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Title

When observers of customer incivility revisit the restaurant: Roles of relationship closeness and norms

Structured Abstract

Purpose – Considerable research has examined the negative consequences of customer incivility on employees (e.g., turnover intention and sabotage behavior toward the customer). However, scant research investigates how other customers, as observers, may react to incivility. This knowledge gap should be filled because hospitality services are often consumed in the public setting where customers can observe and be influenced by each other. This study fills this gap by examining observing customers' willingness to revisit the company following customer incivility.

Methodology – Participants are American consumers recruited from a crowdsourced online panel. Two scenario-based experimental studies in the restaurant setting are conducted. Customer incivility and relationship norms (communal versus exchange) are manipulated, while relationship closeness is measured.

Findings – Study 1 shows that following fellow customer incivility (vs. civility), observing customers' intention to revisit the company was lower when they perceive a distant relationship with the employee. This intention did not differ regardless of incivility and civility when they perceive a close relationship with the employee. Study 2 shows that when observing customers perceive a communal relationship with the employee, their revisit intention was even higher following customer incivility (vs. civility).

Originality/value – This study adds to previous research by challenging the universally negative view of customer incivility. We do so by examining the moderating effects of relationship closeness and norms in observer reactions to customer incivility. This study contributes to previous research drawing on script theory and deontic justice theory.

Implications – Hospitality managers need to train employees to identify signs of customer incivility and assume appropriate actions to reduce the negative consequences on observers. Hospitality managers should also communicate their expectations for respectful customer behaviors through an organization-wide campaign. Lastly, hospitality businesses should foster a close relationship with their customers, particularly a communal relationship to offset the negative consequences of customer incivility on observers.

Keywords

customer incivility; relationship norm; script theory; deontic justice theory

1. Introduction

Customer incivility is commonly observed in hospitality and tourism industries and is on the rise (SDA, 2021). In Australia, 85% of employees in the fast food and retail sectors have experienced uncivil customer treatment (SDA, 2021). Incivility refers to negative remarks and behaviors that subtly harm the target (Kim and Baker, 2019). Such behaviors comprise impolite body languages (e.g., rolling eyes); inappropriate greetings (e.g., “Hey you!”) (Van Jaarsveld *et al.*, 2010); intentional complaints about service (Wilson and Holmvall, 2013); abusive language (Kern and Grandey, 2009); and disrespectful actions toward employees (Zhu *et al.*, 2019). Accordingly, an extensive body of literature has examined the negative outcomes of customer incivility on victimized employees, such as anger, burnout, sabotage behavior toward customers, stress, and job performance (Baker and Kim, 2020, 2021; Bani-Melhem *et al.*, 2020; Boukis *et al.*, 2020; Cheng *et al.*, 2020; Cho *et al.*, 2016; Han *et al.*, 2016; Kim and Qu, 2019; Mkono, 2010; Li *et al.*, 2021).

However, there is limited research on observing customers’ responses to fellow customer’s incivility toward frontline employees. This knowledge gap is vexing because incivility from a customer (vs. a peer employee or supervisor) is more likely to be observed in public (Grandey *et al.*, 2007). Given that hospitality experiences are often consumed in the public setting (Kim and Baker, 2019), observer reactions to their fellow customer’s incivility toward a frontline employee is a novel and important topic. A few hospitality studies explored observer reactions to customer incivility (i.e., Kim and Baker, 2019, 2020). These studies demonstrated that observers of customer incivility tend to have higher levels of gratitude toward employees and loyalty to the company when employees engage in deep (vs. surface) acting.

However, previous studies have failed to demonstrate how the relationship between observing customers and the victimized employee of incivility can result in ironic, yet positive consequences. Hospitality services are high touch in nature, and consumer–employee relationship influences service experiences (Fan and Mattila, 2021). Therefore, this study fills this knowledge gap by proposing that the relationship closeness and relationship norms between observers and the employee are important boundary conditions for observer reactions to customer incivility. We draw on deontic justice theory (Folger, 2001; Hershcovis and Bhatnagar, 2017) and the relationship norm literature (Aggarwal, 2004; Bolton and Mattila, 2015; Clark and Mills, 1993; Fan and Mattila, 2021) to suggest two competing predictions. We propose that following customer incivility, observers’ revisit intention is higher when their relationship with the victimized employee is closer and based on communal (vs. exchange) norms. Study 1 tests the effect of relationship closeness and Study 2 tests the effect of relationship norms.

This study contributes to the emerging literature on observers’ reactions to customer incivility by introducing two boundary factors pertaining to customer–employee relationships. Identifying such boundary conditions can help reconcile two competing theoretical lens, which previous hospitality studies have drawn to examine observers’ responses to incivility: script theory (e.g., Hanks and Line, 2018; Järvi *et al.*, 2020) and deontic justice theory (e.g., Gong *et al.*, 2022; Jin *et al.*, 2020; Kim and Baker, 2019, 2020). Hospitality managers need to train employees to recognize signs of customer incivility and assume appropriate actions to reduce the negative consequences on observers. Hospitality managers should also communicate their expectations for

respectful customer behaviors through an organization-wide campaign. Lastly, hospitality businesses should foster a close relationship with their customers, specifically a communal relationship to buffer the negative consequences of customer incivility on observers.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Observer reactions to customer incivility: script and deontic justice theories

Mistreatment refers to remarks and behaviors that violate moral norms that people treat each other with respect and dignity (Andersson and Pearson, 1999). As one form of mistreatment, incivility is implicit and ambiguous in intent and low in intensity (Andersson and Pearson, 1999). By contrast, aggression is explicit and clear in intent and high in intensity (Neuman and Baron, 2005). This research stream proposes that in a continuum of mistreatment, incivility is weak and aggression is a strong manifestation (Hershcovis and Bhatnagar, 2017). An example of incivility is that a customer frowns while waiting in a long line and talks abruptly to a cashier. Meanwhile, aggression arises when a customer yells at a cashier with inappropriate remarks and slaps the payment on the dining table.

Hospitality service encounters, such as dining in a restaurant or hotel check-in, occur frequently. Through frequent encounters, employees and customers develop their understanding of appropriate and inappropriate behaviors (Leigh and Rethans, 1984; Miao *et al.*, 2011; Solomon *et al.*, 1985). Employees and customers assume to play their roles according to scripts, defined as “a coherent sequence of events expected by an individual, involving him either as a participant or as an observer” (Abelson, 1976, p.33). Script theory proposes that people behave in line with scripts (Miao *et al.*, 2011; Solomon *et al.*, 1985). For example, waiting to be seated (vs. grabbing a seat without letting the host staff know) is in accordance with (vs. violates) scripts in restaurants. Thus, scripts represent people’s expectations on appropriate behaviors and guide their behaviors to be congruent with scripts (Leigh and Rethans, 1984).

Recent hospitality studies have applied script theory to examine consumer and employee expectations for online food delivery, compared to traditional food delivery (Furunes and Mkono, 2019) and value co-destruction in a customer- employee dyad (Järvi *et al.*, 2020). Script theory was also used to explore consumer satisfaction and word-of-mouth after consuming ethnic food from a food truck (Shafieizadeh *et al.*, 2021) and the relationship between brand authenticity, memory and love for the luxury hotel brand (Manthiou *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, script theory was used to demonstrate the effect of appropriate behaviors of other customers and employees on customer satisfaction and loyalty (Hanks and Line, 2018). Among these studies, Järvi *et al.* (2020) and Hanks and Line (2018) are similar to the present study because both studies investigate interactions between customers and employees.

However, the present study differs from these two studies in the following ways. First, Järvi *et al.* (2020) demonstrated a negative consequence of employee and customer behaviors that are incongruent with the script. By contrast, we show a positive consequence of customer incivility when observers have close relationships with employees. Second, Hanks and Line (2018) investigated appropriate and inappropriate behaviors of *other customers and employees* while the present study focuses on appropriate and inappropriate behaviors of *other customers* while

controlling for employee reactions to such behaviors. Third, we account for observing customer-employee relationship as a moderating factor in observer reactions to customer incivility.

Two competing predictions may arise for observer reactions to customer incivility. Specifically, observers' revisit intention may decrease following fellow customer's incivility or it may not. Previous research using script theory proposes that observers' revisit intention decreases because of their negative emotions toward fellow customers behaving with incivility. Miao *et al.* (2011) showed that observing disturbance from other customers induces negative emotions, such as anger, thereby decreasing satisfaction with service encounters. Such negative emotions arise because other customers' behavior is incongruent with their scripted role. Observers' negative emotions may, in turn, reduce their intention to revisit the company.

By contrast, previous research drawing on deontic theory contends that observers' revisit intention increases after customer incivility due to compassion toward victimized employees (Hershcovis and Bhatnagar, 2017). Deontic theorists contend that people are rooted in a moral sense of how others should be treated. Such a sense propels them to show righteousness upon observing an unfair treatment of others (Folger, 2001). For instance, following uncivil treatment of a fellow customer toward employees, observing customers may be motivated to redress violations of moral norms on behalf of the victim (e.g., Folger, 2001; Porath *et al.*, 2010). Deontic theorists propose that such motivation may not stem from cost-benefit considerations ('What do I gain from helping the victim? What do I sacrifice by helping the victim?'). Instead, such motivation results from moral intuitions (O'Reilly and Aquino, 2011). A gut feeling that something is wrong prompts observers of customer incivility to rectify moral violations.

Recent hospitality studies have applied deontic justice theory to examine observers' responses to an illegitimate complaint of a customer to an employee following a service failure and recovery (Kim and Baker, 2020) and the relationship between organizational injustice toward customers and customer orientation of employees (Gong *et al.*, 2022). Yu *et al.* (2022) also examined observers' emotional and behavioral responses to abusive supervision, but they focused on observing employees, not customers. Jin *et al.* (2020) showed that customers have greater revisit intention and may leave more tips when they receive a good (vs. bad) service from an employee who experiences mistreatment from *his/her supervisor*. The present study differs from Jin *et al.* (2020) by examining observing customers' revisit intention following their *fellow customer's* incivility toward an employee and boundary conditions of relationship closeness and norms between observing customers and the employee.

2.2. Relationship closeness

The present study proposes that whether script theory or deontic justice theory is more relevant in explaining revisit intention of observers of customer incivility toward the employee depends on the relationship closeness between observers and the employee. Previous studies used Aron *et al.*'s (1992) inclusion of other in the self (IOS) to conceptualize and operationalize relationship closeness in customer-employee relationships (e.g., Kastendieck *et al.*, 2022; Reimann *et al.*, 2012). Aron *et al.*'s (1992) IOS captures individuals' sense of interconnectedness. In a close relationship, individuals have a sense of connection to each other, entailing feelings that

part of them reflect the other person or vice versa (Aron *et al.*, 1992). In a close relationship, individuals feel that they are understood and validated by the other person with similarities in self-schemata (e.g., similar background, personality trait). Consequently, collective self-identity emerges where the others' behaviors and perspectives are incorporated into self-identity. The wholeness between the self and others in a close relationship may assume mutual influence and overlap of traits, behaviors, emotions, and thoughts (Deutsch and Mackesy, 1985).

Converging evidence indicates that customers build and maintain relationships with brands as interpersonal relationships (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Fournier, 1998). Lo *et al.* (2017) investigated brand relationship quality among loyalty reward program members. The authors contended that customer commitment, trust, and satisfaction constitute brand relationship quality. That is, brand relationship quality is formed based on customers' subjective assessment of quality of products and services. By contrast, relationship closeness is not as related to product and service quality. Customers feel close to brands if the brand identity is congruent with or satisfies their desired personality (Rather and Hollebeek, 2019), if they frequent the company, or if they find similarities with employees (Hanks *et al.*, 2020).

This study proposes that the effect of customer incivility on observers' revisit intention depends on their relationship closeness with the employee. Specifically, we propose that in a distant relationship, script theory prevails because script theory assumes no intimate relationship between consumers and employees (e.g., Miao *et al.*, 2011). Consequently, revisit intention among observing customers is lower when incivility (*vs.* civility) occurs. By contrast, in a close relationship, deontic justice theory prevails because close relationships often entail perspective-taking and empathy (Tucker, 2016). Thus, when observers of customer incivility have a close relationship with the employee, they are prone to have empathy toward employees and revisit intention is not expected to be low when incivility occurs.

Hypothesis 1a [H1a]. When perceived relationship closeness is low, observers' intention to revisit a company is lower in the incivility (*vs.* civility) condition.

Hypothesis 1b [H1b]. When perceived relationship closeness is high, observers' intention to revisit a company does not differ across the incivility and civility conditions.

2.3. Relationship norms

The previous section compared a distant-close relationship between observers and the employee. This section furthers close customer-employee relationships because hospitality businesses aim to foster close relationships (Rahimi *et al.*, 2017). We propose that not all close relationships between customers and the employee equally influence observers' responses to customer incivility. Converging evidence differentiates the exchange and communal relationships, which influence consumer evaluations of the company in divergent ways (Aggarwal, 2004; Bolton and Mattila, 2015; Clark and Mills, 1993; Fan and Mattila, 2021). Both types of relationships assume frequent encounters between the two parties for a prolonged period of time. However, norms that govern communal versus exchange relationships are distinct (Bolton and Mattila, 2015; Fan and Mattila, 2021). In exchange relationships, individuals give and receive comparable benefits in terms of value (e.g., a ride to school that costs approximately \$10 and in exchange buy

lunch for \$10). In such relationships, the value exchange is often calculated and driven by self-benefit and reciprocity. By contrast, in communal relationships, people give and receive benefits because they genuinely care for each other. The exchanges are not based on transactional calculations and the benefits are not always comparable (Aggarwal, 2004; Bolton and Mattila, 2015; Clark and Mills, 1993; Fan and Mattila, 2021).

Following this theoretical line, we suggest that when observing customers perceive a communal relationship with the employee, uncivil behaviors of fellow customer toward employees (vs. no such behaviors) increase their revisit intention. In communal relationships, people are more other-focused and concerned with others' welfare (Clark and Mills, 1993; Fan and Mattila, 2021). Previous research demonstrates a positive association between communal relationship and interdependent self-construal (Chen *et al.*, 2018). Interdependent self-construal disposes people to perceive interpersonal relationships as an integral part of their identity. Fan and Mattila (2021) show that warmth perception is closely related to communal relationships. Thus, we propose that when customers are in a communal relationship with the employee, they tend to empathize and are motivated to help the employee, possibly through future revisit intention.

By contrast, if customers consider their relationships with the employee as exchange-oriented, observers may be indifferent to customer incivility and therefore does not increase their revisit intention. Individuals perceiving an exchange relationship are self-focused and tend to maximize their own benefits (Chen *et al.*, 2018) and value competence instead of warmth as individual characteristics (Fan and Mattila, 2021). Thus, observers are less likely to be attentive to victimized employees or aid the company. Consequently, we propose that observers' intention to revisit the company is not higher, following incivility (vs. no incivility). Figure 1 shows the conceptual model. Study 1 tests H1a and H1b while Study 2 tests H2a and H2b.

Hypothesis 2a [H2a]. In a communal relationship, observers' revisit intention is higher in the incivility (vs. civility) condition.

Hypothesis 2b [H2b]. In an exchange relationship, observers' revisit intention does not differ across the incivility and civility conditions.

[Insert Figure 1 around here]

3. Method

3.1. Study 1

3.1.1. Design and procedure

To test H1, we used a quasi-experimental design where customer behavior (civility vs. incivility) was manipulated as a between-subject factor and relationship closeness was measured. Participants ($n=148$) comprised the United States (US) consumers recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), a crowd-sourced online consumer panel. We advertised our study on MTurk with the title of "a survey about restaurant experience" in January 2021. Converging evidence suggests that data from MTurk are generally reliable, and MTurk is widely used for experimental studies (Buhrmester *et al.*, 2018). Participants need to be 18 years or older and have

at least 98 percent approval rate and at least 500 completed tasks through MTurk. Converging evidence shows that the criteria with the approval rate and previously completed tasks can be used to ensure data quality in MTurk (Peer *et al.*, 2014). For consistency, we used the same criteria in Study 2. Participants' age ranged 19–72 (Mean [M] = 39, Standard Deviation [SD] = 11), 49% were male, and 26% earned \$40,000–\$59,999 per year. On average, our participants spent 6 minutes to complete survey.

Participants were asked to read a scenario and imagine themselves going to a nearby restaurant for takeaway lunch and wait in line for their turn. In the scenario, they observe an interaction between a customer in front of them and a cashier. The customer's behavior was manipulated by being impatient and rushing the cashier for the incivility condition (Appendix A; adapted from Hershcovis and Bhatnagar, 2017). For the civility condition, the customer is polite toward the cashier. Across these two conditions, the cashier's well-mannered behavior toward the customer remained constant. Participants were assigned randomly to one of the two experimental conditions.

After reading the scenario, participants answered survey questions and demographic questions. Manipulations of customer behavior were pilot-tested ($n=95$). An independent samples t-test showed that compared with the civility condition ($M=4.99$ on a 7-point scale), participants in the incivility condition ($M=2.82$) perceived customer incivility to a greater extent ($p < 0.01$).

3.1.2. Measures

Revisit intention was measured with two items (“consider this restaurant as your first choice compared with other restaurants,” “have a strong intention to visit this restaurant again”; $r = 0.76, p < 0.01$; Kim *et al.*, 2009). Relationship closeness was measured with an item (“How close do you feel with the cashier in the scenario? Regard ‘Other’ as the cashier; The Inclusion of Other in Self Scale (IOS); Aron *et al.*, 1992; Appendix B). This scale shows a pair of circles. One circle indicates the participant as the customer observing incivility, while the other circle indicates the cashier being mistreated. On a 7-point scale, the pair of circles vary from having no overlap at all to having a substantial overlap. Participants were asked to indicate which pair of circles best represents their relationship with the cashier in the scenario. Manipulations of customer behavior were assessed using four items (the customer... “politely treated the employee”, “treated the employee with dignity”, “was disrespectful toward the employee”, “made inappropriate remarks to the employee”; the last two items were reverse-coded; 1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree; $\alpha = 0.89$; Colquitt, 2001). Scenario realism was measured with two items (“The scenario was realistic”, “It was easy to project myself in the scenario”; $r = 0.68, p < 0.01$).

3.2. Study 2

3.2.1. Design and procedure

To test H2, an experimental design was used where customer behavior (civility vs. incivility) and relationship norms (exchange vs. communal) were manipulated as between-subject factors. Participants ($n=198$) were American consumers recruited from MTurk and assigned randomly to one of the four experimental conditions. We advertised our study on MTurk with the

title of “a survey about restaurant experience” in February 2021. We checked MTurk ID to make sure that survey participants in Study 1 were not included in Study 2. No MTurk ID appeared in both studies. They were asked to imagine themselves in a hypothetical scenario similar to the Study 1 scenario. After reading the scenario, participants answered the survey and demographic questions. We followed previous research to manipulate relationship norms (e.g., Aggarwal and Law 2005; Fan and Mattila, 2021). Participants’ age ranged 21–75 ($M = 39$, $SD = 12$). Fifty-two percent of them were male and 26% earned \$40,000–\$59,999 per year. On average, our participants spent 7 minutes to complete this survey.

3.2.2. Measures

Revisit intention was measured using the same two items in Study 1 ($r = 0.76$, $p < 0.01$). Manipulations of customer behavior were assessed using the same four items in Study 1 ($\alpha = 0.89$). Manipulations of relationship norms were evaluated using four items from Aggarwal and Law (2005). Two items captured communal and exchange relationship norms, respectively (“to what extent do you think the restaurant was like a close friend, family member, businessperson, or merchant?”; $r_{\text{communal}} = 0.70$, $p < 0.01$; $r_{\text{exchange}} = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$). Scenario realism was measured using the same two items in Study 1 ($r = 0.60$, $p < 0.01$).

4. Results

4.1. Study 1

4.1.1. Realism and manipulation checks

Participants perceived our scenario as highly realistic ($M = 6.16$, $SD = 0.87$). An independent samples t-test showed that this mean rating did not differ across civility vs. incivility conditions ($t(146) = 0.49$, $p > 0.1$). Another independent samples t-test was conducted to check whether our customer behavior manipulations worked as intended. We found that participants in the incivility condition perceived that the customer did not treat the employee with dignity ($M = 2.16$), and this mean was significantly lower than its counterpart in the civility condition ($M = 5.82$; $t(146) = 17.02$, $p < 0.01$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.49$). Thus, our manipulations were deemed effective.

4.1.2. Hypothesis testing

To test H1, a series of regression models were run via PROCESS (X: customer behavior, W: relationship closeness, Y: revisit intention; Model 1; Hayes, 2017; Table 1). Results showed that the main effect of customer behavior on revisit intention was significant (unstandardized coefficient [b] = -0.87 , $t(146) = -2.40$, $p < 0.05$). However, this main effect was qualified by the significant two-way interaction ($b = 0.12$, $t(146) = 2.34$, $p < 0.05$). To understand this interaction further, a floodlight analysis through the Johnson–Neyman technique was used (Spiller *et al.*, 2013). Figure 2 shows that participants whose relationship closeness with the employee was 3.92 or below (out of 7) indicated lower levels of revisit intention in the incivility (vs. civility) condition,

thus supporting H1a. Conversely, such differences were not observed among participants whose relationship closeness with the employee was higher than 3.65, congruent with H1b¹.

[Insert Table 1 around here]

[Insert Figure 2 around here]

4.2. Study 2

4.2.1. Realism and manipulation checks

Participants perceived our scenario as highly realistic ($M = 6.06$, $SD = 0.79$). A two-way ANOVA on the scenario realism scale showed that the main effects and the interaction were insignificant ($ps > 0.5$). That is, realism did not differ across the experimental conditions. Another two-way ANOVA was run on the mistreatment scale. As a result, only the main effect of the customer behavior factor was significant ($F(1, 194) = 139.96$, $p < 0.01$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.42$). Participants in the incivility condition perceived that the customer did not treat the employee with dignity ($M = 2.97$), while the mean was significantly lower than its counterpart in the civility condition ($M = 5.32$).

Moreover, a two-way ANOVA on the communal relationship norm scale revealed that only the main effect of the relationship norms factor was significant ($F(1, 194) = 6.83$, $p = 0.01$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.03$). Participants in the communal (vs. exchange) relationship condition perceived the employee as a friend and family member ($M_{\text{communal}} = 5.20$, $M_{\text{exchange}} = 4.64$). A two-way ANOVA on the exchange relationship norm scale showed that only the main effect of the relationship norms factor was significant ($F(1, 194) = 21.70$, $p < 0.01$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.10$). Participants in the exchange (vs. communal) relationship condition perceived the employee more as a merchant and a business partner ($M_{\text{communal}} = 4.31$, $M_{\text{exchange}} = 5.28$). Thus, our manipulations of customer behavior and relationship norms were deemed effective.

4.2.2. Hypothesis testing

To test H2, a two-way ANOVA was run on revisit intention. The main effect of customer behavior was significant ($F(1, 194) = 3.79$, $p = 0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.02$), but was qualified by the interaction ($F(1, 194) = 3.76$, $p = 0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.02$). To gain a better understanding of this interaction, we conducted an analysis of simple effects. In the communal relationship condition, revisit intention was higher in the incivility (vs. civility) condition ($M_{\text{incivility}} = 6.36$, $M_{\text{civility}} = 5.87$, $F(1, 194) = 7.62$, $p < 0.01$), consistent with H2a. In the exchange relationship condition, revisit intention did not differ across incivility and civility conditions ($M_{\text{incivility}} = 5.97$, $M_{\text{civility}} = 5.97$, $F(1, 194) = 0.00$, $p > 0.1$), congruent with H2b (Figure 3)².

¹ We ran the same model with gender and age as control variables because they are related to communal orientation and sensitivity in interpersonal cues (Hwang and Mattila, 2019; Thrasher *et al.*, 2020). The interaction between customer behavior (incivility vs. civility) and relationship closeness remained significant after adding gender and age as control variables ($F(1, 142) = 4.70$, $p < 0.05$).

² We ran the same model with gender and age as control variables because they are related to communal orientation and sensitivity in interpersonal cues (Hwang and Mattila, 2019; Thrasher *et al.*, 2020). The interaction between

[Insert Figure 3 around here]

5. Discussion and Conclusions

5.1. Conclusions

Previous studies have examined victimized employees of customer incivility in terms of their emotions and behavioral outcomes (Baker and Kim, 2020; Han *et al.*, 2016; Mkono, 2010). Emerging studies shifted their focus from victimized employees to observers of customer incivility (e.g., Dhanani and LaPalme, 2019; Mitchell *et al.*, 2015). Following this research stream, the present study explored how observer responses to customer incivility are contingent on relationship closeness (Study 1) and relationship norms with the employee (Study 2). Our findings presented important contributions to theory and practice.

5.2. Theoretical implications

Hospitality research on customer incivility toward employees mainly examined its negative effects on the emotions and behaviors of victimized employees (Al-Hawari *et al.*, 2020; Boukis *et al.*, 2020; Cheng *et al.*, 2020; Huang and Kwok, 2021; Torres *et al.*, 2017). For example, Al-Hawari *et al.* (2020) identified a positive association between customer incivility and hospitality employees' emotional exhaustion. Huang and Kwok (2021) showed that customer mistreatment negatively influences employees' willingness to voice customers' needs. Cheng *et al.* (2020) demonstrated that customer incivility increases employees' sabotage and revenge intention. However, there is scant research on observer reactions to customer incivility. The current study enriches our understanding of consequences of customer incivility by examining third-party observers' reactions.

In this regard, a few studies revealed negative emotions of observing customers, such as anger (Mitchell *et al.*, 2015), embarrassment, shame, and guilt (Okan and Elmadag, 2020), and decreased satisfaction with service encounter (Miao *et al.*, 2011). The present study differs from this stream of literature by documenting positive consequences of observing customer incivility. Observing customer incivility tends to increase revisit intention when observers and the victimized employee are in a communal relationship. Our findings challenged the ubiquitous negative view of customer incivility and contribute to a more holistic understanding of customer incivility. As such, our findings are consistent with Henkel *et al.* (2017) that observing customer incivility arouses prosocial nature, such as offering emotional support and corresponding kind behaviors toward the victimized employee.

Meanwhile, previous studies have relied on script theory to investigate the deleterious influences of customer incivility on employees, encompassing negative emotions and antisocial behavioral intention (e.g., Walker *et al.*, 2017). The present research expands the scope of script theory's application to customer incivility by focusing on the third-party observers, instead of directly involved parties (i.e., customers as perpetrators or victimized employees). Although a few studies used script theory to examine the effects of customer incivility on observers (e.g., Henkel

customer behavior and relationship norms (communal vs. exchange) was marginally significant ($F(1, 192) = 3.55, p = 0.06$).

et al., 2017; Miao *et al.*, 2011), their findings are inconsistent. Specifically, Miao *et al.* (2011) found that customer incivility tends to decrease observers' satisfaction with the company. By contrast, Henkel *et al.* (2017) found that observers show positive emotional and behavioral responses toward the company. The present study reconciles such inconsistent findings by indicating that observers' reactions to incivility are not uniformly positive or negative, but are rather contingent on their relationship with the employee. By identifying contingent factors in observer responses to customer incivility, we advanced the understanding of when script theory prevails over deontic justice theory.

This study also extends previous research using deontic justice theory. This stream of literature used deontic justice theory to explain observing employees' negative emotions upon abusive supervision (e.g., anger; Yu *et al.*, 2022), observing customers' tipping behavior toward employees who experience abusive supervision (Jin *et al.*, 2020). However, this study differs from this line of research by focusing on customer incivility (vs. abusive supervision). Abusive supervision (vs. customer incivility) is less commonly observed by consumers because supervisors may not want to show abusive behaviors to consumers. Moreover, this research applied deontic justice theory to identify a boundary condition, relationship closeness under which deontic justice theory prevails over script theory. We thus postulate that deontic justice theory prevails when customers perceive a close relationship with the victimized employee, and as a result, enhance revisit intention.

Moreover, this study contributes to the literature emphasizing social influence during service delivery (Libai *et al.*, 2010; Miao and Mattila, 2013; Moore *et al.*, 2005; Wu *et al.*, 2014). This research stream focuses on customers' learning, communications, and interactions in service encounter and their subsequent outcomes. For instance, Miao and Mattila (2013) showed that the valence of a service encounter (children behaving in accordance with their parents' advice vs. children being disruptive without parents' care of their behaviors) influences observers' emotions. Libai *et al.* (2010) explored customer-to-customer interactions in the online service context. Moore *et al.* (2005) revealed that a positive atmosphere facilitates customer-to-customer interactions. This study extends the scope of this stream of research by focusing on observers' behavioral intention instead of emotional responses. In addition, our findings advanced this line of research by proposing relationship closeness and norms as two boundary conditions for observer reactions to customer incivility.

5.3. Managerial implications

Customer incivility and mistreatment are on the rise (SDA, 2021; Van Jaarsveld *et al.*, 2010). Recent studies show that the number of incidents of non-physical and physical workplace abuse of retail staff increased by 22% from 2014 to 2015 in the United Kingdom (Seivold, 2018). In Australia, 85% of fast food and retail workers experienced abuse from customers (SDA, 2021). Hospitality managers need to be aware that customer incivility may negatively affect employee emotions, work attitudes, turnover, and productivity (Baker and Kim, 2020; Hershcovis and Bhatnagar, 2017; Kim and Baker, 2019; Seivold, 2018). We suggest that managers should be aware of negative consequences of customer incivility on observing customers. Accordingly, managers should take the time and effort to (1) prevent customer incivility by inducing the mutual understanding between customers and employees through perspective-taking, (2) devise strategies

to reduce negative effects of customer incivility on employees and observing customers, and (3) foster communal relationships with customers in various ways.

First, managers can proactively take actions to enhance perspective-taking between employees and customers. Doing so may elicit their mutual understanding during service encounter. On the one hand, managers can conduct regular empathy trainings for employees, such as role-playing activities, to take the perspective of customers. For instance, to improve the vacation planning and booking mechanism, Carnival Cruise Line created a game in which employees act as customers going through the booking process. On the other hand, managers can also induce customers' perspective taking of employees by highlighting the value and work ethic of their staff (e.g., Ritz-Carlton's motto, "we are ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen"). Their motto differs from the notion of "customer is the king" in which employees are individuals who deserve the same respect as customers and the desired customers of Ritz-Carlton are ladies and gentlemen with civil behaviors.

Second, once customer incivility occurs, hospitality companies should reduce its negative effects on *employees and observing customers*. To reduce the negative effects of customer incivility on employees, employee training should be done regularly. Such training may focus on quickly recognizing signs of customer incivility and calming unruly customers. Employees can be trained to control their emotions after customer outbursts. Afterward, appropriate channels and procedures should be used to report and document incidents of customer incivility. Managers may hold regular meetings with employees to discuss common causes of customer incivility – whether it happens because of slowness of service delivery or other reasons—and suggest actions that employees can take to handle incidents of customer incivility. Managers should also provide trainings to coach employees to regulate their negative emotions effectively through a deep acting strategy when they encounter customer incivility. To reduce the negative effects of customer incivility on employees and observers, managers should step in to deal with uncivil customers and give employees a break before the situation escalates. Doing so can provide employees with a chance to serve other customers who observe incivility to ensure that the problem is handled with care.

Third, this study indicates that developing communal relationships with customers can mitigate negative consequences of observing incivility. Managers should foster close bonds with customers before or after customer incivility occurs. They can do so by maintaining close relationships with loyal customers and frequently interacting with customers through social media. This social bond serves as a buffer to alleviate observers' negative perceptions following customer incivility. Previous research demonstrates that interdependent (vs. independent) self-construal is positively related to communal relationship (Chen *et al.*, 2018). That is, observers of customer incivility may feel sorry for the victimized employee and increase their intention to continue business with the company. As such, hospitality companies may need to adopt a "we" attitude with observers because they empathize with the victims of customer incivility.

5.4. Limitations and future research

Findings from this study are based on American consumers. Future research is needed to examine cross-country comparisons using consumers from other countries. This study uses a scenario-based design because of the high costs of inducing customer incivility in a field setting. Nonetheless, future studies may examine the observational field data to establish the robustness of

our findings. In our scenarios, employee reactions to customer incivility remained constant (i.e., polite and professional response). Future studies may explore whether or not the employee's different reactions (polite vs. impolite) toward customer incivility may influence observing customers' emotional and behavioral responses. Investigating the relationship strength or type between the perpetrator of incivility and the observer may also be of value. Customer incivility arises in an event setting where attendees are from the same affiliation or company (e.g., conferences or workshops) or friends (e.g., weddings or other private events). Future research can explore vicarious emotions of observers of customer incivility, such as shame or embarrassment (e.g., Spencer and Rupp, 2009). If observers of customer incivility are in a close relationship with the perpetrator of incivility, observers may feel shameful of the perpetrator. The influence of such various emotions on behavioral responses toward the company may provide an interesting topic.

Future research may also investigate how observers' attributions of customer incivility may alter our findings. If employees are incapable of handling a long line of customers, observers may attribute customer incivility to the employees' incapability (e.g., Henkel *et al.*, 2017). If so, observers may not be as likely to revisit the restaurant, even with a close relationship with employees. Attributions would forge observers' perception on whether the receiver of mistreatment deserves such mistreatment or not (Kim and Baker, 2020; Yu *et al.*, 2022). Last, the current study did not examine underlying processes. Future research is needed to test how moral cognition and emotion underlie our findings. In sum, we believe that avenues of future research in observer reactions to customer incivility are promising.

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Appendix A. Scenarios

[Communal relationship]

JP's Kitchen is located a few blocks from where you live. You order from there regularly both on weekdays, as well as weekends. You really enjoy going there—they have large amounts of choices, the food is great, and the people are really nice. Whenever you order from there, you feel special—not just any regular customer. They understand your needs and always make that extra effort. Sometimes when you do not order from them for a while you start to miss them. And the feeling must be mutual since they always seem happy to hear back from you.

They genuinely seem to care about you and you are fond of them. It would be a sad day if they were ever to close the place up. Of course, the combination of great food, prompt service, and convenience makes it quite unbeatable. Their prices are a bit above average, but to you the interaction is beyond just money. Each time you visit JP's Kitchen, you appreciate them even more.

[Exchange relationship]

JP's Kitchen is located a few blocks from where you live. You order from there regularly both on weekdays as well as weekends. You really enjoy their food—they have large amounts of choices, and their service is prompt. You believe that the place provides you more than a fair value for your money and it is worth every penny spent. They know that it makes for good business to treat their customers well. The people there are courteous and provide good service to you. On your part, you try to compensate the employees by giving them a tip.

You tend to think of JP's Kitchen as an ideal business partner—wide variety, efficient service and someone who will never cheat you for short-term gains. Of course, the combination of good food and a nearby location makes the place quite unbeatable. Their prices are a bit above average, but so is their food, service and selection—it seems like an even exchange to you.

[Civility condition]

You decide to go to JP's Kitchen for takeaway lunch today. You find that there is a line.

The customer in front of you looks at the menu. The customer gets to the front of the line, places change onto the counter and says, "Could I get a club sandwich?"

The employee politely picks up the money, and asks the customer "For here or to go?"

The customer says, "To go, please."

The employee hands the customer the smaller change and thanks the customer in a well-mannered fashion.

When the customer is done, you place an order.

[Incivility condition]

The customer in front of you keeps looking at the time and frowning. The customer gets to the front of the line, scowls, puts some change onto the counter, and says, "I think these lines could go a lot faster. Give me a club sandwich. I'm in a hurry!"

The employee politely picks up the money, and asks the customer, "For here or to go?"

The customer impatiently says, "To go."

The employee hands the customer smaller change, and thanks the customer in a well-mannered fashion.

When the customer is done, you place an order.

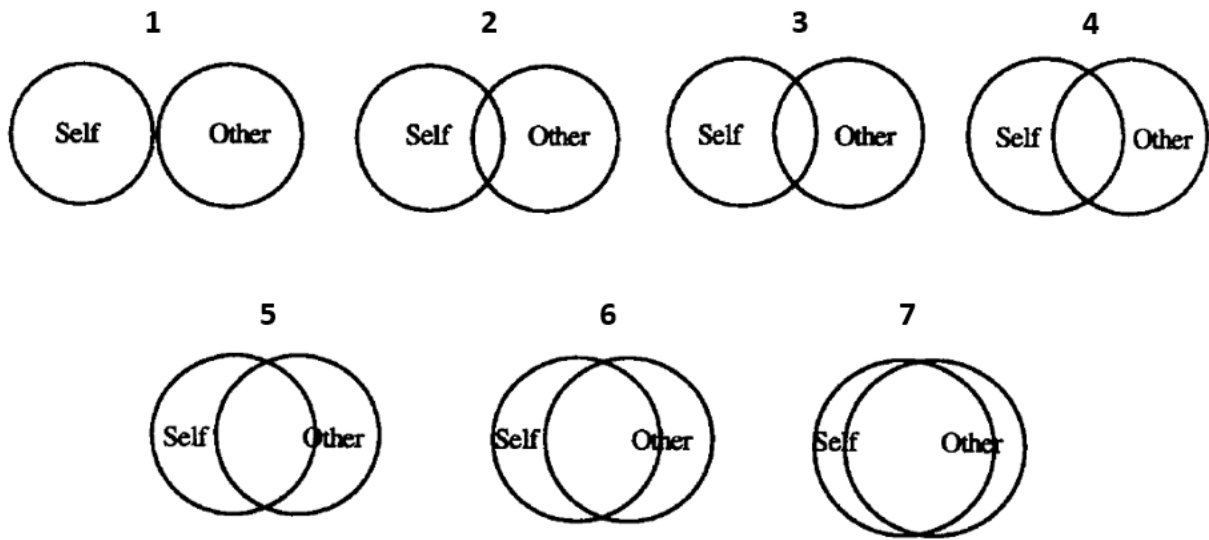
Appendix B. Inclusion of Other in Self (IOS) Scale

Table 1. PROCESS results from Study 1

Y (revisit intention)			
Antecedents	Coeff.	<i>se</i>	<i>t</i>
Constant	6.11	0.48	12.66**
X (customer behavior)	-0.87	0.36	-2.40*
W (relationship closeness)	-0.01	0.07	-0.16
X x W	0.12	0.05	2.34*
$F(3, 144) = 3.16, p < .05$			

Note. N = 148. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$.

Figure 1. Conceptual model

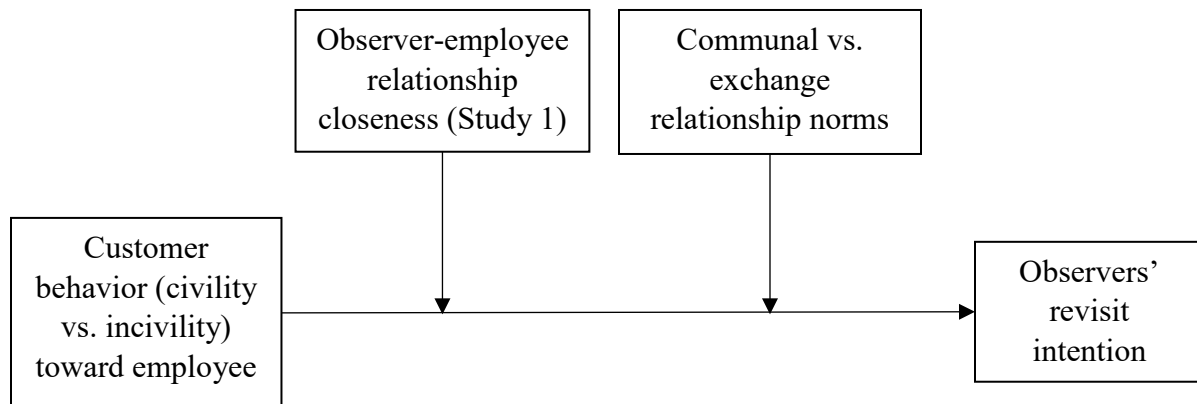


Figure 2. Interaction plot from Study 1

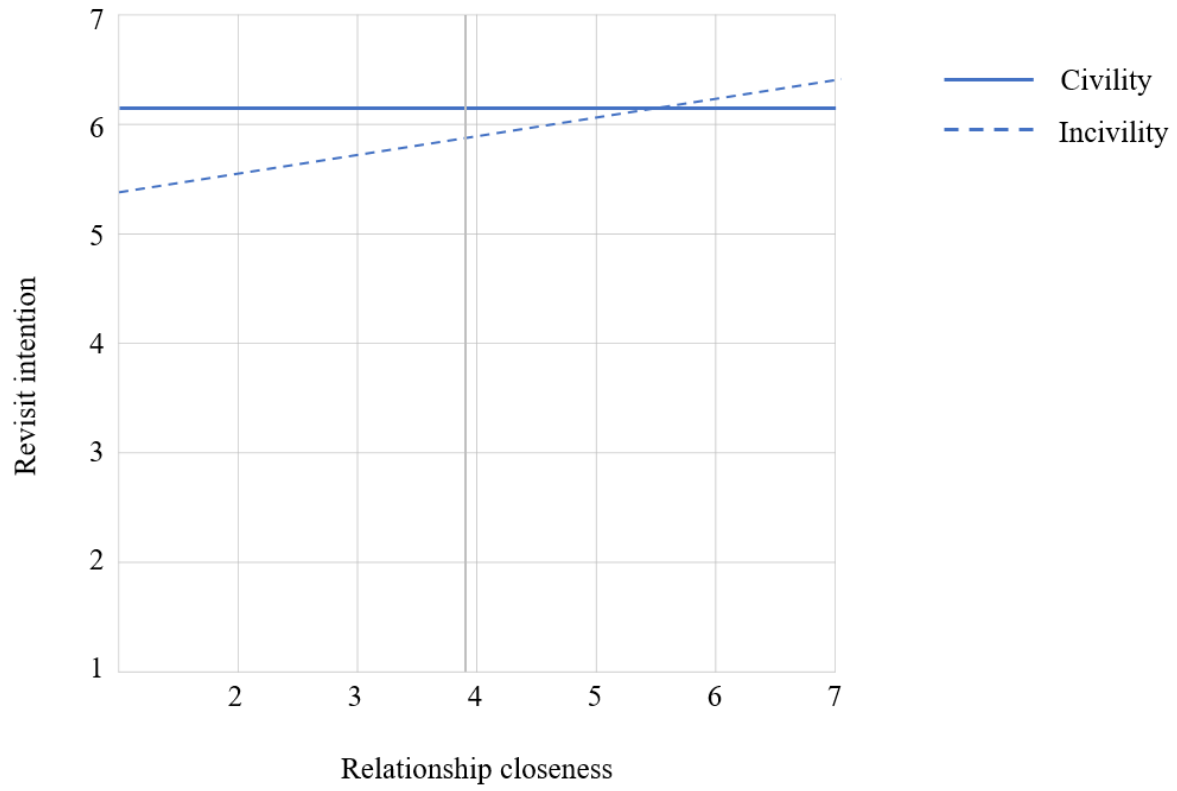


Figure 3. Interaction plot from Study 2

