism through which customer incivility impairs self-regulation and increases the likelihood of deviant behavior directed at customers as a maladaptive attempt to conserve remaining resources (Kim & Qu, 2019; van Jaarsveld et al., 2010).

Despite growing scholarly attention to customer incivility, important gaps remain. First, although prior studies have associated customer incivility with burnout (Han et al., 2016) and burnout with workplace deviance or counterproductive behaviors (Wallace & Coughlan, 2023), relatively few studies have explicitly examined burnout as a mediating mechanism linking customer incivility to deviant behavior directed at customers. This gap is particularly evident in non-Western hospitality contexts such as Thailand, where the dynamics of service interactions may differ from Western settings. Second, existing research has largely assumed that employees respond to customer incivility in relatively uniform ways, paying limited attention to individual characteristics that may moderate emotional resource depletion. While prior studies have examined factors such as emotional intelligence (Kim & Qu, 2019), mindfulness (Fan et al., 2022), and psychological capital (Khanam & Tarab, 2025), this work remains fragmented and lacks integration.

Collectively, these gaps highlight the need to identify which personal attributes explain why some employees are more vulnerable to customer incivility than others.

To address these issues, the present study contributes to the hospitality and behavioral science literature in two important ways. First, it advances understanding of how and why customer incivility leads to employees' deviant behavior directed at customers by explicitly modeling burnout as a mediating mechanism within a stressor–strain–behavior framework in the Thai hotel context. Second, it introduces customer orientation as a boundary condition that may either buffer or exacerbate this indirect relationship, employing a moderated mediation approach to empirically test competing theoretical predictions. By clarifying the paradoxical role of customer orientation, this study offers a more nuanced understanding of employee responses to customer incivility and provides important implications for hospitality organizations seeking to balance customer-centric service values with employee well-being.

Literature Review

To better understand how customer incivility affects deviant behavior directed at customers, this section reviews relevant theoretical foundations and empirical evidence. Drawing primarily on conservation of resources theory, the review first explains how resource loss mechanisms give rise to stress reactions and behavioral outcomes among employees. It then elaborates on the mediating role of burnout in linking customer incivility to deviant behavior directed at customers. Finally, the review discusses the moderating role of customer orientation, highlighting competing theoretical perspectives on whether it buffers or exacerbates these effects, and integrates these mechanisms into a moderated mediation framework.

The Conservation of Resources Theory

The conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) offers a foundational framework for understanding workplace stress and how individuals respond to it. It posits that people strive to obtain, retain, and protect valued resources, and that psychological stress arises when these resources are threatened or lost (Hobfoll, 1989, p. 516). According to the COR theory, resources fall into four categories: object resources (e.g., possessions), condition resources (e.g., tenure, seniority), personal resources (e.g., traits, resilience, self-esteem), and energy resources (e.g., time, money, knowledge). The COR theory emphasizes that resource loss or the threat of loss is central to the experience of stress. When individuals expend resources to cope with demands without sufficient replenishment, resource depletion can occur, leading to stress and impaired self-regulation, which in turn can trigger maladaptive behavioral responses (Hobfoll, 1989).

Within service settings, employees are frequently required to invest emotional and cognitive resources to regulate their reactions, maintain service professionalism, and deliver high-quality service. When such investments are not replenished, continued resource loss resulting from repeated encounters with customer incivility may lead to chronic stress and burnout. Importantly, the COR theory suggests that individuals experiencing resource depletion may engage in defensive, withdrawal, or retaliatory behaviors as a means of conserving remaining resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Thus, the COR theory offers a useful lens for understanding how stressful work conditions translate into strain reactions and maladaptive behavioral outcomes.

Beyond explaining general stress reactions, the COR theory also implies that individuals vary in how they experience and respond to resource loss, depending on personal characteristics and internalized work values (Hobfoll, 1989; Kim & Qu, 2019). As a result, employee reactions to customer incivility may not be uniform across individuals. This highlights the importance of examining individual-level boundary conditions that shape how resource depletion translates into strain and behavioral outcomes. Accordingly, this study proposes customer orientation as a personal resource that moderates this relationship, examining whether it buffers or exacerbates the effects of customer incivility, as discussed in the following sections.

Customer Incivility and Deviant Behavior Directed at Customers: The Mediating Role of Burnout

Customer incivility is defined as low-intensity deviant behavior from customers that violates norms of mutual respect, with ambiguous intent to harm employees (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Sliter et al., 2010). Examples include rude remarks, condescending tones, or unreasonable demands. Such encounters

have become increasingly common and distressing for employees, especially in today's customer-centric climate, where the adage "the customer is always right" fosters a sense of entitlement and encourages incivility toward employees (Fisk & Neville, 2011; Kim et al., 2021).

Empirical evidence indicates that repeated interactions with disrespectful customers significantly deplete employees' emotional and cognitive resources. This depletion leads to stress and burnout (Fisk & Neville, 2011; Im et al., 2024; Sliter et al., 2010), as well as poor service performance (Khanam & Tarab, 2025; Sliter et al., 2010). For instance, Sliter et al. (2010) found that customer incivility was positively related to emotional exhaustion and reduced performance, while Fisk and Neville (2011) reported that unreasonable customer demands increased psychological stress and exhaustion. Similarly, Im et al. (2024) confirmed that customer incivility in hospitality contexts heightened burnout, reduced performance, and increased turnover intentions.

Drawing on conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989), customer incivility can be conceptualized as a salient work stressor that initiates a process of emotional resource depletion. Repeated exposure to rude or uncivil customer behaviors requires employees to expend emotional and cognitive resources to regulate their reactions and maintain professional service standards. When such resource loss persists without adequate recovery, employees are more likely to experience burnout. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Customer incivility is positively related to burnout.

Notably, burnout is not only a distressing psychological outcome but also a key driver of deviant behavior directed at customers. Such behaviors may include being blunt, raising one's voice, or intentionally slowing service (Kim & Qu, 2019; Shao & Skarlicki, 2014; van Jaarsveld et al., 2010), all of which violate service norms and impair the customer experience (Daunt & Harris, 2014). From the COR perspective, individuals experiencing burnout may adopt defensive, withdrawal, or retaliatory behaviors as a means of conserving remaining resources (Kim & Qu, 2019; van Jaarsveld et al., 2010). In service roles, employees who experience burnout may lack the emotional energy or motivation required to maintain politeness and responsiveness, especially when facing uncivil customers. This increases the likelihood of employees' deviant behavior directed at customers (Kim & Qu, 2019) and service sabotage (Hwang et al., 2021). Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Burnout is positively related to deviant behavior directed at customers.

Building on this evidence, burnout represents a central strain mechanism that links customer incivility to deviant behavior directed at customers. Rather than responding directly to customer incivility with inappropriate behavior in return, employees are more likely to do so when prolonged resource depletion undermines their capacity for self-regulation and adaptive coping. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Burnout mediates the positive relationship between customer incivility and deviant behavior directed at customers.

While prior studies have examined the indirect effect of customer incivility on deviant behavior directed at customers through burnout (Hwang et al., 2021; Kim & Qu, 2019), the present study focuses specifically on hotel employees. Hotel employees are often socialized into organizational cultures that strongly emphasize service excellence, customer satisfaction, and responsiveness to customer needs (Johnson et al., 2018). These service values require sustained emotional investment, which may increase employees' vulnerability to resource depletion when they encounter customer incivility. This context makes burnout a particularly salient mechanism through which customer incivility translates into deviant behavior directed at customers in the hotel industry.

The Moderating Role of Customer Orientation

Customer orientation (CO) is defined as an employee's enduring disposition to meet customer needs with empathy, enthusiasm, and dedication (Brown et al., 2002). Highly customer-oriented employees

genuinely care about helping customers and take pride in delivering excellent service. In general, CO is widely regarded as a desirable trait associated with proactive service behaviors and superior service quality (Brown et al., 2002). For example, recent research in Thai hotels using a person–environment fit perspective shows that value congruence between employees with high CO and service-oriented leaders enhances motivation and service performance (Thawornprasert & Potipiroon, 2025).

Despite these well-documented benefits, the role of customer orientation in stressful service encounters is theoretically complex. In particular, relatively limited attention has been paid to how CO shapes employees' stress responses when they are exposed to customer incivility (Yoo et al., 2015). Drawing on conservation of resources theory, this study conceptualizes CO as a personal resource that may condition how employees evaluate and respond to customer incivility.

Customer Orientation as a Buffering Resource

According to conservation of resources (COR) theory, customer orientation can function as an internal personal resource that buffers the negative effects of customer incivility (Kim et al., 2012; Yoo et al., 2015). Customer orientation (CO) reflects employees' empathy, intrinsic service motivation, emotional regulation skills, and commitment to service quality (Babakus & Yavas, 2012). These attributes may enable employees to appraise uncivil customer encounters as manageable challenges rather than as personal threats, thereby reducing emotional exhaustion.

Empirical evidence supports this buffering perspective. Yoo et al. (2015) found that frontline restaurant employees with high CO experienced weaker increases in emotional exhaustion when exposed to customer aggression compared with those low in CO. Similarly, Kim et al. (2012) showed that CO mitigated the negative effects of customer-related stressors (e.g., disproportionate customer expectations or customers' verbal aggression) on emotional exhaustion and service-recovery performance. From the COR perspective, employees with greater personal resources are better equipped to cope with stressors without depleting their emotional reserves. Accordingly, from this perspective, customer orientation acts as a buffering resource that may weaken the positive relationship between customer incivility and burnout.

Customer Orientation as an Exacerbating Factor

However, emerging research presents an alternative perspective, suggesting that high levels of customer orientation (CO) may paradoxically intensify the strain caused by customer incivility, a phenomenon referred to as the customer orientation paradox (Oh et al., 2025; Xie et al., 2023). Oh et al. (2025) found that CO intensified the stress from customer incivility, with employees high in CO reporting significantly greater strain than those low in CO. In other words, employees with strong customer orientation tend to identify deeply with their professional standards and service values. This strong service identification drives them to invest substantial emotional energy and self-worth in fulfilling customer expectations. When confronted with incivility or disrespect, they perceive it as a personal failure to uphold those values, triggering stronger negative emotions, rumination, and heightened job stress. Conversely, employees low in CO are less emotionally attached to their service identity and might shrug off the same rude behavior as just part of the job without internalizing it, experiencing less distress (Oh et al., 2025).

From a complementary theoretical perspective, cognitive dissonance theory helps explain why highly customer-oriented employees may experience heightened strain under customer incivility. Cognitive dissonance arises when individuals encounter inconsistency between their internalized values and actual experiences, producing psychological discomfort that motivates attempts to restore consistency (Festinger, 1957). For employees with strong customer-oriented values, rude or disrespectful customer behavior directly contradicts their self-concept as caring and competent service providers, creating a value–experience incongruence between employees' service-oriented values and customer incivility encounters. This incongruence may intensify emotional distress, self-blame, and rumination, thereby amplifying burnout beyond what would be expected from resource depletion alone. In other words, cognitive dissonance provides an additional psychological mechanism that compounds the resource loss process described by conservation of resources theory.

Recent empirical findings lend further support to this reasoning. Xie et al. (2023) observed that customer-oriented employees suffered higher emotional exhaustion from repeated customer incivility, particularly under strict supervisory monitoring. This dissonance is further compounded when employees must engage in surface acting (e.g., displaying fake smiles) to maintain service standards despite experiencing value violations. In practical terms, employees with high customer orientation might feel deeply frustrated and hurt by a customer's rudeness, yet feel compelled to smile and endure the interaction. This forced display of positive emotions while experiencing internal distress represents a form of emotional labor that intensifies both cognitive dissonance and emotional fatigue (Hur et al., 2015). Consistent with this perspective, Hur et al. (2015) further demonstrated that customer incivility prompted greater surface acting, which heightened exhaustion and eroded customer orientation behaviors over time. These findings highlight customer orientation's dual nature: employees who care most about customers may also suffer the most when customers are rude to them.

Competing Moderating Hypotheses

The preceding discussion reveals two competing theoretical perspectives regarding the moderating role of customer orientation. On the one hand, customer orientation may function as a personal resource that buffers the impact of customer incivility on burnout by facilitating effective coping and emotional regulation. On the other hand, customer orientation may exacerbate emotional resource depletion, as high customer orientation increases employees' emotional investment and sensitivity to service interactions. As a result, highly customer-oriented employees may experience greater distress when confronted with customer incivility because such encounters violate their deeply held service values and professional identity. Given these competing arguments, this study does not assume a priori which effect will prevail but instead empirically examines both possibilities. Accordingly, the following competing hypotheses are proposed:

H4a: Customer orientation moderates the relationship between customer incivility and burnout, such that the relationship is weakened when customer orientation is high.

H4b: Customer orientation moderates the relationship between customer incivility and burnout, such that the relationship is strengthened when customer orientation is high.

Moderated Mediation Model

Building on the competing moderation hypotheses, this study further proposes a moderated mediation framework to clarify how customer orientation conditions the indirect effect of customer incivility on deviant behavior directed at customers through burnout. Burnout is conceptualized as the central psychological mechanism linking customer incivility to deviant behavior directed at customers, while customer orientation serves as a boundary condition that shapes the strength and direction of this indirect effect.

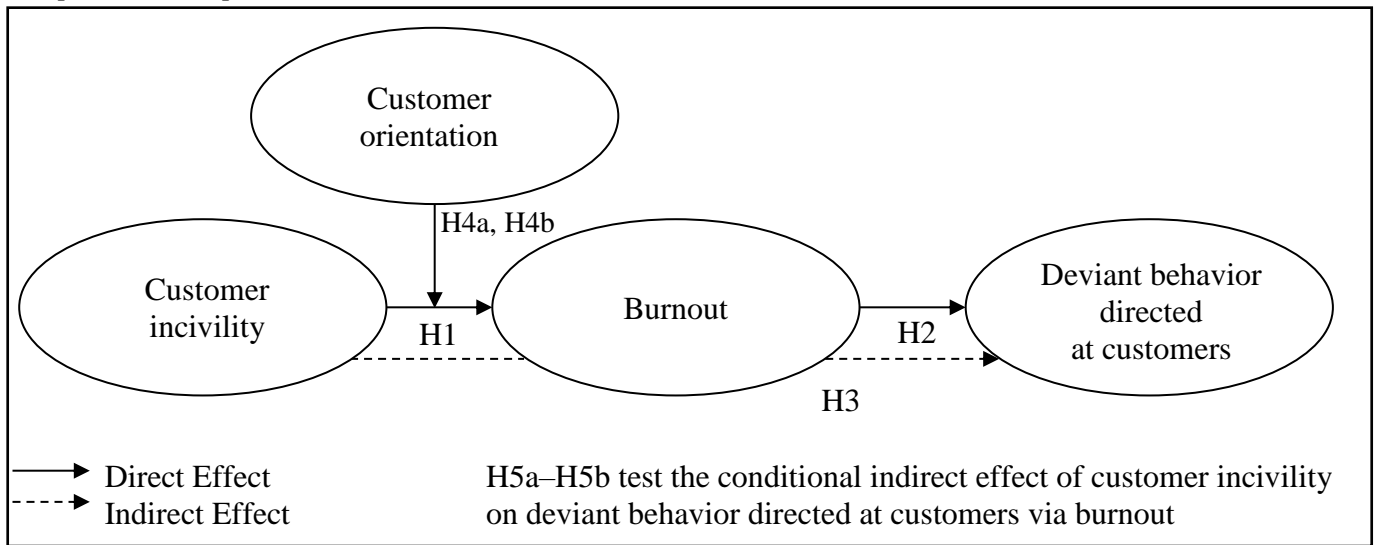
From a conservation of resources perspective, customer incivility depletes employees' emotional resources, increasing burnout and, in turn, the likelihood of employees' deviant behavior directed at customers. However, the magnitude of this indirect effect may vary depending on whether customer orientation functions as a protective resource or an amplifying factor. If customer orientation buffers resource loss, it should weaken the indirect effect of customer incivility on deviant behavior directed at customers by reducing burnout. Conversely, if customer orientation exacerbates emotional strain by heightening emotional investment and sensitivity to service interactions, it may strengthen the indirect effect by increasing burnout under conditions of customer incivility. Accordingly, this study advances competing conditional indirect effect hypotheses to empirically test the paradoxical role of customer orientation:

H5a: The indirect effect of customer incivility on deviant behavior directed at customers through burnout is weakened when customer orientation is high.

H5b: The indirect effect of customer incivility on deviant behavior directed at customers through burnout is strengthened when customer orientation is high.

In summary, this study integrates conservation of resources theory to explain how customer incivility leads to deviant behavior directed at customers via burnout, while explicitly accounting for the paradoxical role of customer orientation as a boundary condition. The proposed conceptual framework is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Proposed Conceptual Framework



Method

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine the proposed moderated mediation model. Data were collected from hotel employees in Songkhla province, a major tourism area in southern Thailand.

Samples and Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional human research ethics committee prior to data collection. This study employed purposive quota sampling to collect data from hotel employees in major tourism areas of Songkhla province in southern Thailand, with the aim of capturing variation across different hotel sizes. Hotels were selected to reflect variation in operational scale and were categorized as medium-sized (60 – 149 rooms) and large-sized (≥ 150 rooms). This categorization is consistent with prior hospitality research indicating that hotels of these sizes tend to operate under more formalized service systems and standardized customer service expectations (Jo et al., 2020).

Data were collected from full-time hotel employees across multiple functional roles, including frontline service, housekeeping, and back-office positions. This approach reflects the study's conceptualization of customer incivility as a service-related job demand embedded within organizational service cultures that emphasize customer satisfaction and service excellence. In such contexts, service expectations and customer-oriented values are often internalized across roles, shaping employees' work experiences beyond direct customer-contact positions (Johnson et al., 2018). A total of 750 questionnaires were distributed across 25 hotels, and 548 usable responses were obtained from 21 hotels (10 medium-sized and 11 large-sized), yielding a response rate of 73.10%. Data collection was conducted over a three-month period between May and July 2024.

To assess sample size adequacy, an a priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power 3.1.9.7 (Faul et al., 2009), focusing on the interaction effect predicting the mediator, which represents the most statistically demanding component of the proposed moderated mediation model. Assuming a small effect size ($f^2 = .02$), $\alpha = .05$, and a desired power of .80, the minimum required sample size was estimated at $n = 395$. The final sample size ($n = 548$) exceeded this threshold, indicating that the sample was adequate for subsequent analyses.

Instruments

Since all original survey items were developed in English, a back-translation procedure was employed to ensure both linguistic accuracy and conceptual equivalence. The Thai version of the instrument was

reviewed by three subject matter experts to improve clarity and interpretability. Following prior Thai workplace incivility research (Potipiroon, 2014), some behaviors included in the original survey (e.g., making inappropriate gestures to attract attention, such as snapping fingers) were considered culturally uncommon in the Thai service context and were therefore excluded to enhance contextual relevance and measurement validity. Customer incivility was measured using seven items adapted from Wilson and Holmvall (2013). Respondents were asked to indicate how often, over the past six months, customers had engaged in such behaviors toward them. An example item is “Continued to complain despite your efforts to assist them.” Responses were measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (always) ($\alpha = .94$). Deviant behavior directed at customers was measured with five items developed from van Jaarsveld et al. (2010) and Shao and Skarlicki (2014). Respondents were asked to indicate how often, over the past six months, they had engaged in such behaviors toward customers. An example item is “Intentionally slowed your service to a customer.” Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (frequently) ($\alpha = .87$). Burnout was measured using five self-reported items adapted from Schaufeli et al. (2002). An example item is “I feel emotionally drained from my work.” Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) ($\alpha = .91$). Customer orientation was measured using thirteen self-rated items adapted from Donovan et al. (2004). An example item is “I enjoy nurturing my service customers.” Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) ($\alpha = .92$).

Control variables included gender (1 = female), education, age (years), and organizational tenure (years), as these factors may influence burnout and deviant behavior directed at customers (e.g., Shao & Skarlicki, 2014; Xie et al., 2023).

Data Collection

Data collection followed approved ethical standards for human-subject research. Formal permission letters were sent to the participating hotels prior to data collection, and coordination was undertaken with human resource (HR) departments to liaise with relevant units and to identify appropriate times and locations for questionnaire distribution and collection. When direct researcher access was not feasible, HR personnel facilitated the dissemination and return of questionnaires according to agreed procedures. The survey was administered in a self-completion format, and participation was entirely voluntary. To safeguard confidentiality, no personally identifiable information was collected. Respondents were informed about the study purpose, anonymity, and data handling procedures on the first page of the questionnaire and were instructed to seal their completed forms prior to submission. To reduce potential common method bias associated with self-reported data, anonymity and confidentiality were assured, and respondents were instructed to return completed questionnaires according to designated procedures, which helped reduce evaluation apprehension and enhance psychological separation among constructs (Podsakoff et al., 2012).

Data Analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modeling (SEM) with latent moderated mediation were conducted using Mplus (version 8.7) (Muthén & Muthén, 2017) to assess the measurement validity and test the hypotheses. The TYPE = COMPLEX option was applied to adjust standard errors for the hierarchical data structure, accounting for intra-cluster correlations and ensuring robust parameter estimates.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations

The majority of respondents were female (68.4%). In terms of education, 48.70% of respondents had less than a bachelor's degree, while 46.5% had a bachelor's degree. The average age of the respondents was 37.74 years ($SD = 10.14$), the average length of employment was 5.22 years ($SD = 5.33$), and most of them worked in large-sized hotels (52.4%). The bivariate correlations of the study variables are reported as shown in Table 1. All predictor variables were significantly correlated with deviant behavior directed at customers in the predicted directions.

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Bivariate Correlations

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Customer incivility	2.84	1.33	(.94)						
Customer orientation	4.19	0.53	-.09*	(.92)					
Burnout	2.42	0.86	.30**	-.20**	(.91)				
Deviant behavior directed at customers	1.30	0.50	.36**	-.22**	.29**	(.87)			
Gender	0.71	0.46	-.01	-.12**	.07	-.07			
Education	1.51	0.53	.08	.01	.12**	.05	.12**		
Age	37.74	10.14	-.05	-.09*	-.19*	.04	-.07	-.30**	
Organizational tenure	5.22	5.33	-.01	-.12**	-.09*	.05	.05	-.11**	.45**

Note. Cronbach's alphas reported in parentheses; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

Measurement Model

The hypothesized four-factor measurement model (customer incivility, customer orientation, burnout, and deviant behavior directed at customers) demonstrated acceptable fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 739.93$, $df = 393$, [$\chi^2/df = 1.88$], $p < .001$; RMSEA = .06; CFI = .92; TLI = .91; SRMR = .05). Standardized factor loadings ranged from .43 to .91. Composite reliability (CR) values ranged from .83 to .93, while average variance extracted (AVE) values ranged from .44 to .66. Although some AVE values were slightly below the recommended threshold of .50, convergent validity was considered adequate given that CR values exceeded .70, consistent with the criteria suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981).

To assess potential common method bias, an unmeasured latent method factor was incorporated into the confirmatory factor analysis following Podsakoff et al. (2003). The model including the latent method factor demonstrated acceptable fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 742.81$, $df = 392$; RMSEA = .05; CFI = .92; TLI = .91; SRMR = .05) but did not show a substantial improvement in fit compared with the baseline measurement model, and substantive factor loadings remained essentially unchanged. Therefore, the measurement model was considered adequate to proceed to the hypothesis testing stage.

Hypothesized Structural Models

To test the hypothesized relationships, the direct and indirect effects of customer incivility on deviant behavior directed at customers were examined. As shown in Table 2 (Model 1), customer incivility was positively associated with burnout, $\beta = .24$, $p < .001$, supporting Hypothesis 1. In addition, burnout was positively related to deviant behavior directed at customers, $\beta = .25$, $p < .001$, supporting Hypothesis 2.

Table 2
Latent Moderated Mediation Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) Analysis Results

Predictor Variables	Mediation (Model 1)		Moderated Mediation (Model 2)	
	Burnout	DBDC	Burnout	DBDC
Control variables				
Gender (1 = female)	.05	-.07	.05	-.07
Education	.01	-.01	.01	-.01
Age (in years)	-.20**	.05	-.19***	.05
Organizational tenure (in years)	-.05	.04	-.05	.04
Mediator				
Burnout	-	.25***	-	.25***
Main predictors				
Customer Incivility (CI)	.24***	.28***	.24***	.28***
Customer Orientation (CO)	-.24***	-	-.25***	-
Interaction term				
CI x CO	-	-	.10*	-
Explained variance (R^2)	.18***	.18**	.20***	.18**
Free parameters	-	109	-	110
Log (L)	-	-15266.93	-	-15263.76

Note. DBDC: Deviant behavior directed at customers; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

The mediating role of burnout in the relationship between customer incivility and deviant behavior directed at customers was subsequently examined. As reported in Table 3, the indirect effect of customer incivility on deviant behavior directed at customers via burnout was statistically significant ($\beta = .06$, 95% CI [.03, .10]). This result provides support for Hypothesis 3. The mediation model explained 18.40% of the variance in burnout and 18.00% of the variance in deviant behavior directed at customers.

Table 3*Indirect Effect*

Mediated Path	Indirect effect				
	β	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i> -value	95% CIs	
				LLCI	ULCI
Customer incivility → Burnout → Deviant behavior	.06	.02	.00	.03	.10
Directed at customers	.34	.06	.00	.23	.45

Note. CIs = 95% bootstrap confidence intervals; LLCI = lower limit confidence interval; ULCI = upper limit confidence interval.

Next, the moderating role of customer orientation was tested by creating a latent interaction term (customer incivility \times customer orientation). As shown in Table 2 (Model 2), the interaction term between customer incivility and customer orientation had a significant effect on burnout ($\beta = .10$, $p = .01$). The log-likelihood ratio test was used to compare the log-likelihood values of Model 2 and Model 1, yielding a statistically significant log-likelihood difference value of 6.34 ($p = .01$). Because Model 1 had 109 free parameters and Model 2 had 110, the difference in free parameters was 1. These results indicated that Model 1 (null model) represented a significant loss in fit compared with Model 2, the more complex model. A simple slope analysis was then conducted to probe the nature of this interaction. The results showed that customer incivility had a stronger positive effect on burnout when employees' customer orientation was high ($\beta = .43$, $p < .001$), whereas the relationship was nonsignificant when customer orientation was low ($\beta = .04$, $p = .66$). These findings indicate that burnout increases more sharply with customer incivility among employees with high customer orientation. These findings support Hypothesis 4b but not Hypothesis 4a.

Finally, the conditional indirect effect of customer incivility on deviant behavior directed at customers through burnout was examined. As presented in Table 4, the conditional indirect effect was significant when customer orientation was high ($\beta = .14$, 95% CI [.03, .26]), but was not significant when customer orientation was low ($\beta = .01$, 95% CI [-.04, .07]). These findings support Hypothesis 5b but not Hypothesis 5a.

Table 4*Conditional Indirect Effects*

Mediated paths	Levels of the Moderator	Indirect Effects				
		β	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i> value	95% CIs	
					LLCI	ULCI
Customer Incivility → Burnout → Deviant Behavior Directed at Customers	Low	.01	.03	.65	-.04	.07
	High	.14	.06	.02	.03	.26

Note. CIs = 95% bootstrap confidence intervals; LLCI = lower limit confidence interval; ULCI = upper limit confidence interval.

Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion of Main Results

This study supports the stressor–strain–behavior framework through the lens of conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989). The findings indicate that burnout mediates the positive relationship between customer incivility and deviant behavior directed at customers. This pattern is consistent with prior research suggesting that repeated exposure to customer incivility depletes employees' emotional and psychological resources, thereby increasing emotional exhaustion and disengagement from

service roles (Kim & Qu, 2019; van Jaarsveld et al., 2010). In the context of the Thai hotel industry, where customer-oriented service norms are strongly emphasized (Johnson et al., 2018), employees may be particularly exposed to recurrent customer incivility, reinforcing the association between customer incivility and deviant behavior directed at customers.

Importantly, the present findings demonstrate that the effects of customer incivility are not uniform across employees. Specifically, the indirect relationship between customer incivility and deviant behavior directed at customers via burnout is conditional on employees' level of customer orientation. The results show that employees with high customer orientation experience higher levels of burnout in response to customer incivility than those with low customer orientation. This conditional pattern highlights that customer orientation does not operate as a universally protective personal resource, but rather differentiates employees' vulnerability to burnout under conditions of customer incivility. These findings are consistent with emerging evidence on the "customer orientation paradox," suggesting that employees who are highly committed to serving customers may incur greater emotional costs when faced with disrespect and incivility from customers (Oh et al., 2025; Xie et al., 2023).

This exacerbating effect can be further explained by integrating the COR theory with cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957). Whereas the COR theory emphasizes emotional resource depletion resulting from repeated exposure to customer incivility, cognitive dissonance theory suggests that psychological suffering arises when individuals' experiences contradict their deeply held beliefs or values. For employees with high customer orientation, dealing with rude or disrespectful customers may create significant dissonance between their deeply internalized professional service values—such as prioritizing respect and care in delivering excellent customer service—and the external reality of facing customer incivility. This dissonance compels them to remain polite externally while experiencing significant emotional distress internally. Employees may be forced to "fake a smile" and accept mistreatment (Hur et al., 2015), which exacerbates job stress (Oh et al., 2025) and intensifies emotional exhaustion (Xie et al., 2023), potentially leading to deviant service behaviors or reduced service performance (Im et al., 2024).

Importantly, the effects of customer orientation are contingent on organizational boundary conditions. In rigid customer-centric service climates characterized by strict or misused supervisory monitoring and inflexible service display rules, customer orientation may exacerbate emotional exhaustion by intensifying emotional labor demands and value–experience incongruence (Xie et al., 2023). In contrast, service environments that provide psychological safety, supportive supervision, and clear organizational boundaries against customer mistreatment may enable customer orientation to function as a protective resource that facilitates adaptive coping and emotion regulation (Alola et al., 2019; Han et al., 2022; van Jaarsveld et al., 2010). These boundary conditions help explain why customer orientation operates as a double-edged construct rather than a uniformly beneficial trait.

Finally, this study makes a novel contribution by providing evidence consistent with a moderated mediation model in which customer orientation conditions the indirect relationship between customer incivility and deviant behavior directed at customers through burnout. Specifically, the indirect effect tended to be stronger among employees with high customer orientation and was not statistically significant among those with low customer orientation. This finding calls into question the common assumption in service research that customer orientation consistently buffers the negative effects of workplace stressors (Kim et al., 2012; Yoo et al., 2015). Instead, the findings suggest a more nuanced understanding of customer orientation as a double-edged construct that may either buffer or exacerbate burnout depending on the context of customer incivility.

Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that future research should address. First, the cross-sectional design limits causal inferences regarding the relationship between customer incivility and deviant behavior directed at customers. Future longitudinal or experimental studies could better capture the temporal dynamics of resource depletion and dissonance. Second, as in many prior studies, data were

collected from a single source, raising concerns about common method bias (CMB) (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Although procedural and statistical remedies were applied, including the analysis of interaction effects, which are recognized as robust against CMB (Siemsen et al., 2010), future research would benefit from incorporating multiple data sources. Finally, while this study focused on customer orientation as a moderator, other personal and organizational resources such as resilience, social support, or leadership behaviors may also influence how employees manage incivility without intensifying burnout or deviant behavior, which invites further investigation.

Implications for Behavioral Science

The findings of this study offer several important implications for behavioral science. Consistent with the stressor–strain–behavior framework (Hobfoll, 1989), customer incivility is associated with burnout, which in turn relates to deviant behavior directed at customers. Beyond reaffirming this general process, the present study demonstrates that customer orientation functions as a conditional vulnerability rather than a uniformly protective personal resource. When employees with high customer orientation encounter customer incivility, their strong service values may activate cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), thereby intensifying burnout and maladaptive behavioral responses.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings suggest that individual difference variables should be conceptualized not only as buffers but also as potential amplifiers of strain under value-threatening conditions. By integrating emotional resource depletion with value-based cognitive conflict, this study extends existing stress and self-regulation models in behavioral science. From a practical perspective, the findings point to the need for multilevel interventions. At the individual level, employees with high customer orientation should receive emotion-regulation and cognitive-reframing training to manage value-experience conflicts more effectively (Fan et al., 2022). At the supervisory level, managers should recognize that highly customer-oriented employees may be particularly susceptible to burnout when exposed to customer incivility and thus require proactive emotional support (van Jaarsveld et al., 2010; Xie et al., 2023). At the organizational level, customer-centric service cultures should be complemented by clear behavioral boundaries and formal policies that protect employees from abusive customer behavior, thereby preventing customer orientation from becoming a chronic source of strain (Alola et al., 2019; Han et al., 2022).

Conclusion

This study contributes to the service and behavioral science literature by providing evidence consistent with burnout as a mediating mechanism in the relationship between customer incivility and deviant behavior directed at customers. This indirect relationship appears stronger among employees with high levels of customer orientation. Although the cross-sectional, self-report design limits causal inference, the findings are consistent with a stressor–strain–behavior process shaped by emotional resource depletion and cognitive dissonance. The results suggest that customer-oriented values may not uniformly protect employees from the negative effects of customer incivility. Rather, under conditions of repeated customer incivility, high customer orientation may be associated with increased vulnerability to burnout and subsequent deviant behavior directed at customers. Overall, this study underscores the importance of balancing customer-centric strategies with employee well-being to sustain effective and professional service delivery.

Declarations

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Ethical Approval Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee) of the Songkhla Rajabhat University Human Research Ethics Committee (protocol code HREC No. 005/2567 and dated 13 February 2024) for studies involving humans.

Declaration of Generative AI: During the preparation of this work, the authors used generative AI tools (namely ChatGPT and QuillBot) only for language editing, including grammar checking and improving sentence clarity. All conceptual development, data analysis, creation of figures and tables, interpretation of results, and theoretical arguments were conducted exclusively by the authors.

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