RESEARCH ARTICLE

The mechanism and boundary conditions of the relationship between customer incivility and service quality

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Abstract

This study addresses the causal linkage between customer incivility and service quality through the lens of self-determination theory, according to which need satisfaction as a potential mechanism mediates this relationship. Additionally, it examines the moderating role of surface acting in the relationship between customer incivility and need satisfaction. Dyadic questionnaires were collected from restaurant employees and their customers in Taiwan. A total of 190 employees and 645 customers participated in this study. Results found that need satisfaction mediates the negative relationship between customer incivility and service quality. Surface acting moderates the relationship between customer incivility and need satisfaction as well as the mediation effect of customer incivility on service quality through need satisfaction. Specifically, the indirect effect of need satisfaction on the relation between customer incivility and service quality creativity was more significantly negative at a high level of surface acting than the effect at a low level.

The global economy has gradually shifted its focus from manufacturing to the service industry. Outstanding service quality has become one of the critical determinants of organizational performance and success (Lytle & Timmerman, 2006; Sliter, Jex, Wolford, & McInnerney, 2010). Under this trend, almost all organizations view 'service quality or service excellence as a strategic imperative or, at a minimum, a strategic opportunity' (Schneider, 1990: 399). One of the most common ways to pursue outstanding service quality is through high-quality service interactions between front-line employees and their direct customers (Hochschild, 1983; Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990). However, regular work interactions with customers might cause service employees to experience stress (Hochschild, 1983; Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Dorman & Zapf, 2004; Sliter, Sliter, & Jex, 2012), especially facing customer negative behaviors can further accelerate employees' negative outcomes (Skarlicki, van Jaarsveld, & Walker, 2008; Shao & Skarlicki, 2014). Customer negative behaviors have been found to have negative effects on employees' service quality and overall organization performance (e.g., Skarlicki, van Jaarsveld, & Walker, 2008; Wang, Liao, Zhan, & Shi, 2011; Shao & Skarlicki, 2014), making it one of the major concerns for academic researchers and organizational practitioners in service areas in recent years (Kern & Grandey, 2009; Sliter et al., 2010; Sliter, Sliter, & Jex, 2012).

Prior research on negative customer behaviors has largely emphasized extreme cases such as jay-customers, severe customer sabotage, or aggression (Lovelock, 2001; Harris & Reynolds,

2004); however, recent research has pointed out that service employees actually more often encounter low-level uncivil customer behaviors, called *customer incivility* (Sliter, Sliter, & Jex, 2012). Empirical evidence shows that customer incivility is a daily occurrence (e.g., Sliter et al., 2010; Walker, van Jaarsveld, & Skarlicki, 2014; Baranik, Wang, Gong, & Shi, 2017) and occurs in many different forms ranging from dealing with ambiguous or unreasonable customer demands to minor customer verbal aggression (Pearson, Anderson, & Porath, 2000; Sliter et al., 2010). Sliter, Sliter, and Jex (2012) indicated that, unlike overt mistreatment, a single incident of incivility 'might not be perceived as stressful, but an accumulation of perceived incivility leads to negative outcomes' (p. 122). Therefore, customer incivility indicates the accumulative effects of low-intensity negative customer behaviors over time, rather than the effect of a specific customer encounter.

Because customer incivility was not introduced as a construct on its own until recently (Sliter et al., 2010), empirical findings in the customer incivility literature remain at an early stage. While previous research has reported that employees who experience customer incivility can face burnout (Kern & Grandey, 2009), negative customer orientation (Hur, Moon, & Han, 2015), less sales performance (Sliter, Sliter, & Jex, 2012), and be uncivil toward other customers (van Jaarsveld, Walker, & Skarlicki, 2010), few studies examine the mechanisms and boundary conditions between customer incivility and its negative outcomes.

The present study attempts to address the above literature gaps through applying the perspective of self-determination theory (SDT, Deci & Ryan, 2000) and emotional labor. SDT is a macro theory that provides a broad framework to explain and study human motivation. It addresses the relationship between motivation, performance, and well-being that brings out employees' volitional engagement. Satisfying psychological needs can provide support to individuals' intrinsic tendencies to function effectively and healthily. On the other hand, thwarting psychological needs will lead to negative work outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2000). One of the key arguments of SDT is that the surrounding social and cultural factors can facilitate or hinder individuals' motivation for well-being and the quality of their performance (Deci & Ryan, 2000; 2002). This study proposes that need satisfaction is a mediating mechanism between customer incivility and negative work outcomes.

Furthermore, the work of service employees often involves a certain level of emotional labor (display rules, Hochschild, 1983). Emotional labor is the process of managing emotions of job-related interactions or the appearance of regulating emotions at work (Hochschild, 1983; Morris & Feldman, 1996). The literature on emotional labor distinguishes between two ways in which service employees regulate their expressed emotion: deep acting and surface acting (Hochschild, 1983). Deep acting involves attempting to change actual inner feelings to match the required display rules set by organizations. In contrast, surface acting involves attempting to change affective displays as encouraged by organizations but without altering one's underlying inner feelings (Grandey, 2000). Research has consistently shown that surface acting is harmful to employees' job performance (Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011) as assessed by customer service ratings (Grandey, Fisk, Mattila, Jansen, & Sideman, 2005; Wagner & Ilies, 2008; Groth et al., 2009). Deep acting, on the other hand, has inconsistent results for employees' performance (Grandey, Diefendorff, & Rupp, 2012). While customer incivility negatively affects employees' psychological needs, we assert that the way employees manage their work-related emotions (i.e., surface acting) can worsen the detrimental effects of customer incivility and reduce service quality. Therefore, this study proposes that emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983; Grandey, 2000) is a potential moderator in the customer incivility–need satisfaction–service quality relationship.

The present study contributes to the literature in two ways. First, while previous research suggests several mechanisms, particularly focusing on stress theory and resource perspectives, this study uses SDT to propose that the experience of prolonged incivility can harm employees' psychological needs, reduce work motivation, and lead to other negative consequences. This study will examine whether customer incivility frustrates employees' need satisfaction, which can in turn have an indirect effect that reduces service quality. Second, the present study examines

the moderating role of surface acting in the relationship between customer incivility and service quality. This examination provides the boundary condition of SDT perspective through which we can obtain a better picture of employee–customer interactions. Based on the above, this study intends to clarify these two issues by investigating whether need satisfaction serves as a mediating mechanism between customer incivility and service quality, and whether surface acting worsens the impact of customer incivility on service quality.

The theoretical model underpinning the present study is depicted in Figure 1. The following section first reviews the literature pertaining to the central concepts in the study – customer incivility, surface acting, need satisfaction, and service quality – and then discusses the hypothesized relationships. Subsequently, we describe the design of the present study, which consisted of a self-report survey of service employees and of service quality collected from customers. Finally, we present the findings and their implications for related literature.

Theoretical background and development of hypotheses

In their seminal article, Andersson and Pearson (1999) defined workplace incivility as 'low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect. Uncivil behaviors are characteristically rude and discourteous, displaying a lack of regard for others' (p. 457). Sliter, Sliter, and Jex (2012) indicate that the word 'ambiguous intent' distinguishes between incivility and 'other forms of interpersonal mistreatment' (p. 122). Examples of uncivil conduct include hostile stares, sarcasm, disparaging tones and remarks, and the 'silent treatment.' Workplace incivility comes from two sources, one is coworker incivility and the other is customer incivility (Sliter, Sliter, & Jex, 2012). Coworker incivility comes from within the organization, including from leaders and colleagues (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002; Aquino & Thau, 2009); customer incivility is a form of low-quality interpersonal treatment at work that employees perceive originating outside of the organization (Dorman & Zapf, 2004). It is reported that service employees experience incivility more often from customers than from their coworkers (Grandey, Kern, & Frone M, 2007; Sliter et al., 2010). Customer incivility is recognized as an important and emerging independent construct that needs more research attention (Totterdell & Holman, 2003; Sliter et al., 2010; Sliter, Sliter, & Jex, 2012).

Organizational authorities have legitimate managerial power to supervise employees via formal and informal rewards and sanctions, so that service employees are often required to follow display rules and comply with the common mantra of 'the customer is always right' when providing services (Grandey, Dickter, & Sin, 2004). In the employee–customer relationship, the customers are often in the position of relatively higher power (Sliter et al., 2010). Some customers even feel that they have authority over employees, treating employees as subordinates in customer–employee interactions (Harris & Ogbonna, 2002), which easily makes employees the target of incivility (Sliter et al., 2010). Most customer–employee relationships consist of episodic and often short-term exchanges. Researchers indicate that such interactions can still induce negative and prolonged adverse consequences (e.g., Sliter et al., 2010). For example, customer incivility is found to be associated with job stress and burnout (Spector & Jex, 1998; Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001; Porath & Erez, 2007; Kern & Grandey, 2009).
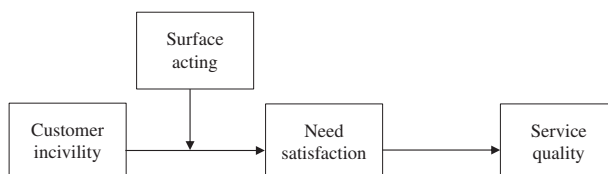

Figure 1. Research framework

Service employees are required to adhere to display rules on an ongoing basis, defined as expression norms, that dictate the emotions that are to be expressed in attaining their work goals (Gosserand & Diefendorff, 2005). While relationships with an authority figure can involve a certain level of impression management on the employee's part, following and maintaining display rules in interactions with customers can be an ongoing stressor (Hochschild, 1983; Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). Rupp and Spencer (2006) found that when employees are not treated fairly by the customers, those who work with high emotional labor will have difficulty complying with the organization's display rules. In short, customers provide unique challenges to employees' workplace experience.

Need satisfaction as a mediator

SDT is one of the most detailed and well-validated theoretical perspectives of motivation and psychological needs (Greguras & Diefendorff, 2009). Different from previous psychological needs theories that assume that individual wants and desires lead to needs, SDT assumes that individuals universally possess an innate desire for personal growth (Deci & Ryan, 2000), the absence of which can cause a decline in psychological function and well-being that are considered psychological needs (Ryan, 1995; Lian, Ferris, & Brown, 2012). SDT posits the existence of three human needs: the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness; these are essential for individuals' psychological growth and well-being (Ryan, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000; 2002). The need for competence refers to the desire to attain valued outcomes and succeed at challenging tasks and daily life (White, 1959; Skinner, 1995); the need for relatedness refers to the desire to feel a sense of connection and mutual respect with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995); and the need for autonomy refers to the desire to initiate one's own action and choose activities consistent with one's integrated sense of self (Ryan & Connell, 1989). Satisfying these three basic psychological needs contributes the most to people's feelings of fulfillment in various events (Sheldon et al., 2001), which is the essential prerequisite for human survival and development (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The thwarting of any need will produce negative outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Moreover, in contrast to other need theories that focus on stable individual differences in need strengths, the main arguments in SDT emphasize different external opportunities and conditions that can satisfy individuals' needs. The surrounding social and cultural factors can facilitate or hinder individuals' motivation for well-being and the quality of their performance (Deci & Ryan, 2000; 2002).

SDT has been broadly applied to various disciplines, including organization studies. Much empirical evidence has demonstrated that the satisfaction of these three psychological needs is related to a wide range of positive employee work outcomes within an organization including job performance, self-esteem, and organizational commitment (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Deci, Olafsen, and Ryan (2017) indicated that SDT can be applied to the work domain with two sets of independent variables: workplace context and individual differences. Workplace context includes supporting and thwarting context (Deci, Olafsen, & Ryan, 2017), such as organizational support versus need thwarting; individual differences include causality orientations of aspirations and goals. There are also two sets of applied dependent variables, the consequences of needs satisfaction (Deci, Olafsen, & Ryan, 2017): work behaviors, such as quality or quantity of work, and health and wellness, including individuals' well-being/ill-being and vitality. The basic psychological needs in this causal relationship model serve as a mediating mechanism (Deci, Olafsen, & Ryan, 2017), which include satisfied versus frustrated basic psychological needs. Although the three inner needs are conceptually distinguishable, depending on the research, they are generally used as a composite (e.g., Gagné, 2003; Baard Deci, & Ryan, 2004; Sheldon & Niemiec, 2006; Van den Broeck, De Witte, & Lens, 2008; Uysal, Lin, & Knee, 2010) or separately (e.g., Richer, Blanchard, & Vallerand, 2002).

SDT represents a comprehensive and overarching theoretical perspective of human motivation and adjustment, wherein need satisfaction leads to human thriving and success, and need frustration leads to maladjustment and impaired regulatory functioning, which undermines an individual's performance. According to the theoretical model, interactions during service encounter may foster or thwart one's work motivation, and therefore, customer incivility is hypothesized as a need thwarting factor in the workplace context. The more frequently employees experience customer incivility, the more likely their need satisfaction is affected.

Customer incivility includes low intensity of unintentional mistreatment or hassling. Uncivil behavior by customers, such as being disrespectful or engaging in discourteous behavior (Sliter et al., 2010), negatively affects individuals' basic psychological needs. For example, customer incivility comprises behaviors such as belittling service employees during the process of service delivery. Being belittled or having one's competence assailed calls into question one's abilities and achievements, and thus can negatively affect one's sense of competence. Meanwhile, the unequal status (i.e., employee in the relatively lower power position) in the interaction between customers and service employees can make service employees behave in line with what they believe their customers desire, to avoid being mistreated; as a result, their sense of autonomy is undermined. Finally, excluding, belittling, and rude behaviors communicate to an employee that he or she is not well-respected by customers, reducing one's sense of belonging and relatedness (Tyler, Degoey, & Smith, 1996; Ferris, Brown, Berry, & Lian, 2008). Based on this, customer incivility negatively impacts the overall basic need satisfaction of service employees.

By regarding these needs as inherent to human nature, SDT focuses on examining satisfactions of these needs in specific situations, with past research outlining the negative consequences associated with thwarted need satisfaction (Deci & Ryan, 2000). More specifically, SDT suggests that need satisfaction facilitates self-regulatory processes and adjustment (Kuhl, 2000), while thwarted need satisfaction is experienced as aversive, undermines self-regulation, and causes poor performance (Deci & Ryan, 2000; 2002). In line with this proposition, need satisfaction is associated with better job performance (Greguras & Diefendorff, 2009), being more engaged at work, and better psychological adjustment (Deci, Ryan, Gagné, Leone, Usunov, & Kornazheva, 2001). In contrast, thwarted need satisfaction is related to failure of self-regulation and aggression (Shields, Ryan, & Cicchetti, 2001) and health-undermining behaviors such as drug use (Williams, Cox, Hedberg, & Deci, 2000). Building on this theoretical perspective, it has been suggested that one of the reasons individuals may react and perform negatively in response to uncivil behaviors at work is due to the impact of such behaviors on individuals' psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Aquino & Thau, 2009). More specifically, being the target of customer incivility may thwart feelings of belongingness with customers, worthiness in their role of service delivery, and ability to predict and control their task environment, which ultimately harm employees' service quality. Deci, Olafsen, and Ryan (2017) indicated that the workplace context can affect individuals' psychological needs, which can further harm the quality of their work. Hur, Moon, and Han (2015) found that the experience of customer incivility by employees can lead to negative customer orientation. Sliter et al. (2010) reported that customer incivility has a direct negative impact on service quality to other customers. Previous research has also suggested that customer incivility can affect employees' customer orientation, eventually damaging their service quality. As such, basic needs satisfaction is therefore proposed to mediate the relationship between customer incivility and service quality. Based on the above argument, this study proposes the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1:   Need satisfaction mediates the negative relationship between customer incivility and service quality.

Surface acting as an exacerbator of customer incivility effects

Although customer incivility negatively impacts employees' service quality, which is indirectly caused by need satisfaction, this study further suggests surface acting as the boundary condition under which the negative influence of customer incivility may be magnified. Specifically, the more surface acting is adopted, the more negative is the relationship between customer incivility and service quality, through the mediating effect of need satisfaction.

As previously mentioned, surface acting is defined as a type of restricted emotion regulation in which affective expressions are purposively manipulated (i.e., by suppressing or faking) to follow display rules when interacting with the focal customer. In other words, surface acting refers to modifying facial expressions (Grandey, 2003). On the contrary, deep acting is a promoted form of emotion regulation, whereby the undesired affective expression is genuinely replaced by the emotional state that is consistent with organizational display rules (Grandey, 2000; Gross and John, 2003). Deep acting refers to modifying one's inner feelings (Grandey, 2003).

Despite both surface acting and deep acting having a common intended goal that is in line with organizational display rules, Grandey (2000) noted that with surface acting, an employee attempts to suppress true inner feelings and simply fake an appropriate expression set by display rules, whereas with deep acting an individual actually generates desired affective states via strategies such as attentional deployment and cognitive reappraisal of the situation (Gross, 1998). Hence, deep acting aligns experienced affect with display rules, whereas surface acting aligns displayed affect with display rules, even if doing so increases the discrepancy between the experienced affective state and the displayed expression (Gross & John, 2003; Scott & Barnes, 2011). Regarding consequences, surface acting is related to a greater number of negative work-related outcomes than deep acting (Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011; Mesmer-Magnus, DeChurch, & Wax, 2012). For instance, researchers have associated surface acting with various negative outcomes such as psychological strain (Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011), emotional exhaustion (Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011), physical illnesses (Schaubroeck & Jones, 2000), poor job performance (Grandey, 2003), and counterproductive behaviors (Groth & Grandey, 2012). Based on the more detrimental impacts of surface acting on organizational life than of deep acting, the present study focuses on the role of surface acting.

Despite growing evidence that surface acting is detrimental for employees at work, it is surprising that there have been very few empirical studies examining the moderating role of surface acting in the process of service delivery (Baranik et al., 2017). As Hypothesis 1 stated, when encountering uncivil treatment from customers, an employee's need satisfaction is thwarted. In this situation, to avoid or to exit this unfavorable situation is not feasible because employee–customer interaction is an in-role requirement in the service industry (Diefendorff, Richard, & Croyle, 2006). Furthermore, because of the display rules of 'service with smile' (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002) and 'the show must go on' (Grandy, 2003), employees encountering uncivil customers still have to keep or fake a positive expression to deal with them. This strategy will decrease the feeling of *autonomy* because service employees have to follow display rules even when they do not experience a positive inner affective state. As a result, their volition and agency are threatened (less satisfied need for autonomy). Therefore, the negative relationship between customer incivility and need satisfaction will be exacerbated.

Meanwhile, because surface acting is a discrepancy reducing approach, by which an employee suppresses felt inner emotion while faking unfelt but required emotion at the same time, an employee requires more cognitive resources and emotional effort to regulate his or her inner affective state. This depletes an employee's cognitive and emotional resources (Rupp & Spencer, 2006; Goldberg & Grandey, 2007). Consequently, an employee's job performance will decrease. As a result, they will receive more negative reactions from customers, resulting in lower self-evaluation of competence in the long run. Under these conditions, the need to feel effective in-

service contexts and capable of achieving valued outcomes will not be satisfied (less satisfaction of need for competence).

Finally, because surface acting is an inauthentic way to interact with uncivil customers (Grandey, 2000), it will distance the psychological connection with customers (i.e., psychological distance), which refers to the subjective distance between an actor and other people in temporal (short vs. long), spatial (close vs. distant), and social (in-group vs. other-group) dimensions (Trope & Liberman, 2003). According to Trope, Liberman, and Wakslak (2007), psychological distance is detrimental for interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, as suggested by Zhan, Wang, and Shi (2016), emotional expression and regulation may also elicit an interpersonal process; that is, the way people regulate their emotions may influence their interaction partners' feelings, perceptions, and behaviors. When employees use surface acting to interact with customers, they put on a mask to treat customers in a desired way, regardless of their true inner feelings (Grandey, 2000; Zhan et al., 2016). Therefore, surface acting is usually perceived to be inauthentic by both service employees themselves (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002) and customers (Grandey, 2003), and the significant inconsistency between felt and expressed emotions is particularly considered to reduce one's sense of self (Hochschild, 1983). From these perspectives, surface acting reveals one's lack of interest in interaction, indicating a sense of relationship avoidance, and consequently, undermining satisfaction of the need for relatedness. When employees perceive customer incivility, the more they use surface acting, the more the negative relationship between customer incivility and need satisfaction is magnified. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed.

Hypothesis 2:   Surface acting moderates the relationship between customer incivility and need satisfaction such that the relationship between customer incivility and need satisfaction is more strongly negative when surface acting is high as opposed to low.

Furthermore, based on Hypotheses 1 and 2, the indirect relation between customer incivility, need satisfaction, and service quality will be moderated by surface acting. Specifically, the indirect effect will be strongly negative when surface acting is high. In contrast, the indirect relationship will be weaker when surface acting is low.

Hypothesis 3:   Surface acting moderates the indirect effect of customer incivility on service quality through need satisfaction such that the indirect effect is more strongly negative when surface acting is high as opposed to low.

Method

Participants and procedure

Participants in this study were restaurant front-line employees. Restaurant employees were selected because their work is considered one of the most emotionally stressful and because they frequently encounter customer incivility in their work environment (Han, Bonn, & Cho, 2016). High-quality or chain restaurants in Taiwan usually require their employees to comply with organizational display rules when providing services. Data were collected from employees and their customers from 21 restaurants in Taiwan. All employees were administered a survey questionnaire containing measures of customer incivility, need satisfaction, surface acting, and control variables. In the customer survey, questionnaires obtained service quality ratings for the focal service employee from customers after they finished dining and before leaving the restaurant. When administering the survey, participants were assured of confidentiality, and the fact that the data were collected for research purposes was emphasized. Among the 190 customer service employees, 129 completed the survey, resulting in a response rate of 67.89%. There were 645 customers who participated in the survey. Each employee was rated by three to five

customers. The final employee sample consisted of 73 women and 56 men. The employees' average age was 26.44 years, with 3.81 years of job tenure. Most respondents were educated above college level (72.90%), and 79.8% were unmarried. Of 645 customers who participated in the present survey, 45.6% were men, 61.2% were unmarried, 76.9% were aged below 40 years, and 64.9% had an above college level of education.

Measures

Customer incivility

A scale from Sliter, Sliter, and Jex (2012) was used to measure customer incivility. The scale consists of 11 items (e.g., 'Customers show that they are irritated or impatient'), and all items were rated on a 5-point scale (from 1 = 'strongly disagree' to 5 = 'strongly agree'). Cronbach's α of this scale was 0.93.

Need satisfaction

Need satisfaction uses the basic needs satisfaction in relationship scale by La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, and Deci (2000). This scale was chosen because this study is interested in the effects of need satisfaction derived from the customer rather than in the effects of need fulfillment derived from the broader working context. The scale measures each basic need satisfaction with three items (response scale: 1 = totally disagree to 5 = totally agree). The sample items are as follows: 'In the service relationship with my customer, I have a say in what happens, and I can voice my opinion (i.e., autonomy),' 'In the service relationship with my customer, I feel like a competent person (i.e., competence),' and 'In the service relationship with my customer, I often feel a large personal distance (i.e., relatedness, reversely coded).' Cronbach's α is 0.76. Confirmatory factor analysis was performed to test whether the three-factor model and an overall second-order factor fitted our data. The results showed that the fit indexes fell within an acceptable range ($\chi^{2(24)} = 42.78$, root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = 0.08; comparative fit index [CFI] = 0.94; Tucker–Lewis index [TLI] = 0.89, standard root mean residual [SRMR] = 0.05), suggesting that the model fitted the data reasonably well. Following conventional practice (e.g., La Guardia et al., 2000; Patrick, Knee, Canevello, & Lonsbary, 2007; Weinstein & Ryan, 2010; Lanaj, Johnson, & Lee, 2016), all items were collapsed into an overall index of need satisfaction.

Surface acting

Daily surface acting was measured with the five items developed by Brotheridge and Lee (2003) and Grandey (2003). Instructions for the measure asked participants to indicate the extent to which each of the five statements described their work experience in the present position, with sample items including 'I put on an act in order to deal with customers in an appropriate way' and 'I just pretended to have the emotions I needed to display on the job.' Responses were rated from 1 (very slightly or not at all) to 5 (very much). Cronbach's α was 0.95.

Service quality

Service quality was rated with a measure developed from Borucki and Burke (1999). To adapt the measure, it is determined that 11 of the original 13 items could adequately capture the nature of restaurant service performance (e.g., being able to help customers when needed), and all items were rated on a 5-point scale (from 1 = 'strongly disagree' to 5 = 'strongly agree'). Cronbach's α was 0.93.

To assess the validity of aggregating customer-level data to the employee level, it was necessary to demonstrate both between-employee variability and within-employee agreement (Hofmann & Stetzer, 1996; Hofmann, 1997; Bliese, 2000). To check interrater agreement among customers for a focal employee, we calculated within-group agreement (r_{wgj}) values using uniform null distribution and obtained median values of 0.89 for service quality. Additionally, the assessment

Table 1. Correlations, means, and SDs for all study variables

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Gender	1.60	0.55	–						
Education	1.86	0.79	−0.10	–					
Job tenure	3.81	5.57	0.27**	− 0.13	–				
Incivility	1.83	0.71	−0.14	0.20*	−0.21*	(0.93)			
Need satisfaction	3.78	0.45	0.04	0.17	0.26***	−0.41***	(0.76)		
Surface acting	3.25	1.14	−0.06	0.09	−0.04	−0.35***	−0.17*	(0.95)	
Service quality	3.91	0.36	−0.02	0.03	0.24**	0.41***	−0.47*	0.04	(0.93)

Note: $N = 129$; Values in parentheses on the diagonal are the Cronbach's α coefficients.
*$p = .05$, **$p = .01$, ***$p = .001$.

between-employee variance in the employee-level service quality construct uses a one-way analysis of variance. The analysis of variance indicated significant between-employee variance in service quality ($F = 2.38$, $p < .001$). The ICC (1) and ICC (2) calculated from the analysis of variance were 0.22 and 0.58, respectively. This value is at the high end of what can be expected in applied research settings (Bliese, 2000). Together, these statistics show acceptable levels of within-employee agreement and between-employee variability in the service quality as an employee variable.

Control variables
Based on prior customer incivility research, this study controlled for gender (1 for male, 2 for female), education (1: below college, 2: college, and 3: above college), and tenure for the present position measured in years (Sliter et al., 2010; van Jaarsveld, Walker, & Skarlicki, 2010).

Results
To examine the distinctiveness of the measured constructs from service employees, a confirmatory factor analysis was conducted with maximum likelihood estimation in LISREL 8.8 (Joreskog & Sorbom, 2006). Given the limited sample size relative to the large number of parameters estimated in the measurement model, this study used item-parceling as indicators to maintain a proper indicator-to-sample-size ratio (Bentler & Chou, 1987) and randomly created three parcels for all scales. The measurement model (theoretical model) consisted of three factors: surface acting, need satisfaction, and customer incivility. Results showed that the hypothesized three-factor model fit the data well ($\chi^{2(24)} = 48.60$, $p < .001$; CFI $= 0.97$; non-normed fit index [NNFI] $= 0.95$; RMSEA $= 0.08$; SRMR $= 0.06$). Furthermore, we compared the three-factor model with the two-factor model (i.e., combining customer incivility and surface acting; $\chi^{2(26)} = 144.72$, $p < .001$; CFI $= 0.85$; NNFI $= 0.79$; RMSEA $= 0.17$; SRMR $= 0.13$), and the one-factor model (i.e., combining customer incivility, surface acting, and need satisfaction; $\chi^{2(27)} = 512.60$, $p < .001$; CFI $= 0.38$; NNFI $= 0.17$; RMSEA $= 0.34$; SRMR $= 0.21$). A change in the χ^2-test suggested the three-factor model produced a significant improvement over the two-factor model ($\Delta\chi^{2(1)} = 96.12$, $p < .001$) and the one-factor model ($\Delta\chi^{2(3)} = 162.03$, $p < .001$). Despite its advantages, however, using parceled scales can mask problems with individual items (Bandalos & Finney, 2001). To strengthen confidence in the factor structure of our measures, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis using all items. All items were loaded on the intended constructs, though factor loadings for two items from the need satisfaction scale were smaller than 0.40. Based on the above, these results support the discriminant validity of the constructs.

Table 2. Results for mediation effect

Mediator variable model	Model 1 Need satisfaction		
	B	SE	t
Gender	−0.05	0.06	−0.73
Education	0.16***	0.04	−3.71
Job tenure	0.02**	0.01	−3.12
Customer incivility	−0.27***	0.05	−5.51
Dependent variable model	Model 2 Service quality		
Gender	−0.07	0.05	−1.36
Education	0.02	0.04	0.44
Job tenure	0.01	0.01	1.49
Customer incivility (CI)	−0.14***	0.04	−3.22
Need satisfaction (NS)	0.26***	0.07	3.69
Mediation effects	B	SE	T
Sobel test	−0.07**	0.02	−3.07
Bootstrap (95%)	Lower = −0.12		Upper = −0.03

Note: $N = 129$. Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported. Bootstrap sample size = 5,000.

Because some of the present constructs were collected from the same source (i.e., service employees), there was a concern about common method variance, which threatens internal validity (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Harman's one-factor test was used to address this issue of same source bias. To run this test, all the measured variables were entered into an exploratory factor analysis and the unrotated factor solution was examined to determine the number of factors necessary to account for the variance in the variables. If a problematic amount of same source bias was present, either a single factor would emerge from the exploratory factor analysis or one factor would account for the majority of the covariance among the variables. The results of the analysis revealed the presence of three distinct factors with eigenvalues >1.0 and that one factor explained 31.23% of the total variance. Therefore, because the Harman test revealed the presence of more than one distinct factor and that the majority of the total variance was not explained by one factor, the results provide empirical evidence that common source bias is not an issue. Thus, the authors are confident that it is unlikely that same source bias confounded our results.

A summary of the descriptive statistics (means, SDs, and reliabilities) and correlations among all variables is presented in Table 1. The correlations among customer incivility, need satisfaction, and service quality were in the expected direction.

Hypothesis 1 predicts that need satisfaction mediates the negative relationship between customer incivility and service quality evaluated by the direct customers. As shown in Table 2, customer incivility was negatively related to need satisfaction ($B = -0.27$, SE $= 0.05$, $p < .001$, Model 1). Moreover, need satisfaction was positively related to service quality ($B = 0.26$, SE $= 0.07$, $p < .001$, Model 2). The mediation effect was significantly negative (Sobel test: $B = -0.07$, $p < .01$, the confidence interval ranged from −0.12 to −0.03 from 95% bootstrapping). Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Table 3. Results for conditional indirect effect

Mediator variable model	Need satisfaction		
	B	SE	*T*
Gender	−0.06	0.06	−0.97
Education	0.15***	0.04	3.58
Job tenure	0.02***	0.01	3.41
Customer incivility (CI)	−0.21***	0.05	−3.91
Surface acting (SA)	−0.03	0.03	−1.11
CI x SA	−0.10**	0.04	−2.54
Dependent variable model	**Service quality**		
Gender	−0.07	0.05	−1.37
Education	0.02	0.04	0.54
Job tenure	0.01	0.01	1.41
Customer incivility (CI)	−0.18***	0.05	−4.08
Need satisfaction (NS)	0.29***	0.07	4.18
Surface acting (SA)	0.08***	0.02	3.22
CI × SA	0.07*	0.03	2.17
NS × SA	−0.11	0.07	−1.52
Conditional indirect effects model	*B*	SE	*t*
Moderator: surface acting			
Sobel test			
Low Mod (−1 SD)	−0.03	0.02	−1.15
High Mod (+1 SD)	−0.09***	0.03	−3.37
	Lower		Upper
95% Bootstrapping			
Low Mod (−1 SD)	−0.07		0.00
High Mod (+1 SD)	−0.16		−0.05

Note: $N = 129$. Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported. Bootstrap sample size = 5,000.

Hypothesis 2 proposes that surface acting moderates the relationship between customer incivility and need satisfaction. The results are shown in Table 3 (Model 1). The interaction between customer incivility and surface acting was negatively related to need satisfaction ($B = −0.10$, SE = 0.04, $p < .01$). Following the procedure suggested by Aiken and West (1991), we plotted the interaction effects shown in Figure 2. To further probe the relationship between customer incivility and need satisfaction at the different levels of surface acting, we conducted a series of simple slope tests at five levels of points (i.e., 1: very low = −2 SD; 2: low = −1 SD; 3: medium = 0; 4: high = +1 SD; and 5: very high = +2 SD). The simple slope tests showed that customer incivility had no significant relationship with need satisfaction when surface acting was very low ($B = −0.02$, SE = 0.12, $p > .05$) and low ($B = −0.10$, SE = 0.08, $p > .05$), but was
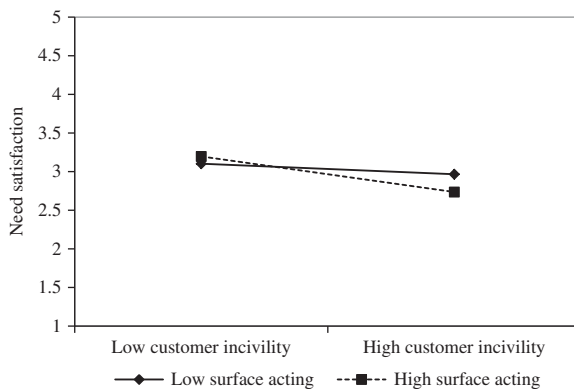
Figure 2. Interaction between customer incivility and surface acting on need satisfaction

significantly negatively related to need satisfaction when surface acting was medium ($B = -0.21$, SE $= 0.05$, $p < .001$), high ($B = -0.33$, SE $= 0.06$, $p < .001$), and very high ($B = -0.44$, SE $= 0.09$, $p < .001$). Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Hypothesis 3 predicts that surface acting moderates the mediation effect of customer incivility on service quality through need satisfaction. To test this hypothesis, we followed the moderated path analysis approach developed by Edwards and Lambert (2007) to test the overall moderated mediation effects. This approach produces a group of models that indicate how the first-stage effect (from the independent variable to the mediator), second-stage effect (from the mediator to the dependent variable), direct effect (from the independent variable to the dependent variable), and indirect effect (from the independent variable to the dependent variable through the mediator) vary at the different levels of the moderator. We also followed the suggestion of Edwards and Lambert (2007) to bootstrap 1,000 samples to construct bias-corrected confidence intervals for the significance tests of the effects. The results, as summarized in the conditional indirect effect model in Table 3, show that the size of the difference in the indirect effect of customer incivility on service quality was 0.07 (SE $= 0.03$, $p < .05$), with the 95% confidence intervals computed using bootstrap estimates excluding zero. Specifically, the indirect effect of need satisfaction on the relation between customer incivility and service quality creativity was more significantly negative at a high level of surface acting ($B = -0.09$, SE $= 0.03$, $p < .001$) than the effect at a low level of surface acting ($B = -0.03$, SE $= 0.02$, $p > .05$). The interaction pattern is shown in Figure 3. Hypothesis 3 was supported.

In spite of some researchers (e.g., Weinstein & Ryan, 2010; Lanaj, Johnson, & Lee, 2016) having suggested that needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness can be aggregated to an overall construct, there is still a possibility of different relationships among variables between the levels of construct and its dimensions. To address this concern, we added the analysis at each need dimension to probe for possible different effects of customer incivility on the three distinct psychological needs. Results showed that customer incivility was significantly negatively related to autonomy ($B = -0.23$, SE $= 0.05$, $p < .001$), and autonomy mediated the relationship between customer incivility and service quality (mediation effect $= -0.09$, SE $= 0.02$, $p < .001$). The same significant patterns can also be found in the direct and mediation effects of competence ($B = -0.30$, SE $= 0.05$, $p < .001$; mediation effect $= -0.17$, SE $= 0.03$, $p < .001$) and relatedness ($B = -0.30$, SE $= 0.04$, $p < .001$; mediation effect $= -0.15$, SE $= 0.03$, $p < .001$). Results of tests assessing the moderating role of surface acting on the relationships between customer incivility and three psychological needs showed that surface acting moderated the relationship between customer incivility and relatedness (interaction effect $= -0.10$, SE $= 0.03$, $p > .01$), but not for autonomy and competence (interaction effect $= -0.02$, SE $= 0.04$, $p > .05$; interaction effect $= -0.02$, SE $= 0.04$, $p > .05$, respectively). With these findings, implications will be offered in the discussion section.

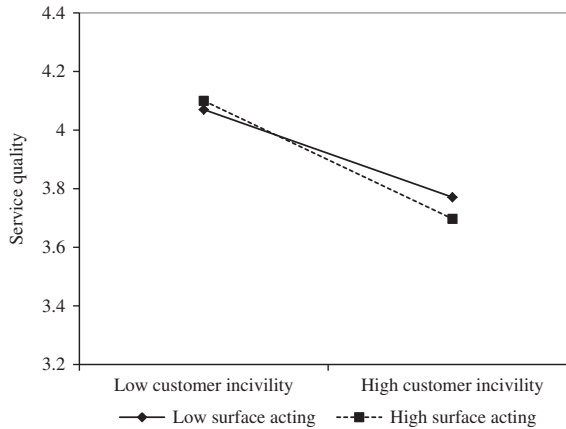**Figure 3.** Moderating effect of surface acting on indirecting effect of customer incivility on service quality

Discussion

From a theoretical standpoint, the current study contributes to the literature in two important ways. First, the present study extended previous empirical efforts through investigating the mediating role of need satisfaction in the relationship between customer incivility and service quality. Previous researchers have conceptualized customer incivility from the perspectives of interactional justice (e.g., Rupp, McCance, Spencer, & Sonntag, 2008) and job demands (e.g., Dormann & Zapf, 2004; Grandey, Dickter, & Sin, 2004; Wang et al., 2011). Our results lend support to the growing body of research that suggests a new mechanism may be at play, and this theoretical angle views customer mistreatment from the SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Second, this study contributes to the existing literature by exploring whether surface acting moderates the relationship between customer incivility and employee need satisfaction. Grounded in emotional labor perspective (Grandey, 2000), this finding provides insight into conditions when surface acting is likely to produce a more adverse effect of customer incivility on service quality.

Theoretical and practical implications

The primary contribution of the present study is to further our understanding of the causal linkage between customer incivility and two key outcomes: need satisfaction and customer service performance. Namely, it is believed that need satisfaction – satisfaction with autonomy, relatedness, and competency – was the composite driving force behind the negative effects of customer incivility.

Drawing upon a SDT framework, the present study examined the mediating role that need satisfaction plays in the relation between customer incivility and service quality. Compared to previous research that has primarily theoretically focused on emotional resources and justice perception to account for the relation between customer behavior and service performance, the present findings, by including basic psychological needs, highlight the important internal driving force of motivation, offering a new lens for future research.

The findings also suggest that this relationship becomes more adverse when the employee uses surface acting to cope with customer incivility. In other words, the experience of customer incivility is not the only source of threat to need satisfaction. Research results suggest that if the customer service representative cannot express his or her feelings, but fakes or suppresses his or her inner emotion instead, the negative consequences of customer incivility will worsen.

Regarding customer service quality, the present results suggest that faking positive emotions or suppressing negative emotions (a common type of emotional labor) likely plays a moderating

role in the relationship between customer incivility and customer service performance. The results of this study build on these findings by adding the knowledge that customer identification of inauthentic emotion can actually decrease customer ratings in the service encounter. Service providers who fake/suppress emotions when dealing with an uncivil customer may be perceived as patronizing or as minimizing the customer's concerns. In the long run, using surface acting with an uncivil customer may lead to what Andersson and Pearson (1999) termed a spiral of incivility and, ultimately, a more dissatisfied customer.

Furthermore, the analysis results of dimensional level of need satisfaction (as the last part of results section) revealed that autonomy, competence, and relatedness individually mediate relationship between customer incivility and service quality, which are similar to the mediating role of construct level of need satisfaction. However, the moderating role of surface acting in the mediation relationship mentioned above shows interesting differences in dimensional level analyses: surface acting only exacerbates the negative consequence of customer incivility on the satisfaction of relatedness need, but not for autonomy and competence. The findings, on the one hand, imply that customers' uncivil behaviors impair a service employee's satisfaction of social interaction and, on the other hand, that unauthentic interaction (e.g., surface acting) will worsen actors' (i.e., service employees) social need fulfillment. To the best of our knowledge, such a relationship perspective has received very few, if any, attention in the extant literature of customer incivility. We believe this unexplored lens will offer researchers a more sophisticated picture of the present field.

Customer incivility is a pervasive phenomenon in service settings. To cope with negative consequences (e.g., emotional exhaustion and negative emotional experience) stemming from customer negative behaviors, service employees may adopt dysfunctional coping strategies (i.e., surface acting). In doing so, however, this coping method may strengthen a cycle of negativity that results in further problems for service employees and for the organization indirectly. Based on the above finding, it suggests that managers and organizations may adopt the following ways to avert negative effects. First, suppressed negative emotions, but not faked positive emotions, have a discernible impact on customer outcomes. Therefore, employees can be trained to differentiate between these two acting processes and focus more of their attention on the former rather than the latter. Second, the display of genuine negative emotions will lower customer satisfaction. Thus, organizations may be advised to focus on mitigating negative experiences to help employees not to express genuine negative emotions or to invest cognitive resources to suppress those negative emotions. Third, given that surface acting depletes resources, the present study suggests that organizations can develop fairly standardized service processes that may divert resources otherwise used to control emotions to other tasks, without necessarily jeopardizing service satisfaction. Finally, because strong relationships with customers may buffer the negative effects of suppressed negative emotions, organizations can provide interpersonal training to strengthen customer bonds, which may mitigate the negative impact of suppressing negative emotions.

Strengths and limitations

One strength of the present study is that it used a multisource research design. In particular, it assessed customer incivility, need satisfaction, and surface acting from service employees, and service quality from multiple customers. Despite these strengths, the present work is not without methodological limitations. First, customer incivility, surface acting, and need satisfaction measures were collected from the same source (i.e., service employees). While the above three constructs are perceptual variables and should be assessed using self-reports, other reports (e.g., significant others) may have been useful to assess these three constructs. However, Harman's one-factor test indicated that the same source might not be a major threat to the present study findings. Furthermore, Evans (1985) suggested that the presence of interaction effects argues

against method effects. Although it cannot conclusively rule out any concern with common method variance as an explanation for the results, the precautions taken make such an explanation unlikely. Second, a potentially more serious limitation lies in the correlational nature of this study; the causal ordering of variables remains uncertain, and it is possible that poor service quality itself causes one to be treated uncivilly by customers through the effect on need satisfaction.

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