



The relationship between customer incivility, restaurant frontline service employee burnout and turnover intention

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ABSTRACT

Employee turnover continues to represent one of the most significant challenges faced by the U.S. restaurant industry, and customer incivility is regarded as being related to this phenomenon. In order to obtain a better understanding about the relationships between customer incivility, restaurant frontline service employee burnout and their turnover, information was obtained from 228 frontline service employees working in 28 independent Florida-based restaurants. Employees provided details of their experiences and attitudes regarding customer incivility as well as information on their job burnout and turnover intention. Hierarchical linear modeling was used for data analysis. Results confirmed that customer incivility has a positive relationship with restaurant frontline service employee job burnout. Further, this study found that the relationship between customer incivility and turnover intention through job burnout was fully mediated. The moderating roles that organizational support and supervisory support play upon the relationships between customer incivility and burnout were also investigated. Results confirmed that organizational and supervisory support moderates the relationship between customer incivility and burnout. Managerial implications for developing effective employee management strategies are provided for restaurant managers.

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1. Introduction

Service-oriented businesses, including restaurants, frequently train their frontline service providers under the overemphasized philosophical position that “the customer is always right”, or “the customer is King” and that employees should “always provide service with a smile” (Rafaelli et al., 2012). Although uncivil customer behavior is endemically reported in various hospitality business situations (Aslan and Kozak, 2012), most existing academic literature has focused on how to increase customer satisfaction operating under the assumption that customers behave rationally. Therefore, frontline service industry employees are required to follow very strict organizational policies and regulations regarding how their emotions are expressed, even in situations involving customers whom are perceived to be acting in an uncivil manner (Sliter et al., 2010).

A recent research study (Human Performance, 2014) conducted a survey of 438 restaurant employees (servers, hosts, bartenders, cashiers, and managers) to examine their experience involving customer uncivil behavior. This study reports that most respondents disproportionately relate their high levels of stress to customers exhibiting rude or unpleasant behavior, often about situations in which the restaurant service provider has no control. This stressful workplace environment would be related to high levels of employee distress (Adams and Webster, 2013), psychological and job-specific strain (Wilson and Holmvall, 2013), emotional exhaustion (Kern and Grandey, 2009; van Jaarsveld et al., 2010) and further associated with high employee turnover rates. As evidence, employee turnover rates specific to the U.S. restaurant industry continue to remain much higher (62.6%) annually, compared with the overall private sector turnover rate of 42.2% (Restaurantengine.com, 2014). This is an extremely critical issue for the U.S. restaurant industry, which must continuously invest revenue to recruit, select and train new employees that are replacing those former employees having terminated their restaurant frontline service positions (Mueller, 2011).

In consideration of this situation, recent academic literature has begun to pay attention to incivility that occurs when customers

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mistreat employees. While negative workplace behavior has been addressed in the existing organizational behavior literature, Kern and Grandy's (2009) study was the first attempt to encompass incivility by customers and focused on the negative impact of customer incivility upon employees. Incivility is defined as "low intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect" (Andersson and Pearson, 1999, p. 447). Research documents acts of customer incivility that includes situations where employees perceive customer rudeness such as when customers ignore employees and/or speak to employees in a disrespectful and/or insulting manner (Sliter et al., 2010; van Jaarsveld et al., 2010). Additional research suggests that uncivil customer behavior directed to employees may represent the most frequently experienced form of workplace mistreatment (Sliter et al., 2012).

Although less than ten years of scholarly attention has focused upon customer incivility, it has received growing interest as a research topic in a variety of industries including educational service and engineering firms (Adams and Webster, 2013), retail sales service (Hur et al., 2015; Wilson and Holmval, 2013), banking (Sliter et al., 2010, 2012) and insurance (Walker et al., 2014). However, despite insights from previous organization behavior research, past and current research appearing in the hospitality literature has neglected to investigate issues related to customer incivility when specifically applied within the context of restaurants and how these issues regarding customer incivility may be overcome.

To obtain a better understanding of customer incivility in the restaurant business setting, this study adopts the Conservation of Resource (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989). COR theory suggests that individuals attempt to acquire, maintain and protect their physical, emotional, social and psychological resources. Individuals being placed in situations where customer incivility occurs, at a minimum, feel distress, sadness, rejection, irrationality and hostility (Liu et al., 2008). In particular, frontline service employees are frequently exposed to situations involving customer incivility. Consequently, employee defense mechanisms must become enacted to guard and protect their personal resources as a direct result of customer incivility, often leaving them emotionally strained. Supporting this theory, this current study suggests that customer incivility may make restaurant employees consume their emotional and psychological resources, which represents job burnout and further results in employees leaving jobs.

Early research studies regarding job stress focused on a variety of factors including emotional support, organizational rewards and job conditions in order to examine how to alleviate employee stress levels (Kottke and Sharafinski, 1988; Shore and Shore, 1995). Subsequent studies have demonstrated that support from other individuals and/or organizations can buffer consequences related to employee stress (Andrews and Kacmar, 2001; Demerouti et al., 2014; Miner et al., 2012; Sakurai and Jex, 2012; Randall et al., 1999). Based upon this body of knowledge, our study expects to find that support from restaurant organizations and supervisors can play an important role to moderate workplace stress caused specifically by customer incivility.

With this in mind, the main study objectives are to investigate (a) the relationship between customer incivility and restaurant frontline service employee burnout and also, the mediating role burnout plays upon the relationship between customer incivility and employee turnover intention, and (b) the moderating role support by restaurant organizations and supervisors has upon the relationship between customer incivility and frontline service employee burnout. This study expects to discover that restaurants can develop and implement effective strategies to assist employees with burnout by controlling and managing their job stress related specifically to customer incivility.

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1. Customer incivility

Early incivility studies focused upon incivility from the standpoint of employee-to-employee interactions within the workplace (e.g., Cortina et al., 2001; Ben-Zur and Yagil, 2005), while more recent attention has been devoted to customer incivility (Bunk and Magley, 2013). Although customer behavior related to incivility can be seemingly innocuous, such uncivil behavior may represent an overwhelming situation to an employee involved with experiencing perceived customer incivility (Cortina et al., 2001; Bunk and Magley, 2013). Additionally, customer incivility could be looked upon by employees as being a daily hassle, or as part of the job expectations. In reality, a single incident of incivility might not be perceived as stressful, but an accumulation of perceived incivility incidents may lead to negative outcomes (Kern and Grandey, 2009; Sliter et al., 2012).

Existing research regarding customer incivility has been almost exclusively limited to the organizational behavior area. These studies provide evidence that customer incivility increases the emotional exhaustion of retail employees (Kern and Grandey, 2009) and the stress levels of bank tellers (Sliter et al., 2010). Significant effects of customer incivility were also found to increase stress levels of engineering firm employees (Adams and Webster, 2013) and department store sales employees (Hur et al., 2015), and was also responsible for contributing to bank teller absenteeism (Sliter et al., 2012). Other research studies found that employees who experience customer incivility may feel exhausted, and consequently misbehave toward their coworkers (van Jaarsveld et al., 2010; Walker et al., 2014).

As seen in Table 1, existing customer incivility literature focuses upon the identification of customer incivility and factors that negatively impact employee emotions and behavior. In particular, three studies found that racial identity among minorities (Kern and Grandey, 2009), coworker incivility (Sliter et al., 2012), entity incivility and negative affectivity (Walker et al., 2014) significantly increase the negative effect customer incivility has upon employees. However, no research study has yet to explore factors that may reduce the negative impact customer incivility has upon employees. Therefore, it is necessary to explore this research void with respect to restaurant frontline service employees.

2.2. The relationship between customer incivility and burnout

Adopting the Conservation of Resource (COR) theory, Kern and Grandey (2009), suggested that customer incivility can be regarded as a social stressor that can drain emotional and cognitive employee resources. Another incivility study found that it can increase employee job demands, requiring efforts to correct psychological resource depletion (van Jaarsveld et al., 2010). Generally, employee experiences involving the depletion of emotional and physical resources, represents job 'burnout' (Karatepe and Aleshinloye, 2009; Lee et al., 2012). Supporting this logic, it could be possible that customer incivility applied to the hospitality industry may also result in psychological resource depletion which could be considered a leading factor including employee burnout. Because restaurant frontline employees have frequent contact with customers compared with other industries, it makes them more prone to emotional burnout (Karatepe, 2015).

Originally, Maslach and Jackson (1981) suggested that burnout is a multidimensional concept comprised of three components: emotional exhaustion (feeling tired and fatigued), depersonalization (feeling callous and/or uncaring) and reduced accomplishment (a feeling of not accomplishing anything). Existing literature (van Jaarsveld et al., 2010; Sliter et al., 2012) focusing on the negative

Table 1
Summary of customer incivility literature.

Study	Sample	Outcome	Mediator	Moderator	Key findings
Kern and Grandey (2009)	Retail employees	Emotional exhaustion	Stress	Racial identity among minorities	Stress mediates the relationship between customer incivility and emotional exhaustion The centrality of minority employees' racial identity positively moderates the relationship between customer incivility and emotional exhaustion
Sliter et al. (2010)	Bank tellers	Emotional exhaustion, Customer service quality	Emotional labor		Customer incivility has a positive relationship with emotional exhaustion and a negative relationship with customer service quality. Emotional labor mediates the relationship between customer incivility and emotional exhaustion/customer service quality
van Jaarsveld et al. (2010)	Call center employees	Employee incivility	Job demands, Emotional exhaustion		Customer incivility is positively related to employee incivility toward customers through higher job demands which leads to emotional exhaustion
Sliter et al. (2012)	Bank tellers	Sales performance, Absenteeism, Tardiness		Coworker incivility	Customer incivility has a negative effect on sales performance and has a positive effect on absenteeism and tardiness. Coworker incivility enhances the relationship between customer incivility and sales performance and absenteeism
Adams and Webster (2013)	University alumni, engineering firm employees	Coworker incivility, Distress	Surface acting		Customer incivility is positively related with surface acting and distress. Surface acting partially mediates the relationships between customers and coworker incivility and distress
Wilson and Holmvall (2013)	Retail sales employees	Job satisfaction, Turnover intention, Psychological and job specific strain			Customer incivility is negatively linked with job satisfaction and positively linked with turnover intentions and psychological and job-specific strain
Walker et al. (2014)	Insurance customer service employees	Employee incivility		Entity incivility, Negative affectivity	Customer incivility generates employee incivility Entity incivility and negative affectivity enhance the relationship between customer incivility and employee incivility
Hur et al. (2015)	Department store sales employees	Surface acting, Customer orientation	Emotional exhaustion, Surface acting		Customer incivility is positively related to service employee's use of surface acting and further leads to emotional exhaustion and customer orientation

effect of customer incivility is limited to examining employee emotional exhaustion, which represents just one of the three dimensions associated with burnout. Emotional exhaustion may not be sufficient enough to capture all aspects related to burnout involving relationships between people and human services as in the context specific to incivility by customers directed at frontline restaurant employees (Maslach et al., 2001). Therefore, our study uses a comprehensive approach to more clearly understand the impact consumer incivility has upon burnout with respect to all three of the specific burnout dimensions. The following hypothesis was developed based upon this reasoning:

Hypothesis 1. Customer incivility has a positive relationship with restaurant frontline service employee burnout

2.3. The mediating role burnout plays upon the relationships between customer incivility and turnover intention

Burnout derived from job stressors has been found to be strongly associated with work withdrawal behavior (Podsakoff et al., 2007;

Leiter et al., 2009). The position suggesting the positive relationship between employee burnout and turnover intention has been empirically supported in various business contexts (Kim and Stoner, 2008; Lu and Gursoy, 2013; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). Several research studies have provided evidence that the workplace environment involving job stressors causes high levels of employee burnout, which in turn, increases employee turnover (Cherniss, 1980; Chiang and Jang, 2008; Hinkin and Tracey, 2000; Tews et al., 2013). Customer incivility is especially regarded as one of the main job stressors that can accentuate psychological depletion representing employee burnout, which further causes employees to become counterproductive in their work behavior (e.g., turnover, absenteeism, poor work quality, etc.).

Supporting this, several studies have demonstrated the significant mediating role employee emotional exhaustion plays in the relationship between job stress and job-related outcomes (Goldberg and Grandey, 2007). In a more recent study conducted by Hur et al. (2015), department sales employee's emotional exhaustion, one of the burnout sub-dimensions, was found to have a significant mitigating role in the relationship between customer

incivility and employee service performance. These findings suggest that customer incivility is more likely felt by restaurant frontline service employees, contributing to burnout, and leading further to high levels of turnover intention. Therefore, this study hypothesizes that burnout plays a mediating role on the relationship between customer incivility and employee turnover intention.

Hypothesis 2. Restaurant frontline service employee burnout mediates the relationship between customer incivility and turnover intention.

2.4. The moderating role of support on the relationship between customer incivility and burnout

Early studies stated that support provided by organizations is a critical factor for increasing positive employee attitudes and behaviors (Cohen and Wills, 1985; Day and Bedeian, 1991). Because emotional losses caused by job stress can be overcome through resources such as perceived support, several researchers have documented that organizational and interpersonal support enables employees to reduce their job stress (Demerouti et al., 2014; Lindebaum, 2013; Salovey et al., 2002).

Support provided by their organizations and leaders contributes to enhancing the employee's emotional bond, which is documented as being an important determinant of organizational dedication and commitment (Tian et al., 2014). Research conducted by these individuals further demonstrated that a supportive work environment plays a significant role in decreasing various workplace stressors and also in improving job performance. Therefore, organizational support may be able to intervene between customer incivility and burnout by attenuating or preventing a stress appraisal response.

Support has been generally conceptualized to reflect the degree that individuals perceive their well-being to be valued by workplace sources including supervisors and their organizations in which they are embedded (Eisenberger et al., 2002; Ford et al., 2007; Kossek et al., 2011). Organizational support and supervisory support can be defined as follows:

Organizational support: Organizational support is defined as “assurance that aid will be available from an organization when it is needed to carry out one's job effectively and to deal with stressful situations” (George et al., 1993; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002, p. 698). Organizational support is perceived by employees as being appreciated, which heightens their belief that they have access to help (Cohen and Wills, 1985; Kossek et al., 2011). Therefore, this study expects that as individuals perceive more organizational support, their emotional and psychological resources for coping with customer incivility enables employees to moderate the negative impact of customer incivility upon burnout:

Hypothesis 3. Restaurant organizational support moderates the relationship between customer incivility and frontline service employee burnout. This relationship becomes weaker as employees' perceptions about organizational support improve.

Supervisory support: Supervisory support refers to the degree to which employees perceive efforts by their supervisor's contributions and care about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 2002). Supervisors represent various managerial positions (Assistant Managers, General Managers), whom may be able to assist employees with alleviating their psychological stress by providing programs offering emotional support (George et al., 1993; Jordan et al., 2002). A study conducted by Halbesleben (2006) documented that supervisor support plays a significant moderating role to decrease various workplace stressors. Based upon these research findings, it is anticipated that supervisory support will be an important factor for decreasing employee job stress due to customer incivility, specifically in situations where supervisors and

employees share similar work environments, such as is often the case regarding restaurants and hotels.

Hypothesis 4. Restaurant supervisory support moderates the relationship between customer incivility and frontline service employee burnout. This relationship becomes weaker as employees' perceptions about supervisor support improve.

3. Method

3.1. Measurement

This study's measurements were developed by a comprehensive literature review process that ultimately generated 45 items. A total of 14 items were related to customer incivility, and were adopted from the research based upon Burnfield et al. (2004). The 16 burnout items used in this study were adapted from Maslach and Jackson (1981) and represented six emotional exhaustion items, four emotional depersonalization items and six reduced accomplishment items. Turnover intention was measured using three items from Brashear et al. (2005). These three constructs (customer incivility, burnout and turnover intention) were used as individual-level variables. As business-level variables, organizational support and supervisory support were measured using 12 items, six for each, based upon published findings (Eisenberger et al., 1997; House, 1986).

In order to refine and test the appropriateness of measurement items generated through a comprehensive review of the literature, a pilot test was performed using 124 university students having recently completed frontline service internships with independent restaurants. All individuals were asked to provide responses to their restaurant service experiences related to issues involving customer incivility, burnout, organizational support and supervisory support. Information was analyzed using exploratory factor analysis (EFA). Internal consistency of items for each construct was accessed by calculating Cronbach's α coefficients.

Based upon the EFA results, five customer incivility items (e.g., comments about employees' physical appearance, offensive sexual comments, personal insulting and verbal attacks) having factor loading lower than 0.50 and were excluded. Six items affiliated with 'burnout,' two items related to 'emotional exhaustion' (e.g., "I feel frustrated by my job" and "I feel like I am at the end of my rope"), and one item associated with emotional depersonalization ("I feel that I treat some customers as if they were impersonal objects) were deleted because of low factor loadings. Two items affiliated with 'reduced accomplishment' (e.g., "I feel I am positively influencing the lives of others through my work" and "I can easily create a relaxed atmosphere with my customers") were removed because they were highly cross-loaded with other constructs. The final survey, including the remaining 35 items, was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to address the ethical and human study portion and was then used as the main survey instrument.

The survey consists of five parts. The first three parts measure frontline service employee-level variables including five constructs pertaining to customer incivility, burnout (emotional exhaustion, emotional depersonalization and reduced accomplishment) and turnover intention. Part four was created to measure restaurant business-level variables including two constructs, organizational support and supervisory support. The fifth part included respondents' socio-demographics and behavioral information. Specifically, the study sought to gather data pertaining to total numbers of years employees worked in the hospitality environment along with the numbers of different areas where these employees were assigned involving frontline service experiences (reception/reservations, catered events, bussers, servers,

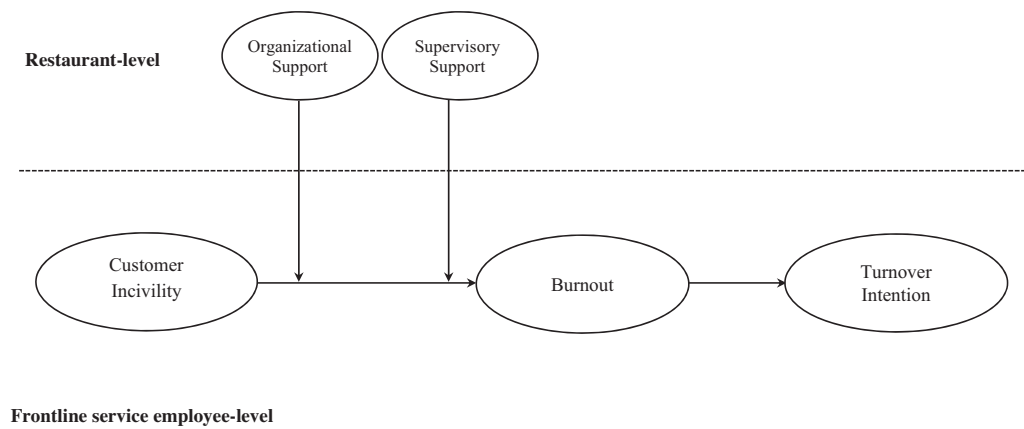


Fig. 1. Multilevel research model.

etc.). Selected socio-demographic and behavioral information were used as control variables for this study.

3.2. Data collection and sampling

To meet this study's objectives, a total of 50 locally owned independent restaurants unaffiliated with any chain of corporate restaurants were selected from a list of food service establishments appearing in a publication sponsored by a Florida tourism marketing organization located in a highly popular visitor destination. All 50 restaurant managers were visited by appointment to discuss the study's purpose and to request permission from management to allow access to frontline service employees prior to starting their shift in order to gain information from them via personal interviews, pertaining to the topic of incivility in each particular restaurant's environment. A total of 28 restaurant managers agreed to allow interviews with full-time employees working in their establishment whom had direct experience with providing frontline service to restaurant customers for a period of at least one year. All respondents were advised as to their rights as human subjects and they were assured that all information provided would be protected under strict confidentiality.

As a condition for their cooperation, each restaurant manager received an executive summary of the study's findings. Additionally, each employee participating in the study received a \$25 gift card as a token of appreciation for their time and effort. Based upon the 28 participating restaurants, an average of 17 possible employees per restaurant met the study's criteria for inclusion as potential respondents. This ultimately represented an overall total population of $n = 476$ restaurant employees whom were made available for inclusion as potential study respondents. From this total, $n = 300$ employees were randomly selected for interview. Using five trained surveyors, $n = 228$ interviews were completed during a four week period, generating a useable response rate of 76%.

3.3. Data analysis: hierarchical liner modeling

Organizational behavior research documents that because employees' perceptions about their organizations are shaped upon how their organizations meet their expectations, implying that employees within the same organization have a shared and similar evaluation. Thus, research asserts that individual-level perceptions about organizations should be aggregated to a group-level of shared perceptions about organizations (Covin and Slevin, 1989; Schminke et al., 2000). Several research studies also used a multilevel approach to integrate individual-level and business-level relationships between employees and organizations (Ambrose and

Schminke, 2003; Shanock and Eisenberger, 2006). In support of this approach, it is logical to assume that restaurant employees' perceptions about organizational support and supervisor support should be strongly dependent upon types and/or levels of support provided by their restaurants.

With this in mind, two different levels of restaurant frontline service employee perspectives are incorporated within the study design: (a) the employee-level representing customer incivility, burnout and turnover intention, and (b) the business-level representing support provided from restaurant organizations and supervisors. This study aggregates individual perceptions about support provided from restaurant organizations and supervisors to business-level variables regarding shared perceptions about restaurants. This study predicts that the relationship between customer incivility and burnout will be affected by restaurant business-level support. Therefore, a multilevel approach designed to integrate frontline service employee-level variables (customer incivility, burnout and turnover intention), in conjunction with restaurant business-level variables (organizational support and supervisory support), is deemed appropriate to effectively analyze this study's data set (Bryk and Raudenbush, 1992).

This study focused on investigating the relationships between customer incivility, burnout and turnover intention and further examining the roles organizational support and supervisory support upon those relationships. Customer incivility, job burnout and turnover intention were evaluated based upon frontline service employee experience, while employee perceptions about their organizational support and supervisory support were evaluated from the restaurant business-level standpoint. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze this study's data in consideration of both employee- and business-level perspectives. Accordingly, a multilevel analysis approach was deemed appropriate and thus, hierarchical linear modeling was developed by aggregating individuals' perceptions about organizational support and supervisory support to the restaurant business-level variables (Raudenbush, 1998). HLM 7.0 statistic program was used to test hypotheses (see Fig. 1).

4. Results

4.1. Validity and reliability of measurements

To confirm construct validity in terms of convergent and discriminant validity and reliability, first-order and second-order confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) were conducted due to the multi-dimensional concept of burnout which has been empirically proven in previous literature (Marsh and Bailey, 1993). Result of

Table 2
Validity and reliability of measures.

Variables	CCR	AVE	Cronbach's α
Frontline service employee-level variables			
<i>Customer Incivility</i>	.898	.502	.926
<i>Burnout</i>	.784	.520	.732
Emotional exhaustion (EE)	.822 ^a	.537	.903
Emotional depersonalization (ED)	.752	.505	.793
Reduced accomplishment (RD)	.845	.582	.834
<i>Turnover Intention</i>	.723	.503	.762
Restaurant-level variables			
<i>Organizational Support</i>	.856	.504	.872
<i>Supervisory Support</i>	.881	.554	.925

Notes: $\chi^2/df=1.967$ ($p<.01$), CFI = .920, TLI = .902, RMSEA = .065; CCR = composite construct reliability; AVE = average variance extracted; (R) indicates an item reversely coded; ^aNumbers in italics represent a second-order measurement model for burnout.

the first CFA showed a reasonable fit indices: comparative fit index (CFI) = .920, Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) = .902, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .065 (Hu and Bentler, 1999). Convergent validity was supported because standardized factor loadings for all 35 items are above 0.60 and statistically significant ($p < .01$) (Anderson and Gerbing, 1991).

All constructs in the research model were acceptable (see Table 2). Composite construct reliability (CCR > .70) and average variance extracted (AVE > .50) were acceptable exceeding the recommended values (Hair et al., 1998). Cronbach's α coefficients ranged from .762 to .926 implied high internal consistency among the variables within each factor (Nunnally, 1978).

The second-order CFA focused primarily on assessing the higher-order factor, "burnout" that was structured with emotional exhaustion, emotional depersonalization and reduced accomplishment. Standardized factor loadings of three sub-dimensions were all significant and above .60. Also, the AVE value of the burnout construct was .520, providing support that convergent validity and composite construct reliability were both acceptable (CCR = .784).

Table 3 presents the means, standard deviations and correlation coefficients of the five constructs representing frontline service employee-level and restaurant business-level variables. The correlation analysis shows that customer incivility is positively related to both burnout and turnover intention. Organizational support and supervisory support are negatively associated with the three other constructs representing customer incivility, burnout and turnover intention. Discriminant validity was supported because all of the square roots of the average variance extracted (AVE) ranged from .708 to .744 and were greater than those correlations for each pair of constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

4.2. Multilevel validity testing

To justify the appropriateness for using a multilevel approach, one-way ANOVA tests were conducted. Results for each of the two restaurant business-level variables (organizational support and supervisory support) showed that the variance shared between-restaurant employees was significantly greater than the within-restaurant employees ($F = 4.706, p < .000$; $F = 7.237, p < .000$). In addition, two intraclass correlations (ICC[1] and ICC[2]) were calculated (McGraw and Wong, 1996). All of the ICC[1] values for organizational support were ranged from 0.24 to 0.35 and were satisfied with criteria ranging between 0.05 and 0.50 (James, 1982). Also, all of the ICC[2] values for supervisory support ranging 0.78–0.86 were acceptable that exceeded the threshold value of 0.50 (Klein and Kozlowski, 2000). These results indicated that aggregating our data regarding individual evaluations about organizational support and supervisory support provided by their restaurants to a business-level was appropriate.

Null models containing no frontline service employee-level or restaurant business-level variables were tested to assure that significant variances exist in dependent variables (Woltman et al., 2012). Two separate null hierarchical models containing burnout and turnover intention were tested. Chi-square tests revealed that between-restaurants variances were significantly different in burnout ($\gamma_{00}, t = 20.10$; $\chi^2 = 171.30, p < 0.001$) and in turnover intention ($\gamma_{00}, t = 20.05$; $\chi^2 = 87.76, p < 0.001$) which in turn support justification for using cross-level analyses (Luke, 2004).

4.3. Hierarchical linear modeling results

4.3.1. Tests for hypotheses 1 and 2

Hypothesis 1 predicted that customer incivility is positively related to burnout. Model 1 included four control variables and no restaurant business-level variable, and investigated the relationship between customer incivility and burnout at the frontline service employee-level (see Table 4). The result indicated that customer incivility is significantly and positively associated with burnout ($\gamma = 0.18, p < 0.01$). This finding is consistent with a previous research study (Kern and Grandey, 2009) investigating the role of customer incivility in the context of a national retail store and further demonstrates that frequency of customer incivility significantly increases levels of employee job stress. Therefore, hypothesis 1 was supported.

Hypothesis 2 expected that burnout plays a significant mediating role upon the relationship between customer incivility and turnover intention. In doing so, three preconditions should be met by showing the significant relationships between (1) customer incivility and turnover intention, (2) burnout and turnover intention, and (3) customer incivility and burnout (Baron and Kenny, 1986; Hofmann and Stetzer, 1998). Model 1 demonstrated the significant relationship between customer incivility and turnover intention, showing that precondition (1) was met. Model 2 identified the significant relationship between burnout and employee job turnover intention ($\gamma = 0.53, p < 0.001$). Model 3 revealed the significant relationship between customer incivility and turnover intention ($\gamma = 0.13, p < 0.01$). These results implied that preconditions (2) and (3) were met. The mediating effect model was then tested to evaluate whether or not the relationship between customer incivility and turnover intention would still be significant when burnout was included. Model 4 revealed a significant variance in turnover intention when burnout was simultaneously used as the individual-level variable, however, the effect of customer incivility upon turnover intention was not significant ($\gamma = 0.09, p > 0.05$). This finding as seen in Table 4, implied that the relationship between customer incivility and turnover intention was fully mediated by burnout. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

4.3.2. Tests for hypotheses 3 and 4

In order to assure justification for further cross-level analyses, the random-intercept hierarchical model with consumer incivility as a frontline service employee-level predictor and burnout as a frontline service employee-level dependent variable was tested and generated a significant between-restaurant variance ($\chi^2 = 40.39, p < 0.05$).

Hypotheses 3 and 4 predicted that organizational support and supervisory support play an important moderating role upon customer incivility and burnout. Model 5 indicated that organizational support ($\gamma = -0.13, p < 0.01$) and supervisory support ($\gamma = -0.09, p < 0.05$) have a significant cross-level interaction effect upon the relationship between customer incivility and burnout. This result implied that support provided by restaurant organizations and supervisors significantly weakens the relationship between customer incivility and burnout. Therefore, hierarchical linear model analyses provide evidence that the positive relationship between

Table 3
Correlations and discriminant validity (n = 228).

	Mean	Std. dev.	1	2	3	4	5
1. Customer incivility	3.10	1.29	.708^a				
2. Burnout	2.56	1.23	.429 ^b **	.721			
3. Turnover intention	2.87	1.62	.280 [*]	.687 ^{**}	.710		
4. Organizational support	5.24	1.33	-.255 ^{**}	-.581 ^{**}	-.585 ^{**}	.710	
5. Supervisory support	5.20	1.42	-.195 ^{**}	-.423 ^{**}	-.416 ^{**}	.645 ^{**}	.744

^a Diagonal elements (in bold) are the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE).

^b Off-diagonal elements are the correlations among constructs.

^{*} p < .05.

^{**} p < .01.

Table 4
Hierarchical linear modeling results.

	Hypothesis 1				Hypothesis 2				Hypotheses 3 & 4	
	Burnout Model 1		Turnover intention Model 2		Turnover intention Model 3		Turnover intention Model 4		Burnout Model 5	
	Coeff	t	Coeff	t	Coeff	t	Coeff	t	Coeff	t
<i>Employee-level</i>										
Intercept (γ ₀₀)	2.63	19.83 ^{***}	2.92	20.06 ^{***}	2.91	20.06 ^{***}	2.91	20.04 ^{***}	2.57	27.31 ^{***}
Hours ^a (γ ₁₀)	-0.01	-0.87	-0.01	-1.37	-0.01	-0.72	-0.01	-1.06	-0.01	-1.06
Age (γ ₂₀)	-0.01	-2.33 [†]	-0.03	-4.17 ^{***}	-0.01	-1.22	-0.03	-2.48 [†]	-0.01	-0.87
Experience ^b (γ ₃₀)	0.08	1.10	-0.24	-2.69 ^{**}	-0.03	-2.84 [*]	-0.02	-2.31 [*]	-0.01	-1.23
Gender (γ ₄₀)	0.15	1.43	0.13	0.98	0.23	1.35	0.27	1.67	0.19	1.86
Customer incivility (CI) (γ ₅₀)	0.18	2.95^{**}			0.13	2.89^{**}	0.09	1.36	0.17	3.06^{**}
Burnout (BO) (γ ₅₀)			0.53	5.24^{***}			0.36	5.23^{***}		
<i>Restaurant-level</i>										
Organizational support (OS) (γ ₀₁)									-0.44	-5.37^{***}
Supervisory support (SS) (γ ₀₁)									-0.27	-3.44^{**}
<i>Cross-level interactions</i>										
CI × OS (γ ₅₁)									-0.13	-2.45^{**}
CI × SS (γ ₅₁)									-0.09	-1.79[†]
Total R ²	0.29	0.52	0.46	0.54	0.41					
Deviance	575.66	700.92	672.44	705.65	569.4					

Note: Information pertaining to the statistical details associated with each of the five models is available upon request from the corresponding author.

^a Hours = Work hours per week.

^b Experience = How many places you have worked in the hospitality industry.

^{*} p < 0.05.

^{**} p < 0.01.

^{***} p < 0.001.

customer incivility and burnout could be reduced based upon employee perceptions about support provided by their restaurant companies and supervisors. **Hypotheses 3 and 4** were supported.

5. Discussion

5.1. Conclusions

This study’s findings contribute to the existing body of knowledge by providing empirical support for the importance of clearly understanding customer incivility and its relationships specific to the restaurant workplace environment. Even though contemporary researchers have begun to realize the need for research studies that investigate customer incivility and its effects on employee turnover, existing literature has generally neglected the topic of customer incivility specifically applied to the restaurant industry. Therefore, this study was the first attempt to identify the relationships between customer incivility, burnout, and further turnover intention from the perspective of frontline restaurant service employees. In addition, this study provides a better understanding regarding the role support at the restaurant business-level plays upon the relationships between customer incivility and burnout.

Pertaining to the frontline service employee-level analysis, two hypotheses were tested and results supported our expectations the significant and positive relationships between customer incivility,

employee burnout and their turnover intention. At the restaurant business-level, all other hypotheses were tested and supported by showing that organizational and supervisory support has significant the cross-level interaction effects on the relationship between customer incivility and burnout. Results for all hypotheses tests are presented in **Table 5**.

5.2. Theoretical implications

Results from the study’s findings provide several theoretical implications from the hospitality frontline service employee perspective involving customer incivility and its effects. The primary contribution of this study to the existing hospitality management

Table 5
Results of testing hypotheses.

Hypothesis	Result	
H1: Customer incivility → Burnout	Positively related	Supported
H2: Customer incivility → Burnout → Turnover intention	Fully mediated	Supported
H3: Organizational Support → Customer incivility – Turnover Intention	Negatively moderated	Supported
H4: Supervisor Support → Customer incivility – Turnover Intention	Negatively moderated	Supported

literature is to highlight customer incivility and its relationship the employee's psychological outcome which is closely related to a high level of turnover intention.

One recent study (Karatepe, 2015) proposed that service employees may be more frequently exposed to high job stress situations involving customer incivility. In the restaurant workplace environment, one-time customer interaction is common (Gutek et al., 1999). This lends itself to customers taking advantage of their anonymity when treating service employees in an uncivil manner (Wilson and Holmval, 2013). Many emotional labor studies revealed that frontline restaurant employees have suffered job stress because their particular work environment represents demanding workloads that often involve unpleasant social interactions with customers due to internal regulations pertaining to how frontline employee emotions are expressed in situations related to customer incivility (Grandy, 2003; Jung and Yoon, 2014; Hülshager and Schewe, 2011; Shani et al., 2014; Sliter et al., 2010). In consideration of this situation, this study was the first attempt to empirically demonstrate the significant and negative relationship customer incivility has upon restaurant frontline service employee burnout.

This study adopted a resource-based approach using the COR theory in order to clearly understand the relationships between customer incivility, burnout and turnover intention in the restaurant industry. Results provide evidence demonstrating that psychological resource depletion due to customer incivility is significantly related to employee workplace attitudes and behaviors. This is consistent with previous research findings (Adams and Webster, 2013; Sliter et al., 2012) suggesting that customer incivility is one important factor significantly influencing job stress and emotional exhaustion.

This study's findings support that employee burnout plays a mediating role upon the relationship between customer incivility and turnover intention. Previous customer incivility studies demonstrated that emotional exhaustion plays a mediating role upon the relationship between customer incivility and customer oriented behavior (Kern and Grandey, 2009; van Jaarsveld et al., 2010). However, this study integrated the comprehensive concept of employee burnout (emotional exhaustion, emotional depersonalization and reduced accomplishment), and provided evidence that customer incivility leads to a high level of turnover intention through employee burnout. This finding supports the COR theory proposition that depletion of emotional and psychological resources derived from customer incivility causes burnout, and as a result, implies that employees tend to conserve their resources and become more likely to terminate their jobs.

Existing restaurant literature has focused on internal factors (i.e., employee compensation, benefits and internal conflicts) that are closely related to employee turnover, in order to examine how restaurants could effectively reduce their employee turnover rates (Collins, 2010; Lynn, 2002). However, no research to date has investigated the power of the external factor (customer incivility) upon restaurant employee turnover rates. Therefore, this study successfully documents that customer incivility significantly increases restaurant frontline service employee turnover intention and proposes that customer incivility should be addressed in future scholarly, academic hospitality literature as an important research topic.

Study results also offer theoretical implications involving support provided by the restaurant business-level. It is necessary for the hospitality industry to identify how to best assist employees with overcoming negative impacts due to customer incivility. Existing restaurant literature has demonstrated the positive and direct effects organizational support (Kim et al., 2005) and coworker support (Susskind et al., 2007) have upon employee job satisfaction and customer service. However, this study specifically investigates the moderating role of support offered by both restaurant

organizations and supervisors, and its ability to reduce the influence of customer incivility upon restaurant frontline service employee burnout. Addition, this study revealed that organizational support and supervisory support play significantly important roles in mitigating the relationship between customer incivility and employee burnout. This result supports the COR theory's position that suggests socio-emotional resource investments may be the most appropriate form of employee support to overcome emotional depletion (Hobfoll, 1989; Lee and Ashforth, 1996).

Organizational support was found to have a greater interaction effect for reducing the impact of customer incivility upon burnout, than did supervisory support. Conversely, Kossek et al.'s (2011) proposition asserting that supervisory support may be more influential than organizational support for encouraging employees specifically in the interdependent teamwork environment, is contradictory to our findings. However, our study's findings are submitted as being reasonable due to the fact that respondents were frontline service employees working in a restaurant environment where much of the service encounters occurred independently (i.e. tableside service encounters), and without supervisory involvement.

5.3. Practical implications

Given that customer incivility is a prevalent phenomenon in the labor-intensive restaurant industry which is notorious for high employee turnover rates (Collins, 2010; Lu and Gursoy, 2013), identifying an effective approach which can moderate the negative impact of customer incivility toward employees should be part of a long term business strategy. Generally, customer incivility has been assumed to be negatively related to employee workplace attitudes and behaviors. This study's approach to better understanding consumer incivility was applied specifically to the context regarding customer incivility experienced by frontline restaurant service employees. Adopting this approach, our findings suggest that employees having positively evaluated support provided by their organizations and supervisors are more likely to control and overcome negative impacts of customer incivility. Based upon these findings, several specific practical implications are suggested.

Actionable results based upon these research findings suggest that restaurant supervisors and managers begin to have frontline service employees categorize those critical incidents representing issues pertaining to customer incivility. Then using this information, scenarios can be developed to educate all frontline service employees on techniques that may be employed to defuse and better address specific customer incivility situations. Furthermore, information should be documented by frontline service employees describing techniques appearing to work more successfully than others. Constantly monitoring this program's results could be coordinated by a 'rotating nucleus' of frontline service employees, to be regularly discussed at employee meetings.

An important sub-strategy would be for restaurant management to carefully log employees involved with customer incivility issues to decide if certain employees are actually in need of more detailed observational sessions by management, perhaps also integrating these training sessions with frontline service team leaders. A result of this could be the development of 'buddy systems' representing frontline service employees having experienced fewer customer incivility encounters with those employees documented as having been involved with multiple customer incivility situations.

Another practical implication would be for managers to actually be present regularly in the restaurant dining area so that a 'supervisory' presence is clearly visible to employees and customers alike. Ease of access to management by customers and employees could reduce many potentially difficult situations before they elevated into confrontational and uncivil incidents.

Restaurants should take into account providing better monetary and emotional job conditions in order to achieve a competitive edge among other businesses also involved with the recruitment, selection and retention process for those most desirable frontline service employees desiring employment in the restaurant industry. Restaurants need to regularly review employee performance and offer meaningful rewards and incentives for providing excellent service performances. As an example, restaurant supervisors and organizational management could develop meaningful, customized employee loyalty programs in conjunction with input from frontline service employees. This strategy could generate much more applicable information used for establishing obtainable goals leading to employee incentives that are considered to be important benefits to them.

Well-structured training programs should be developed and continuously re-evaluated to optimize the importance frontline service employee performances have upon the entire restaurant. When employees understand the critically important role they represent to the entire success of the restaurant business, and their organization holds them in high regard because of this, training programs may obtain much higher levels of employee knowledge with many pertinent issues related to operations and service. Excellent training programs centered on the importance frontline employees have upon the business will result in more knowledgeable, confident and manageable employees.

5.4. Limitations and recommendations for future research

As with all research, this current study is not without limitations. First, the study's sample was limited to only one geographic area located in a major Florida tourist destination. Thus, representativeness of this study's sampling to overall restaurant frontline service providers is unknown. As well, data were obtained over a relatively short period of time with a relatively small sample of frontline service employees. Although enough usable responses were obtained to allow statistical estimates to be made at the 95% level of confidence with ± 0.05 error, testing these hypotheses on larger samples of service employees is recommended. Also, this study examined only incivility regarding frontline service employees working in independent restaurants. Although these findings offer introspective dimensions about an overlooked and very serious topic, the study's sample of businesses were all independently owned and operated properties. Further research should also involve corporate managed restaurant organizations having multiple brands.

As well, other hospitality industry segments having frontline service employees also deserve to be investigated in a similar light. Situations pertaining to lodging properties could offer many potentially different typologies involving critical incidents of customer incivility, unique to those industry segment service employees at both independently and corporately owned properties. Service providers stationed at points of critical encounters such as front desk employees, housekeeping, security, maintenance and other guest services should be included in future applications of customer incivility research.

Hierarchical linear modeling was used for this study in order to investigate the important roles of organizational support and supervisory support from the perspective of the restaurant business-level in moderating the relationship between customer incivility and burnout. However, hierarchical linear modeling alone does not allow for testing of all study hypotheses in the same model. Structural equation modeling would be more appropriate to test for relationships between all variables simultaneously. Therefore, future research can use structural equation modeling to investigate all comprehensive relationships between variables.

Another study limitation was that this study adopted and used scales developed by organizational behavior researchers in order to evaluate restaurant customer incivility, which may not be able to fully reflect a restaurant-specific workplace environment. Therefore, future research should develop scales specific to restaurant customer incivility in order to properly address uncivil customer behavior unique to the restaurant workplace environment.

Our final limitation offers direction for future research, and involves incivility issues that may be experienced between employees and management. This current study's objective purposely focused on incivility between restaurant customers and frontline service employees working within that setting. Future research needs to consider the mitigating circumstances involving burnout and turnover as related to 'internal' work environment experiences. Comments pertaining to incivility experienced directly from other employees, as well as from managers, or directed to managers, should be investigated in future research addressing incivility within the hospitality setting.

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