

Customer online reviews and hospitality employees' helping behavior: Moderating roles of self-efficacy and moral identity

Abstract

Purpose: Online reviews are perceived as credible and trustworthy across various business sectors; thus, they influence customers' purchase decisions. However, the potential role of customer online reviews as feedback for employee performance and employee reactions to customer reviews remain largely unclear. To address this knowledge gap, this study proposes that employee characteristics, namely, self-efficacy (Study 1) and moral identity (Study 2), moderate the effect of the valence of customer reviews on hospitality employees' helping behavior.

Design: We used a scenario-based, quasi-experimental design in two studies. We recruited a total of 215 frontline employees at independent casual dining restaurants in İstanbul, Turkey (Study 1) and 226 US residents who have worked in the restaurant industry for more than 6 months (Study 2). Multiple linear regression via PROCESS and moderation analysis via Johnson–Neyman technique were used.

Findings: Study 1 demonstrates that when employees' self-efficacy is low, positive (vs. negative) customer reviews enhance employees' helping behavior. By contrast, when employees' self-efficacy is high, their helping behavior is invariantly high regardless of the valence of customer reviews. Study 2 reveals that when employees' moral identity is low, their helping behavior decreases in the presence of negative (vs. positive) customer reviews. Conversely, when employees' moral identity is high, their helping behavior is similarly high regardless of the valence of customer reviews.

Originality/value: This study advances our understanding of employees' responses to customer reviews, with the performance appraisal feedback framework as fresh theoretical lens. This study is among the first to demonstrate the relationship between the valence of customer reviews and the consequent helping behavior of employees toward customers. It also contributes to the emerging literature that identifies boundary conditions for employees' responses to customer reviews.

Implications: Hospitality managers may need to develop training programs to enhance their employees' self-efficacy and moral identity. They may also provide necessary organizational support to induce their employees' self-efficacy and moral identity, given that such psychological resources help buffer the dampening effect of negative reviews on helping behavior. Lastly, hospitality managers may consider incorporating customer reviews as part of employee performance feedback.

Keywords

Helping behavior; online review; performance feedback; self-efficacy; moral identity

1. Introduction

With the growing presence of third-party online review sites, such as Yelp, Foursquare, and TripAdvisor (De Pelsmacker *et al.*, 2018), hospitality managers aim to fully utilize online reviews as a unique informational source to constantly adjust service products and improve customer experience. Customers tend to consider online review sites as crucial platforms where they can candidly rate businesses and write comments based on their experience. Online reviews are electronic word-of-mouth, defined as “a form written memo on the web usually posted by an experienced or previous consumer” (Abubakar *et al.*, 2017, p. 220). Numerous studies have

revealed the importance of online reviews in influencing customers' attitudes and behavioral intentions (Chakraborty, 2019; Zhang *et al.*, 2019). However, the influence of such reviews on frontline employees' job behavior remains largely unknown. Filling this gap is important because customer online reviews can be used to appraise employees' work performance.

To address this knowledge gap, the present study draws upon the performance appraisal feedback literature (e.g., Aguinis *et al.* (2012), Kluger and DeNisi (1996), Krasman (2010), Lam *et al.* (2002), and Taylor *et al.* (1984)). This study proposes that online reviews are a novel form of performance feedback with the following unique features. First, traditional performance appraisals are made formally and termly for employee promotion or termination of contract, whereas online reviews are informal and spontaneous. Second, online reviews are accessible to the public, whereas the information exchanged for traditional performance appraisals is confidential, involving only the appraiser and the appraisee. Third, writers and targets of online reviews are often unidentifiable or vague, whereas appraisers and appraisees in traditional performance appraisals are identifiable. Notwithstanding distinguishing characteristics of online reviews (vs. traditional performance feedback), online reviews can capture customer evaluations of employee performance and can thus be factored into management decisions related to bonus pay or other incentives.

Previous studies on performance appraisal feedback have yielded inconsistent findings regarding the influence of feedback on appraisees' attitudes and job performance. Some studies revealed that performance feedback has a positive effect on job performance, whereas others found little or negative effect (Aguinis *et al.*, 2012; Kluger and DeNisi, 1996; Krasman, 2010; Lam *et al.*, 2002; Taylor *et al.*, 1984). This inconsistency may be attributed to boundary conditions, such as the timing and valence of feedback (Lam *et al.*, 2002). Lam *et al.* (2002)

showed that employees' attitudes toward their job improve upon positive performance feedback, whereas their attitudes do not change upon negative feedback. Extending this line of work, this study posits that employees may differ in their perceptions of customers' positive and negative reviews and identifies two important individual characteristics, namely, self-efficacy and moral identity, as moderating factors in altering such perceptions.

Self-efficacy reflects one's self-assessment of competence to achieve goals (Bandura, 2010). From the perspective of control theory, self-efficacy is the perception of one's attainability to align job performance with performance requirement (Podsakoff and Farh, 1989). Moral identity denotes the degree of importance placed on honesty, generosity, empathy, and forgiveness (Aquino and Reed, 2002). On the basis of the principle of moral psychology, moral identity comprises the behavioral aspect to align self-concept with workplace behaviors that promote organizational success and individual wellbeing (Hart *et al.*, 1998). This study posits that employees' self-efficacy and moral identity are likely to influence their behavioral responses to customers' online reviews as informal performance feedback.

Helping behavior is an important but relatively understudied job behavior among hospitality employees. It indicates employees' proactive or reactive actions to respond to other individuals' needs at work (Dudley and Cortina, 2008; Grant *et al.*, 2009). First, with customers' participation in service production and their heterogeneous needs, hospitality employees often need to "go the extra mile" to accommodate such needs (Lu *et al.*, 2016). In this regard, helping behavior is a nonroutine aspect of job behavior (Mossholder *et al.*, 2011). Second, hospitality service often results from sequential and concerted efforts among employees in different departments. Therefore, teamwork is crucial for successful service delivery (Wang *et al.*, 2020). Converging evidence demonstrates that helping behavior is positively associated with service

quality (Yoon and Suh, 2003), organizational effectiveness (MacKenzie *et al.*, 2011), and customer satisfaction (Walz and Niehoff, 2000). Therefore, the current study sheds light on helping behavior as one key job behavior of hospitality employees.

Taken together, the current study has two objectives: 1) to examine how employees' helping behavior is influenced by the valence of customers' online reviews and 2) to investigate the moderating roles of employees' self-efficacy (Study 1) and moral identity (Study 2) on the relationship between the valence of customers' online reviews and employees' helping behavior. This study extends the literature on performance feedback to the context of online reviews. This study is among the first to establish the relationship between the valence of online reviews and employees' helping behavior in a controlled experimental setting. More importantly, this study addresses a call for deepening our understanding of individual-level factors that influence employees' reactions to performance feedback by showcasing employees' self-efficacy and moral identity.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Employees' reactions to performance appraisal feedback

Feedback has long been considered instrumental in nurturing individuals' motivations for goal pursuit and persistence (Locke and Latham, 1990). Feedback refers to "actions taken by an employee's supervisor to provide information regarding task performance" (Kluger and DeNisi, 1996, p. 255). However, feedback results not only from employees' supervisors but also from themselves and their co-workers (Podsakoff and Farh, 1989). This study focuses on an unconventional form of feedback, that is, informal performance feedback from customers in the form of online reviews. Formal performance feedback involves confidential information exchanged between a supervisor (appraiser) and a subordinate (appraisee) and serves various

purposes, including promotion, termination of contract, or pay raise (Lam *et al.*, 2002).

Considerable evidence suggests that formal performance feedback influences job attitude, satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intention (Belschak and den Hartog, 2009; Taylor *et al.*, 1984). Although the significance of formal performance feedback has been extensively discussed in previous research (Lam *et al.*, 2002), informal performance feedback has garnered limited attention. To address this gap, this study focuses on the effect of customers' online performance feedback on employees' helping behavior.

When customer reviews are utilized for informal performance feedback, positive and negative reviews beget different responses from employees. Negative reviews are directed at employee performance that falls short of customers' expectations and organizational goals. By contrast, positive reviews highlight employees' positive contributions to the organization and customers' recognition of such contributions (Lam *et al.*, 2002). Converging evidence demonstrates that compared with positive feedback, negative feedback breeds employees' anger, distress, frustration, or irritability (Bradley *et al.*, 2015, 2016; Lam *et al.*, 2002; Weber *et al.*, 2017). Weber *et al.* (2017) found that negative customer reviews induce employees' anger, which in turn influences emotional exhaustion and cynicism. Consequently, negative feedback can reduce organizational commitment (Pearce and Porter, 1986). The generic dampening effect of negative feedback stems from individuals' tendency to view themselves in a positive light, thereby leading to a biased assessment of their capability (Harris and Schaubroeck, 1988). Consequently, such self-bias induces preferences for positive (vs. negative) feedback that include positive online reviews. In line with previous research, the present study suggests that negative (vs. positive) customer reviews are likely to undermine employees' helping behavior.

2.2. Employees' helping behavior

Although previous studies have examined the effect of performance feedback on *task performance* (cf. Belschak and den Hartog (2009)), discussions concerning implications of performance feedback in *non-task-related performance* remain limited. Rotundo and Sackett (2002) proposed three elements of job performance, namely, task performance, organizational citizenship behavior, and counterproductive performance. Different from task performance, organizational citizenship behavior is based on unwritten rules that reside outside of employment contract. Unlike counterproductive performance, organizational citizenship behavior nurtures the overall wellbeing of employees in an organization (Rotundo and Sackett, 2002). Particularly, helping behavior is an interpersonal dimension of organizational citizenship behavior and is affiliative and cooperative in nature (Hirst *et al.*, 2016; Mossholder *et al.*, 2011). Helping behavior is defined as voluntary behavior that goes beyond what is normally expected and that may not be directly related to organizational services or products (Rotundo and Sackett, 2002; Brief and Motowidlo, 1986). Such behavior can be toward co-workers by sharing useful information (Supanti and Butcher, 2019; Zhao and Guo, 2019; Zou *et al.*, 2015), toward customers by fulfilling their extraordinary requests related to personal matters (Rotundo and Sackett, 2002), or toward supervisors (Luo *et al.*, 2013). The present study focuses on employees' helping behavior toward customers and how this behavior is influenced by the valence of customers' online reviews.

The relevant hospitality literature on employees' helping behavior has demonstrated its antecedents, including company's participation in corporate social responsibility activities (Supanti and Butcher, 2019), job satisfaction (Nadiri and Tanova, 2010), leader–member exchange (Kim *et al.*, 2010; Luo *et al.*, 2013; Zou *et al.*, 2015), and servant leadership (Zou *et al.*, 2015). This stream of literature draws on social exchange theory, leader–member exchange

theory, and justice theory to posit the underlying mechanisms of employees' helping behavior (Luo *et al.*, 2013; Zou *et al.*, 2015). Specifically, leader–member exchange is positively related to interpersonal justice, which in turn enhances employees' helping behavior toward their supervisors (Colquitt *et al.*, 2001; Luo *et al.*, 2013). However, this line of hospitality literature has scantily discussed employees' helping behavior *toward customers* and employees' characteristics altering such helping behavior. In this study, self-efficacy and moral identity of employees are suggested as modulating factors in employees' reactions to customer reviews as follows.

2.3. Moderating effect of self-efficacy

This study draws on control theory to posit that individuals' responses to feedback are contingent upon their motivations to reduce the discrepancy between their goals/standards and their actual performance (Bandura and Cervone, 1983; Taylor *et al.*, 1984). Ideal performance is what they should do or aim to do, whereas actual performance reflects what they have actually done or achieved. Given that employees' ideal performance is determined by their organizational goals (e.g., delivering excellence in service), their actual performance is evaluated with regard to such organizational goals. Positive feedback is given to employees when their performance either meets or exceeds the organizational goals; otherwise, negative feedback is given. Consequently, positive feedback helps stabilize employees' effort in their subsequent work (Podsakoff and Farh, 1989), whereas negative feedback may require employees to exert considerable effort to address the discrepancy between their actual and the ideal performance (Bandura, 2010). In our study context, service failures may result in negative reviews from customers, thereby requiring employees to exert additional effort to remedy such discrepancy.

Kluger and DeNisi's (1996) meta-analysis demonstrates that although feedback generally enhances employee performance, feedback negatively affects employees' job performance in one-third of their investigated cases. In other words, boundary conditions in employees' responses to feedback should be further investigated. This study proposes that employees' self-efficacy serves as a boundary factor in the effect of the valence of feedback (positive vs. negative) on their helping behavior. In line with this notion, Bandura (2010) posited that negative feedback leads to divergent responses based on people's perceptions of their efficacy to attain goals and standards. Previous studies have differentiated general self-efficacy (GSE) from state self-efficacy (SSE). GSE denotes individuals' evaluations of their ability to excel in various tasks across domains (Judge *et al.*, 1998). By contrast, SSE refers to "beliefs in one's capabilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to meet given situational demands" (Wood and Bandura, 1989, p. 408). SSE is restricted to certain tasks and domains and is generally short lived, whereas GSE is persistent to changes in situations and environments and spans across various domains. This study focuses on GSE as this type of self-efficacy reflects an individual trait (vs. ephemeral state).

Employees with high GSE believe that they can reduce the negative discrepancy between their service performance and organization standards; thus, they exert effort in reducing such discrepancy (Podsakoff and Farh, 1989). By contrast, employees with low GSE do not believe that such discrepancy is reducible; thus, their effort to address such discrepancy is minimal (Podsakoff and Farh, 1989). Employees with low GSE may thus demonstrate a reduced level of helping behavior upon receiving negative (vs. positive) feedback from customers. Conversely, we predict that employees with high GSE consistently demonstrate high levels of helping behavior regardless of the valence of feedback.

On the basis of the plasticity hypothesis of Brockner (1988), Chen *et al.* (2001) reported that self-efficacy buffers the influence of performance feedback on employees' motivations and job performance. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the adverse effects of negative customer reviews on employees' helping behavior are ameliorated among employees with high (vs. low) self-efficacy. Employees with high self-efficacy are not as emotionally drained by negative customer reviews; thus, their helping behavior may not be significantly lowered than when they are exposed to positive customer reviews. Supporting this notion, convergent evidence suggests that employees' self-efficacy is positively associated with their attitude toward work even under difficult situations (Ballout, 2009), and self-efficacious employees tend to experience reduced levels of stress at work and increased levels of work engagement (Liu *et al.*, 2017). More recent studies have shown that employees' ability to mobilize resources helps weaken the relationship between supervisor abuse and employees' helping behavior (Zhao and Guo, 2019). In sum, this study suggests that negative (vs. positive) customer reviews reduce employees' helping behavior toward customers when employees have low self-efficacy. Conversely, such differences in helping behavior are attenuated among employees with high self-efficacy. The following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1. The valence of customer reviews and self-efficacy of employees has an interactive effect on employees' helping behavior. Specifically,

Hypothesis 1a. Employees with low self-efficacy exhibit higher levels of helping behavior in the presence of positive (vs. negative) customer reviews.

Hypothesis 1b. Employees with high self-efficacy exhibit similarly high levels of helping behavior regardless of the valence of customer reviews.

2.4. Moderating effect of moral identity

Moral identity represents the extent to which individuals perceive the importance of a set of moral traits, including forgiveness, compassion, honesty, and generosity, in establishing their self-identity (Aquino and Reed, 2002). In a similar vein, Hart *et al.* (1998) defined moral identity as individuals' commitment to aligning their self-concept with behaviors and actions that maintain and promote others' wellbeing. Incorporating the above definitions, Skarlicki *et al.* (2008) developed a set of measurement items that tap into two dimensions, namely, internalization and symbolization of moral identity. Internalization indicates the centrality of moral traits to self-concept (intrapersonal component), whereas symbolization refers to behavioral manifestations of such traits in public (interpersonal component; Skarlicki *et al.*, 2008).

Bradley *et al.* (2015) contended that employees assess whether customer online reviews are harmful or helpful. In comparison with positive reviews, negative reviews are perceived as more detrimental to employees' psychological wellbeing or reputation in the workplace. Emerging evidence suggests that harmful events are not as likely to result in stress when employees perceive that they have resources to cope with stress (Hobfoll, 2011). Such resources can be psychological (e.g., resilience or optimism), physical (e.g., stamina), or social (e.g., organizational support from supervisors and co-workers). Particularly, moral identity can be regarded as a psychological resource that allows employees to cope with difficult situations. Negative customer reviews result in employees' negative emotions and stress (Bradley *et al.*, 2015, 2016; Lam *et al.*, 2002; Weber *et al.*, 2017), possibly undermining their helping behavior. As a psychological resource, moral identity may buffer the dampening effect of negative customer reviews on helping behavior. Thus, employees whose moral identity is high should

exhibit constantly high levels of helping behavior regardless of the valence of customer reviews. By contrast, we predict that employees with low moral identity exhibit lower levels of helping behavior in the presence of negative (vs. positive) customer reviews.

Moreover, Skarlicki *et al.* (2008) demonstrated that individuals with high (vs. low) moral identity tend to be more attentive in situations that are conducive to violations of moral values, which threaten their moral identity. In such situations, individuals with high moral identity engage in acts to reaffirm their threatened identity. Skarlicki *et al.* (2008) found that an unjust treatment of customers toward employees can lead to employee sabotage. They further showed that such effect is magnified among employees with high (vs. low) moral identity because sabotage behavior reflects employees' self-regulatory mechanism to reinforce high levels of moral identity. Similarly, Bavik and Bavik (2015) revealed that the effect of employee incivility on customer complaints hinges on customers' moral identity. When moral identity is high (vs. low), customers are more prone to take revenge on the company by complaining to a third party upon experience of employee incivility. Skarlicki *et al.* (2008) and Bavik and Bavik (2015) examined an unfair treatment of customers and employees. Conversely, the present work focuses on online reviews written by customers who have experienced satisfying or dissatisfying service encounters and on the responses of employees to such reviews.

Drawing on the aforementioned line of literature, this study posits that employees' responses to positive (vs. negative) customer reviews depend on employees' moral identity. Specifically, we predict that the dampening effect of negative customer reviews may be mitigated among employees with high (vs. low) moral identity. Aquino and Reed (2002) revealed that the internalization of moral identity is positively associated with concern for others. Increased concern for others results from perspective-taking, which helps reduce egocentric bias

in social judgments (Gilovich *et al.*, 2000; Madera, 2018). Employees' judgments based on customer–employee interactions, including service failures, are often based on their own beliefs, emotions, and attitudes. However, by taking the perspective of customers who experience service failure, employees may feel compassionate toward their customers. Therefore, employees with high moral identity tend to engage in helping behavior even in the presence of negative reviews. Figure 1 shows the conceptual model. The following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 2. The valence of customer reviews and moral identity of employees has an interactive effect on employees' helping behavior. Specifically,

Hypothesis 2a. Employees with low moral identity exhibit higher levels of helping behavior in the presence of positive (vs. negative) reviews.

Hypothesis 2b. Employees with high moral identity exhibit similarly high levels of helping behavior regardless of the valence of customer reviews.

[Insert Figure 1 around here]

3. Study 1

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Sampling and design

Study 1 aims to test Hypothesis 1. A 2 (valence of customer review: positive vs. negative) by 2 (self-efficacy: low vs. high) quasi-experimental design was used. The valence of customer reviews was manipulated, and self-efficacy was measured on a continuous scale. The participants ($n = 215$) in this study were frontline employees at independent casual dining restaurants in İstanbul, Turkey. On the basis of the network of one of the authors, the participants

were recruited on a voluntary basis and given a survey link. Participants were eligible to participate in the survey if they had worked in the restaurant industry for six months or longer. Our participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions. The survey, which was originally written in English, was administered in Turkish via back-translation (Brislin, 1970).

To reduce hypothesis guessing, the participants were informed that the survey involves two unrelated studies pooled out of convenience (Trochim and Donnelly, 2008). The first part of the survey (“Personality test”) captured self-efficacy, whereas the second part (“Work experience”) asked the participants to imagine a hypothetical scenario. If the participants infer that the two parts of survey are related, then they may guess our hypothesis. At the end of the survey, we asked the participants to report any suspicion and comment on the survey. No respondent raised any possibility of relatedness of the two parts of our survey or guessed our hypothesis correctly.

In the second part of the survey, the participants were instructed to imagine that they work in a hypothetical restaurant and that their boss organizes a brief meeting before the start of their shift. During the meeting, their boss hands them a recent review by a customer. In this review, the customer wrote about a dining occasion where he/she was served an overcooked steak and elaborated how the employee handled this service failure (Appendix A). The valence of customer reviews was manipulated by stating that the employee’s service recovery either meets the customer’s expectations (i.e., single deviation; positive valence) or not (i.e., double deviation; negative valence). After reading the scenario, the participants answered a battery of survey questions and demographic questions.

3.1.2. Measures

Self-efficacy was measured with eight items (e.g., “I will be able to achieve most of the goals that I have set for myself;” Chen *et al.*, 2001; 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; $\alpha = 0.93$). Helping behavior was measured with four items (e.g., “Given the scenario described above, please indicate the extent to which you are motivated to go beyond what is normally expected to help customers;” Axtell *et al.*, 2007; 1 = not at all, 7 = very much; $\alpha = 0.88$). Scenario realism was measured with two items (“The scenario was realistic,” “It was easy to project myself in the scenario;” 1 = not at all, 7 = very much). The manipulations of the valence of customer reviews were assessed with one item (“In the scenario, I failed to meet the customer’s expectation;” 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). (See Appendix B for a full list of survey measures.)

3.2. Results

3.2.1. Demographics, realism, and manipulation check

The participants were 27 years old on average ($SD = 6.58$). Among them, 49% were male, 54% had a bachelor’s degree, and 28% worked in the restaurant industry for 6 months to 1 year (Table 1). They perceived our scenario as realistic ($M = 5.66$, $SD = 1.42$), and they easily projected themselves in the scenario ($M = 5.44$, $SD = 1.55$). The participants in the negative (vs. positive) valence condition agreed that they failed to meet the customer’s expectation ($M_{\text{negative}} = 4.60$, $M_{\text{positive}} = 2.35$, $t(205) = 10.43$, $p < 0.01$). Therefore, our manipulations were deemed effective. For further descriptive statistics, see Table 2.

[Insert Table 1 around here]

[Insert Table 2 around here]

3.2.2. Hypothesis testing

To test Hypothesis 1, a series of regression models were run via PROCESS (Model 1; X = valence of customer reviews, W = self-efficacy, Y = helping behavior; Hayes, 2017). The regression model was significant ($F(3, 211) = 15.51, p < 0.01$; Table 3). The main effects of the valence of customer reviews (unstandardized coefficient (b) = 1.59, $t(211) = 2.30, p < 0.05$) and self-efficacy ($b = 0.49, t(211) = 5.82, p < 0.01$) were significant. However, such main effects were qualified by a significant interaction ($b = -0.24, t(211) = -2.06, p < 0.05$). To further understand this interaction, a floodlight analysis was conducted via Johnson–Neyman technique (Spiller *et al.*, 2013). Those participants with self-efficacy scores of 5.59 or lower exhibited higher levels of helping behavior in the positive (vs. negative) valence condition ($b_{JN} = 0.24, SE = 0.12, p = 0.05$). Thus, Hypothesis 1a was supported. This category accounted for 29% of the participants. Conversely, such differences in helping behavior were not observed among those participants with self-efficacy scores exceeding 5.59 (see Figure 2). Thus, Hypothesis 1b was also supported. This category accounted for 71% of the participants. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was fully supported.

[Insert Table 3 around here]

[Insert Figure 2 around here]

3.2.3. Discussion

The findings from Study 1 support Hypothesis 1. Specifically, the effect of the valence of customer reviews on employees' helping behavior is moderated by employees' self-efficacy. Specifically, when employees' self-efficacy is low, customers' positive (vs. negative) reviews enhance employees' helping behavior. By contrast, when employees' self-efficacy is high, their helping behavior is invariantly high regardless of the valence of customer reviews. Study 2 aims

to test another important moderator, namely, employees' moral identity. To show the robustness of our findings, Study 2 involves a different country, the US.

4. Study 2

4.1. Method

4.1.1. Sampling and design

Study 2 aims to test Hypothesis 2. A 2 (valence of customer review: positive vs. negative) by 2 (moral identity: low vs. high) quasi-experimental design was utilized. The valence of customer reviews was manipulated, and self-efficacy was measured on a continuous scale. The participants ($n = 226$) were US residents who worked in the restaurant industry for 6 months or longer. They were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), a crowd-sourced online panel. Recent studies have shown that data from MTurk are as reliable as those from other sources, such as undergraduate students (Buhrmester *et al.*, 2018). The participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions. Similar to Study 1, the participants were informed that the survey involves two unrelated studies pooled out of convenience. The first part of the survey ("Personality test") captured moral identity, whereas the second part ("Work experience") presented scenario descriptions and customer reviews similar to those used in Study 1. After reading the scenario, the participants answered a battery of survey and demographic questions.

4.1.2. Measures

Moral identity was measured with 10 items (Aquino and Reed, 2002; 1 = not at all, 7 = very much; $\alpha = 0.73$; Appendix B). Helping behavior was measured with the same four items used in Study 1 ($\alpha = 0.88$). Scenario realism was measured with the same two items used in

Study 1. The manipulations of the valence of customer reviews were assessed with the same item used in Study 1.

4.2. Results

4.2.1. Demographics, realism, and manipulation check

The participants were 36 years old on average ($SD = 9.94$). Among these participants, 65% were male, 50% had a bachelor's degree, and 40% worked in the restaurant industry for 1 year to less than 3 years (Table 1). These participants perceived our scenario as realistic ($M = 5.81$, $SD = 1.36$), and they easily projected themselves in the scenario ($M = 5.90$, $SD = 1.23$). The participants in the negative (vs. positive) valence condition agreed that they failed to meet the customer's expectation ($M_{\text{negative}} = 4.78$, $M_{\text{positive}} = 1.48$, $t(207) = 14.87$, $p < 0.01$). Therefore, our manipulations were deemed effective. For further descriptive statistics, see Table 2.

4.2.2. Hypothesis testing

To test Hypothesis 2, a series of regression models were run via PROCESS (Model 1; $X =$ valence of customer reviews, $W =$ moral identity, $Y =$ helping behavior; Hayes, 2017). The regression model was significant ($F(3, 222) = 15.27$, $p < 0.01$; Table 4). The main effects of the valence of customer reviews ($b = 1.83$, $t(222) = 2.09$, $p < 0.05$) and moral identity ($b = 0.84$, $t(222) = 5.70$, $p < 0.01$) were significant. However, such main effects were qualified by a marginally significant interaction ($b = -0.40$, $t(222) = -1.87$, $p = .06$). To further understand this interaction, a floodlight analysis was conducted via Johnson–Neyman technique. The participants whose moral identity was 3.91 or lower exhibited higher levels of helping behavior in the positive (vs. negative) valence condition ($b_{\text{JN}} = 0.28$, $SE = 0.14$, $p = 0.05$). Thus, Hypothesis 2a was supported. This category accounted for 41% of the participants. Conversely,

such differences in helping behavior were not observed among those participants whose moral identity score exceeded 3.91 (Figure 3). Thus, Hypothesis 2b was supported. This category accounted for 59% of the participants. In sum, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

[Insert Figure 3 around here]

[Insert Table 4 around here]

5. General Discussion

5.1. Conclusions

In this work, we conducted two quasi-experimental studies to demonstrate how employee characteristics influence the effect of the valence of customer reviews on employees' helping behavior. By doing so, the present study responds to a call for further research on individual-level factors that moderate employees' responses to customer reviews (Bradley *et al.*, 2015). The results indicated that employees' self-efficacy beliefs and moral identity play important roles in influencing their helping behavioral tendencies following customers' online reviews.

5.2. Theoretical implications

The first theoretical implication resides in the extension of previous research on performance appraisal to the recently developed field of third-party online review platforms. The recent literature on customer online reviews has discussed cultural factors and motivations for posting online reviews (Leon, 2019; Mariani and Predvoditeleva, 2019); effects of online reviews on customers' attitudinal and behavioral tendencies (Baker and Kim, 2019; Chakraborty, 2019; Lo and Yao, 2019); organizational practice (Bortoluzzi *et al.*, 2020; Ho-Dac *et al.*, 2013); employees' anger, stress, and job burnout (Bradley *et al.*, 2015, 2016; Weber *et al.*, 2017); and

managers' responses to such reviews (Sparks *et al.*, 2016). However, how customer reviews, as a new form of performance feedback, can influence employees' job behaviors is benignly overlooked (Ali *et al.*, 2019; Nusair, 2020). The present study fills this knowledge gap by examining the effect of the valence of customer reviews (positive vs. negative) on employees' helping behavior.

Previous research has focused on the influence of traditional performance appraisal feedback on employees' satisfaction with such appraisal, work performance, and organizational commitment (Culbertson *et al.*, 2013; Kuvaas, 2011; Palaiologos *et al.*, 2011). This study extends this line of work by proposing customers' online reviews as a novel form of performance feedback, thereby extending the scope of performance feedback to the online review context. Building upon previous research on performance appraisal feedback, this study empirically examines how hospitality employees' helping behavior is influenced by the valence of customers' online reviews. This study is among the first to propose that hospitality employees' helping behavior results from the valence of customer reviews, thereby expanding the nomological network of performance feedback to the hospitality context (Lechermeier and Fassnacht, 2018). This notion is in line with previous findings showing that the valence of feedback is an important determinant of employees' attitudinal and behavioral outcomes (Culbertson *et al.*, 2013; Nease *et al.*, 1998; Lechermeier and Fassnacht, 2018; Westerman *et al.*, 2014).

Notably, the extant literature has yielded inconsistent findings regarding the influence of performance feedback on job performance, and this inconsistency may stem not only from the valence of performance feedback but also from individual differences (Daoanis, 2012; Kluger and DeNisi, 1996; Lechermeier and Fassnacht, 2018; Selvarajan and Cloninger, 2012). Although

positive feedback generally results in prosocial job attitudes and behaviors, negative feedback yields divergent responses from employees (Culbertson *et al.*, 2013; Lam *et al.*, 2002). For example, a low performance rating does not decrease employees' job attitudes six months after a performance appraisal (Lam *et al.*, 2002). The findings from the current study reveal that positive online reviews boost employees' helping behavior toward customers, whereas negative online reviews reduce their helping behavior. Thus, the present study clarifies the relationship between the valence of customers' performance feedback in the form of online reviews and employees' helping behavior.

In addition to the valence of performance feedback, converging evidence suggests that feedback characteristics influence how employees respond to performance feedback (Lechermeier and Fassnacht, 2018). Kuvaas (2011) showed that the positive influence of perceived helpfulness of performance feedback on job performance arises only when feedback is regularly given to employees. Some other boundary factors are timing and source of feedback (Lechermeier and Fassnacht, 2018). Moreover, employees' individual characteristics have been found to influence their reactions to performance feedback. Lam *et al.* (2002) suggested that "...individual differences, notably personality, likely play a substantial role in how people interpret appraisal feedback and in how they respond to these interpretations" (p. 193). As important employee characteristics, need for achievement and goal orientation were examined to influence individuals' responses to performance feedback (Lechermeier and Fassnacht, 2018). Culbertson *et al.* (2013) reported that goal orientation moderates the effect of the valence of performance feedback on employees' satisfaction with such feedback. Extending this limited literature, this study identifies two additional individual-level variables, namely, self-efficacy

and moral identity, and illustrates that employees' self-efficacy and moral identity can influence their responses to customers' positive and negative online reviews.

The moral psychology literature suggests that morality-related beliefs are crucial precursors of moral conduct that include helping behavior (Aquino and Reed, 2002; Reynolds and Ceranic, 2007). The current study posits that moral identity serves as a moral barometer that guides individuals to engage in prosocial behaviors regardless of personal gains or losses (Hardy and Carlo, 2011). In addition, the current findings suggest that self-efficacy is not only a key psychological state that ensures learning/training outcomes (Simosi, 2012; Pan *et al.*, 2011) but also an indispensable force that drives employees to persist in goal-congruent behaviors even if customers write negative reviews about their service. By proposing self-efficacy and moral identity as boundary factors in the effect of the valence of customer reviews on employees' helping behavior, this study advances our understanding of employee characteristics that influence the outcomes of performance feedback.

5.3. Practical implications

With access to third-party online review sites, customers are motivated to write positive and negative reviews online after a service experience (Tripp and Grégoire, 2011). Given the far-reaching implications of customers' online reviews on employees (Weber *et al.*, 2017), managers might need to incorporate such reviews into the formal performance appraisal system for frontline employees. Clarifying the role of customers' online reviews in the performance appraisal system may help managers guide their employees' workplace behaviors to be congruent with organizational goals. All online reviews about employee performance should be collected and addressed similarly to the performance appraisal system. To do so, the marketing team should be comprehensive in collecting and organizing all online reviews. The managers can

determine how the collected information can be used. For example, sharing customers' compliments in a shift meeting can acknowledge the corresponding employees' performance well and facilitate an uplifting experience for the whole team as service production entails close collaborations among team members (Wang *et al.*, 2020).

As for negative online reviews, contingent on the specificity of the targets, managers can arrange a one-to-one meeting with the employee involved or a group discussion if no employee name is mentioned in the reviews. Managers should use customer reviews to motivate employees to constantly improve service. In addition, hospitality managers should reduce service failures to avoid negative customer reviews. Conversely, when service failures occur, hospitality managers should effectively design service recovery strategies to remedy such failures. Emerging evidence shows that double deviation (i.e., failed service recovery) is more prevalent in online complaints (vs. face-to-face complaints; Tripp and Grégoire, 2011). Therefore, an appropriate employee training is needed to address service failures and failed service recoveries.

Moreover, hospitality managers should encourage customers to write reviews after experiencing a satisfying service encounter. Our findings show that exposure to positive customer reviews induces employees' helping behavior. Conversely, negative reviews cause negative emotions of employees, such as anger, frustration, and embarrassment, thereby leading to maladaptive behaviors, such as reduced job commitment (Bradley *et al.*, 2015, 2016; Weber *et al.*, 2017). Converging evidence suggests that employees' helping behavior is important in organizations because such behavior fosters employees' work engagement, flexibility, and interactivity (Mossholder *et al.*, 2011). The high-touch nature of the hospitality industry is characterized by high levels of work engagement and interactive encounters between employees and customers. Therefore, an empirical investigation into the predictors of hospitality

employees' helping behavior is essential. This study sheds light on hospitality managers' understanding of their employees' helping behavior in the restaurant setting. Specifically, we demonstrate that employees' psychological resources, namely, their self-efficacy and moral identity, modulate the effect of the valence of customer reviews on employees' helping behavior. Therefore, forging and developing employees' self-efficacy and moral identity is important for the salutary effects of online reviews.

Particularly, organizational support should be provided to improve employees' self-efficacy (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). Supervisory support can enhance employees' self-efficacy after reading negative customer reviews. As for moral identity, managers should nurture an organizational culture in which morality is highly valued. That is, nurturing a culture in which employees support one another and engage in goal-congruent job behaviors should be considered by hospitality managers. Alternatively, hospitality managers may use self-efficacy and moral identity as criteria for selecting job applicants, which can be gauged with a self-administered survey.

5.4. Limitations and future research

Although this study captured employees' self-ratings of helping behavior toward customers, such behavior can be objectively measured by their superordinate. This measurement issue merits future research. Moreover, in manipulating the valence of customer reviews, procedural (e.g., waiting a long time for steak) and outcome failures (e.g., steak not cooked properly) were involved. Future research may investigate the effect of procedural or outcome failure independently and compare its standalone effect on employees' helping behavior. Moreover, other downstream effects of customer reviews (e.g., job performance, attitudes toward work, and sabotage behavior) can be examined in future research. Employees' attitudinal or

behavioral responses to customers' online reviews may also be contingent on the extent to which these reviews are related to and incorporated into the formal system of performance appraisal. Future studies can explore how customers' online feedback is integrated into the formal performance appraisal process.

The sentiment of customer reviews may also be investigated in addition to their valence. In some reviews, the emotions and wordings of customers are significantly toned down. Given that heightened or reduced levels of sentiment tend to influence employees' helping behavior, future research may consider the role of sentiment of customer reviews in influencing employees' helping behavior. Lastly, this study is a scenario-based experiment, and its data are cross-sectional in nature. The long-term effects of customer reviews on employees' helping behavior can be examined in future research via longitudinal data.

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Appendix A. Survey stimuli

[Positive valence]

I dined with a friend of mine last Friday and ordered a 10-ounce filet mignon, medium rare, with grilled vegetables. My friend ordered homemade pasta, Taliatelle, with shrimps and zucchini. Our server, Chris, brought us some bread with oil and vinegar while we were waiting. After 15 minutes or so, our meals were served. As soon as I cut into the steak, I was very disappointed. It was overcooked.

(...)

I told the server. The server immediately apologized and took away my dish. The server sincerely asked me to wait for another 10 minutes. Then, my server came back with a corrected order. This time, the steak was properly cooked.

[Negative valence]

I dined with a friend of mine last Friday and ordered a 10-ounce filet mignon, medium rare, with grilled vegetables. My friend ordered homemade pasta, Taliatelle, with shrimps and zucchini. Our server, Chris, brought us some bread with oil and vinegar while we were waiting. After 15 minutes or so, our meals were served. As soon as I cut into the steak, I was very disappointed. It was overcooked.

(...)

I told the server. The server apologized and took away my dish. After 20 minutes or so, my server came back with my order. This time, the steak was slightly better than the first time. However, it still did not meet my expectation at all.

Appendix B. Survey measures

Self-efficacy

I will be able to achieve most of the goals that I have set for myself.

When facing difficult tasks, I am certain that I will accomplish them.

In general, I think that I can obtain outcomes that are important to me.

I believe I can succeed at any endeavor to which I set my mind.

I will be able to successfully overcome many challenges.

I am confident that I can perform effectively on many different tasks.

Compared with other people, I can do most tasks very well.

Even when things are tough, I can perform quite well

Moral identity

Listed below are some characteristics that might describe a person:

Caring, Compassionate, Fair, Friendly, Generous, Helpful, Hardworking, Honest, Kind

The person with these characteristics could be you or someone else. For a moment, visualize in your mind the kind of person who has these characteristics. Imagine how that person would think, feel, and act. When you have a clear image of what this person would be like, answer the following questions using the scale below:

It would make me feel good to be a person who has these characteristics.

Being someone who has these characteristics is an important part of who I am.

I often wear clothes that identify me as having these characteristics.

I would be ashamed to be a person who have these characteristics*.

The types of things I do in my spare time (e.g., hobbies) clearly identify me as having these characteristics.

The kinds of books and magazines that I read identify me as having these characteristics.

Having these characteristics is not really important to me*.

The fact that I have these characteristics is communicated to others by my membership in certain organizations.

I am actively involved in activities that communicate to others that I have these characteristics.

I strongly desire to have these characteristics.

*indicates reverse-coded items.

Helping behavior

Given the scenario described above, please indicate the extent to which you are motivated to...

...go beyond what is normally expected to help customers.

...persist to overcome obstacles to help customers.

...help customers with a problem or inquiry even when it is personally inconvenient.

...anticipate and try to prevent problems that might arise for customers.

Scenario realism

The scenario was realistic.

It was easy to project myself in the scenario.

Tables

Table 1. Demographic profile of participants

Categories		Study 1 n (%)	Study 2 n (%)
Gender	Male	106 (49.3)	146 (64.6)
	Female	109 (50.7)	80 (35.4)
Education	High school or equivalent	74 (34.4)	18 (8.0)
	Associate degree	12 (5.6)	40 (17.7)
	Bachelor's degree	115 (53.5)	112 (49.6)
	Graduate school/professional degree	14 (6.5)	56 (24.8)
Restaurant work experience	6 months–less than 1 year	59 (27.5)	58 (25.7)
	1 year–less than 3 years	58 (27.0)	90 (39.8)
	3 years–less than 5 years	42 (19.5)	22 (9.7)
	5 years or longer	56 (26.0)	56 (24.8)
Total		215 (100.0)	226 (100.0)

Table 2. Descriptive statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Valence of review	215 (Study 1)	0.00	1.00	0.51	0.50
	226 (Study 2)	0.00	1.00	0.49	0.50
Self-efficacy	215 (Study 1)	1.00	7.00	5.81	1.01
Moral identity	226 (Study 2)	2.00	5.40	4.09	0.65
Helping behavior	215 (Study 1)	1.00	7.00	6.11	0.95
	226 (Study 2)	1.50	7.00	5.53	1.11

Table 3. Results for Hypothesis 1

	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i> -value	95% CI
Constant	3.17**	0.49	6.43	[2.20, 4.14]
Valence of review	1.59*	0.69	2.30	[0.23, 2.95]
Self-efficacy	0.49**	0.08	5.82	[0.32, 0.66]
Int_1	-0.24*	0.12	-2.06	[-0.47, -0.01]
Adjusted R^2	0.18			
<i>F</i>	15.51**			

Note. N = 215. CI = confidence interval, Int_1: valence of review \times self-efficacy.
 * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$.

Table 4. Results for Hypothesis 2

	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i> -value	95% CI
Constant	2.01**	0.60	3.36	[0.83, 3.19]
Valence of review	1.83*	0.87	2.09	[0.10, 3.55]
Moral identity	0.84**	0.15	5.70	[0.55, 1.13]
Int_1	-0.40	0.21	-1.87	[-0.81, 0.01]
Adjusted R^2	0.17			
<i>F</i>	15.27**			

Note. N = 226. CI = confidence interval, Int_1: valence of review \times moral identity.
 * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$.

Figures

Figure 1. Conceptual model

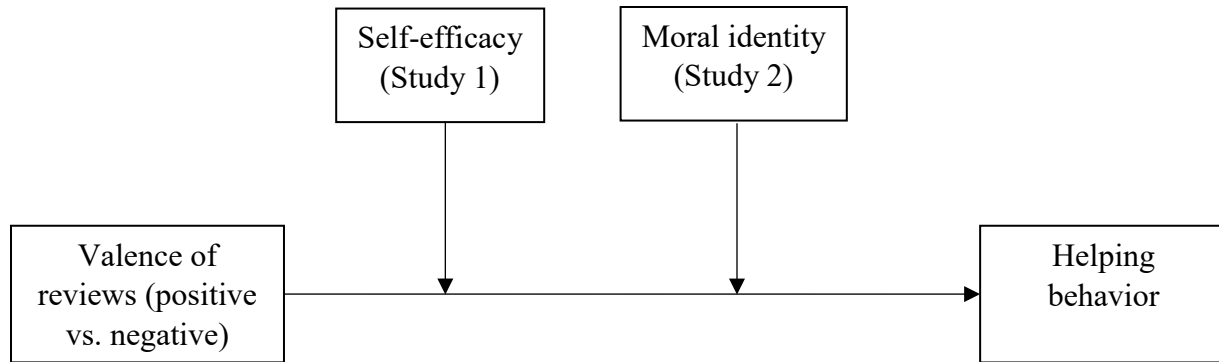


Figure 2. Results from floodlight analysis in Study 1

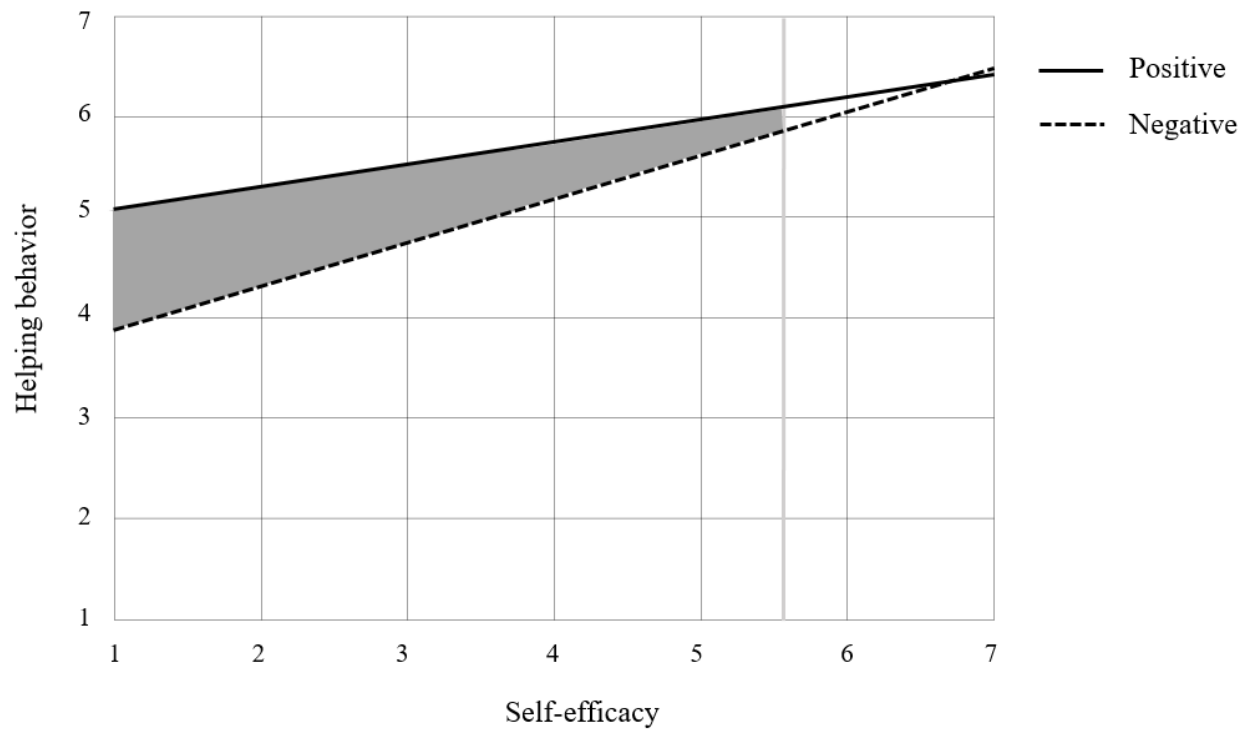


Figure 3. Results from floodlight analysis in Study 2

