

The Impact of Customer Mistreatment Behavior on the Turnover Intention of Frontline Employees in Tourism Industry

Hongying Li^{1,a,*}, Weihua Duan^{1,b}, Qi Zhao^{2,c}

¹Yatai School of Business Administration, Jilin University of Finance and Economics, Changchun, 130117, China

²Continental Automotive Corporation (Lian Yun Gang) Co., Ltd. Changchun Branch, Changchun, 130000, China

^a 87944255@qq.com, ^b 243079638@qq.com, ^c qi.zhao@continental-corporation.com

*corresponding author

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Abstract: This study investigated the influence of customer mistreatment behavior on the turnover intention of frontline employees in tourism industry, and verified the moderating effect of industrial relations climate and the mediating effect of emotional exhaustion. With a sample of 288 frontline employees in tourism industry, the results indicate that: (1) customer mistreatment behavior is positively related to front-line employee's turnover intension. (2) emotional exhaustion has a mediating effect between customer mistreatment behavior and front-line employee's turnover intention. (3) Labor-management hostility climate plays a moderating role between emotional exhaustion and turnover intention. And then theoretical implications and practical implications are discussed.

1. Introduction

The rapid development of the service industry requires front-line employees to provide high-quality services to customers. Tourism is a typical service industry. Enterprises have always attached great importance to the consumer experience, in order to improve consumer satisfaction, enhance competitiveness, and thus improve economic efficiency. However, it is not uncommon for customers to have bad attitudes and behaviors that are not friendly towards front-line employees. Customer mistreatment behavior not only makes tourists' travel experience worse, but also reduces the work mood and work enthusiasm of front-line service employees, and increases the turnover intension of front-line service employees.

The turnover intension of front-line employees of the tourism industry is increasingly affected by customer behavior, but little research has been done. Research on the work experience of frontline employees of tourism enterprises is conducive to solving the problems of the high turnover behavior of the tourism industry.

Therefore, this paper tests the relationship between customer mistreatment behavior and turnover intension of front-line service employees of the tourism industry, and discusses the mediating effect of emotional exhaustion as well as the moderating role of industrial relations climate through empirical research. Finally, this study provides some suggestions to reduce the turnover rate of employees in the tourism industry.

2. Theory and Hypotheses

2.1. Customer Mistreatment Behavior and Employee's Turnover Intension.

Customer mistreatment behavior is born out of the idea of "customer first" in order to enhance competitiveness. Customer mistreatment behavior was originally proposed by American scholars.

The earliest was the concept of jay customer by Lovelock [1], and he coined the term jay customers to refer to dysfunctional customers who deliberately or unintentionally disrupt service in a manner that negatively affects the organization or other customers. There are many similar definitions, such as dysfunctional customer behavior [2], unfair customer [3]. According to Wen, Li & Hou [4], customer mistreatment behavior refers to low-quality behaviors such as rude, insulting, unreasonable or infringing from the customer during the service delivery process.

In the tourism industry, front-line employees have frequent contact with customers, and customer mistreatment behaviors frequently occur. However, the tourism industry that has always adhered to the “customer first” concept has few effective solutions to deal with such problems. This is also the main reason for the high turnover intention of front-line employees.

Based on the Attribution Theory and Social Exchange Theory, when employees face customer mistreatment behavior, employees will have negative emotions, resulting in lower satisfaction, and customer mistreatment behavior has a negative effect on employees’ perceived organizational support. Ultimately, employees are reluctant to make positive rewards or respond negatively. This can lead to lower employee performance and higher turnover intention [2, 4]. Therefore, it was predicted that:

H1: customer mistreatment behavior is positively related to front-line employee’s turnover intention.

2.2. The Mediating Effect of Emotional Exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion is a central variable for understanding the burnout process. Historically, research on emotional exhaustion emerged from Maslach’s [5] influential model of burnout. In Maslach’s original framework, burnout had three parts. The first component and the topic of the present investigation, emotional exhaustion, is a chronic state of emotional and physical depletion. It is reasonable to conceptualize emotional exhaustion as a type of strain that results from workplace stressors. The second component of the model, depersonalization, is a type of interpersonal distancing and lack of connectedness with one’s coworkers and clients. The third component, diminished personal accomplishment, refers to a negative evaluation of the self [6].

In the tourism industry, front-line employees need to bring positive emotions to work to improve service quality. In order to maintain a good emotional state, employees need to constantly consume emotional resources. The personal qualities of customers are very different, and it is not uncommon for them to be rude. Therefore, employees feel a negative working atmosphere and need to consume emotional resources to adjust their emotions to achieve customer satisfaction. Grandey et al. [7] find that verbal abuse from outsiders (customers, clients or patients) occurs more frequently than insider verbal abuse, particularly for those with higher emotional labor requirements, and abuse from outsiders can lead to employee emotional exhaustion. Therefore, the following Hypothesis is put forward.

H2: customer mistreatment behavior is positively related to front-line employee’s emotional exhaustion.

When employees feel emotional exhaustion, they will lack the internal driving force of their work and lack sufficient energy to complete their performance, leading to an increase in turnover intention. Zhao & Xi [8] found that in emotional labor, emotional exhaustion has a significant positive predictive effect on turnover intention. Cropanzano et al., [6] and Pan & Wei [9] also obtained similar research conclusions. Therefore, the following Hypothesis is put forward.

H3: emotional exhaustion is positively related to front-line employee’s turnover intention.

Front-line employees in the tourism industry need to consume emotional resources to enable customers to have a better consumer experience to meet the requirements of the enterprise. However, if facing with customer mistreatment behaviors for a long time, employees need to exhaust more emotional resources to adjust their status. If this situation is not compensated in time, the staff will show emotional exhaustion, thus reducing the quality of service and improving the turnover intention [8]. Therefore, it is predicted that:

H4: emotional exhaustion has a mediating effect between customer mistreatment behavior and

front-line employee's turnover intention.

2.3. The Moderating Role of Industrial Relations Climate

The industrial relations climate refers to the perception of behavioral norms, concepts, attitudes, etc. formed by the employer and the employee in the daily activities of the organization in the organization [10]. The industrial relations climate refers to the atmosphere of the relationship between workers and other workers and superiors, and is a subjective feeling. There are three types of industrial relations climate, which are labor-management mutual regard climate, labor-management hostility climate and employee participation climate [10]. A win-win situation of mutual regard climate is the best state. Employees will have a strong sense of belonging in the organization and their enthusiasm for work will become higher.

Cui et al. [10] believed that if employees felt that the organization's industrial relations climate was not good, employees' organizational identity and organizational commitment would be reduced, work investment will also be reduced, and the turnover intention will increase.

The tourism industry's employees are highly interactive with customers and often face-to-face with visitors. While doing their job well, employees also need to give customers positive emotions according to organizational requirements to improve customer satisfaction. However, emotions are susceptible to subjective and objective factors. If employees are often treated rudely by customers, they will naturally feel depressed, work enthusiasm will be reduced, and their turnover intention will be improved. On the contrary, a good industrial relations climate will compensate employees' emotional resources and reduce turnover intention. Therefore, it is predicted that:

H5: industrial relations climate plays a moderating role between emotional exhaustion and turnover intention.

3. Methods

3.1. Measures

Customer mistreatment behavior was measured through 18 items developed by Wang et al. [11]. In this paper, Cronbach's α was 0.896. Emotional exhaustion was measured through 6 items developed by Maslach [5]. Cronbach's α was 0.912. A three-item scale, used in Aryee [12], was adopted to assess turnover intentions. The scale's alpha reliability in this study was 0.852. Industrial relations climate scale is used to investigate the employee's perception of the company's labor relations atmosphere. The study used the scale from Cui et al. [10]. There were 3 dimensions: labor-management mutual regard climate, labor-management hostility climate and employee participation climate, and Cronbach's α were 0.834, 0.826 and 0.891 separately.

3.2. Sample

The research object of this paper is the frontline staff of the tourism industry. The sample selected three types of enterprises: travel agencies, hotels and scenic spots, including China Travel Service of Jilin City, Haze Travel Agency, Century Hotel, Liard Hotel, Changbai Mountain Scenic Area, which are representative of the tourism industry.

A total of 335 questionnaires were distributed in this study, and 288 valid questionnaires were collected, accounting for 85.97%. In terms of gender, female respondents accounted for 52.78%, male employees accounted for 47.22%, and women accounted for more than men. In terms of income, the monthly average income of below 3,000 is the most one, accounting for 58.33%. The number of people with an average monthly income of more than 5,000 is second, accounting for 16.67%. In terms of working years, the number of respondents under two years accounted for 77.78%, which is closely related to the high turnover rate. In terms of education level, the majority of respondents were specialists, accounting for 69.44%, undergraduate accounted for 13.89%.

4. Results

4.1. Discriminant Validity

In the questionnaire of this study, very mature research scales were adopted, so the content validity of these scales can be guaranteed. To examine discriminant validity, the paper ran the CFA through software AMOS17.0. Fit indices are presented in Table 1. A, B, C, D, E, and F represent “customer mistreatment behavior”, “emotional exhaustion”, “labor-management mutual regard climate”, “labor-management hostility climate”, “employee participation climate”, and “turnover intention”. Compared to the other models, the proposed six-factor model fit much better ($\chi^2/df=1.896$, GFI=0.86, NFI=0.80, IFI=0.88, RMSEA=0.061). The results implied an acceptable construct distinctiveness.

Table 1 Result of CFA (N=288)

Model	Factors	χ^2/df	RMSEA	GFI	IFI	NFI
one-factor model	A+B+C+D+E+F	4.542	0.143	0.39	0.40	0.36
two-factor model	A+B+F, C+D+E	3.719	0.121	0.58	0.58	0.50
three-factor model	A+B, C+D+E, F	3.581	0.102	0.61	0.61	0.56
four-factor model	A, B, C+D+E, F	2.864	0.087	0.72	0.73	0.64
five-factor model	A, B, C, D+E, F	2.499	0.074	0.79	0.80	0.70
six-factor model	A, B, C, D, E, F	1.896	0.061	0.86	0.88	0.80

4.2. Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations, kurtosis and skewness of the key variables in this study. The kurtosis and skewness values of each variable are between -1 and 1, and their absolute values are between 0 and 1, which is a very obvious normal distribution, and provides feasibility for empirical analysis.

Table 2 Means, standard deviations and correlations (N=288)

Variables	Mean	SD	kurtosis	skewness
customer mistreatment behavior	2.87	0.739	0.069	0.492
emotional exhaustion	2.71	0.761	-0.037	0.547
labor-management mutual regard climate	3.53	0.778	-0.425	-0.193
labor-management hostility climate	2.55	0.747	-0.126	-0.042
employee participation climate	2.97	0.826	-0.313	-0.129
turnover intention	2.76	0.970	-0.167	0.171

4.3. The Main Effects of Customer Mistreatment Behavior on Employee Turnover Intention

Hypothesis 1 is analyzed by AMOS, and the data results are shown in Table 3. The value of χ^2/df is 1.926, between 1 and 3. The value of RMSEA is 0.072, less than 0.8. The value of CFI is 0.965, greater than 0.8; the value of IFI is 0.965, greater than 0.8; the value of NFI is 0.951, greater than 0.8; the value of RFI is 0.937, greater than 0.8. It can be seen that the model has a good fit.

From the result of the path coefficient, P is 0.023, which is positive, so the customer mistreatment behavior is positively related to the turnover intention. That is to say, Hypothesis 1 is established.

Table 3 customer mistreatment behavior and employee turnover intention

	χ^2/df	RMSEA	CFI	IFI	NFI	RFI
Main effect model	1.926	0.072	0.965	0.965	0.951	0.937
Path coefficient						
Variables	Estimate		S.E.	C.R.	P	
TI \leftarrow CMB	0.295		0.130	2.301	0.023	

Notes: TI-turnover intention, CMB-customer mistreatment behavior

4.4. The Test for Mediating Effect of Emotional Exhaustion

First, check whether the path coefficient between the customer mistreatment behavior and turnover intention is significant. If significant, then the path coefficient of the customer mistreatment behavior and emotional exhaustion is verified. Finally, the path coefficient of emotional exhaustion and turnover intention is studied. The data results are shown in Table 4.

The variability of the customer mistreatment behavior and emotional exhaustion path coefficient was 0.001, less than 0.05, and the significance was obvious. Therefore, the two variables are positively correlated, and hypothesis 2 is supported.

The significance of the path coefficient of emotional exhaustion and turnover intention is 0.001, less than 0.05, and the significance is obvious. Therefore, the two factors are positively related and Hypothesis 3 is supported.

After the introduction of emotional exhaustion, it can be found that the significant level of the path coefficient of the customer mistreatment behavior to the turnover intention is greater than 0.05, which is 0.286. The direct relationship between the two factors becomes insignificant. This confirms the mediating effect of emotional exhaustion between the customer mistreatment behavior and employee turnover intention. Hypothesis 4 is supported.

Table 4 Analysis result of Emotional Exhaustion

Comparative analysis of model fitting						
model	χ^2 /df	RMSEA	CFI	IFI	NFI	RFI
full mediation	1.962	0.071	0.973	0.973	0.927	0.924
partial mediation	1.973	0.071	0.973	0.974	0.927	0.923
Path coefficient of partial mediation model						
Path			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
TI \leftarrow CMB			-0.107	0.118	-1.036	0.286
EE \leftarrow CMB			0.449	0.094	4.121	***
TI \leftarrow EE			1.023	0.176	6.380	***
Path coefficient of full mediation model						
Path			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
EE \leftarrow CMB			0.385	0.094	4.767	***
TI \leftarrow EE			0.993	0.168	6.241	***

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

TI-turnover intention, CMB-customer mistreatment behavior, EE-emotional exhaustion.

4.5. The Test for Moderating Role of Industrial Relations Climate

In order to check out the influence of control variables on turnover intention, as shown in Table 5, the study first introduces the control variables in the questionnaire into model 1, including gender, education, working years and monthly income. The correlation coefficients of the four variables are all not significant, indicating that the control variables have no significant effect on the turnover intention.

Then, the four variables of emotional exhaustion, labor-management mutual regard climate, labor-management hostility climate and employee participation climate are introduced into model 2. The coefficient of emotional exhaustion is 0.436 ($p < 0.001$), and the coefficient of labor-management hostility climate is 0.274 ($p < 0.001$). These two variables have a positive impact on turnover intention. In addition, labor-management mutual regard climate and employee participation climate have not had a significant impact on turnover intentions.

Finally, the three interaction terms between emotional exhaustion and three kinds of industrial relations climate are introduced into model 3. The coefficient of emotional exhaustion* labor-management hostility climate is 0.140 ($p < 0.05$). The coefficient of emotional exhaustion* labor-management mutual regard climate and the coefficient of emotional exhaustion* employee participation climate is not significant. R^2 is changed from 0.402 to 0.434, and ΔR^2 is 0.032 ($p < 0.001$).

This shows that the interaction between emotional exhaustion and labor-management hostility

climate additionally explains 3.2% of turnover intention, with statistical significance. Labor-management hostility climate plays a moderating role between emotional exhaustion and turnover intention. H5 is supported partially.

Table 5 Analysis result of industrial relations climate

variable	model 1	model 2	model 3
gender	0.027	0.022	0.017
income	-0.039	-0.011	0.003
working years	-0.175	-0.068	-0.053
education	0.82	0.122	0.089
emotional exhaustion		0.436***	0.476***
labor-management mutual regard climate		-0.083	-0.061
labor-management hostility climate		0.274***	0.223***
employee participation climate		-0.079	-0.087
MRC * EE			0.000
HC * EE			0.140*
EPC * EE			0.121
R2	0.038	0.402	0.434
F	1.761	16.351	12.151
P	0.106	0.000	0.000

Notes: *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001.

EE-emotional exhaustion. MRC: labor-management mutual regard climate. EPC: employee participation climate. HC: labor-management hostility climate

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical Implications

Initially, through analysis and testing, this study verifies that the customer mistreatment behavior and the employee turnover intention are positively related. In the tourism industry, the more customer mistreatment behavior frontline employees facing, the stronger their willingness to leave. This conclusion is consistent with previous studies [2, 4].

Secondly, the study finds that customer mistreatment behavior affects turnover intention through emotional exhaustion, and emotional exhaustion plays a mediating role. Employees need to consume a lot of emotional resources in the service process. If the emotional consumption is excessive, or the employer can not compensate the employees' consumption in time, front-line employees will be less motivated to work, and turnover intention will correspondingly increase.

Finally, the study shows that the interaction between emotional exhaustion and labor-management hostility climate additionally explains 3.2% of turnover intention. Labor-management hostility climate plays a moderating role between emotional exhaustion and turnover intention. The labor-management hostility climate strengthens the influence of emotional exhaustion on turnover intention. When employees are in a high level of labor-management hostility climate, the impact of emotional exhaustion on turnover intention is more obvious.

5.2. Practical Implications

Firstly, in the recruitment process, companies should choose employees with high matching positions. Person-position fitness helps to achieve a win-win situation for employees and businesses. On the one hand, employees can get more sense of accomplishment from high-matching positions, work is full of passion, and work enthusiasm is high. On the other hand, companies can also get more rewards that contribute to the realization of corporate strategy. Employees have a strong sense of identity with the company, low turnover intention, and can contribute to better performance.

Secondly, through training, companies can reduce the negative impact of customer mistreatment behavior on employees. Training is essential regardless of the position of the staff, especially front-line employees. In response to customer mistreatment behavior, companies should pay

attention to training front-line employees in how to deal with such behaviors and how to communicate effectively. Enterprises can enhance employee's ability to communicate with customers through scenario simulation exercises, in order to reduce the excessive emotional consumption of employees. Tourism companies can't blindly adhere to the principle of customer first, but also pay more attention to employees, so that employees could feel valued, improve their organizational commitment, and reduce their turnover intention.

Thirdly, companies should make up for the emotional exhaustion of employees in a timely manner. In the process of high-frequency contact between employees and customers, conflicts are inevitable, which consumes a lot of emotional resources of employees. Enterprises can compensate employees for emotional exhaustion from both physical and non-material perspectives. For example, employees who have handled the problem properly will be commended, verbally praised or given bonuses or given some welfare incentives. This can largely offset the emotional consumption of employees and thus reduce their turnover intention.

Finally, tourism companies must create a good corporate atmosphere and avoid the labor-management hostility climate. Enterprises can organize group activities, such as outward-bound training, to create a good atmosphere in which employees can enhance their feelings for the organization. Let employees participate in the company's various decisions, and increase the sense of ownership and responsibility of frontline employees. Managers communicate with employees, care about employees in a timely manner, and listen to employees' opinions or suggestions to strengthen employee organization commitment. These initiatives can increase the motivation of employees and reduce their turnover intention.

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