

# Customer Mistreatment and Employees' Emotional Exhaustion: Moderating Role of Gender

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## **Abstract**

Employees of quick service restaurant often have to face mistreatments from customers because of different reasons and situations. Customer mistreatment affects employees emotionally and consequently took a toll on their motivation, and other work-related problems. The purpose of this research is to examine the cause of customer mistreatment and its effect on frontline fast food employees' emotional state. Data was collected from 121 quick service restaurant employees in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, Malaysia. The data obtained through self-administered questionnaires were then analyzed using SPSS statistical tool. The finding of the study brings new discovery on the issue of customer mistreatment on employee's emotional exhaustion in quick service restaurants in Malaysia. Therefore, this study aims to improve the awareness about employees' emotional state and future research might explore the other work-related factors to emotional exhaustion of restaurant employees especially in the local setting.

## **Keywords:**

Customer mistreatment, quick service restaurant, emotional exhaustion

## **1 Introduction**

The hospitality industry is rapidly growing throughout the years particularly in the restaurant sector (Dube et al., 2020). In Malaysia, food and beverage sectors particularly quick service restaurant is one of the preferred places to work for adolescents. However, as the world being hit by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the movement restriction enforced by the governments around the world, the employment rate has declined significantly (Dube et al., 2020). Most of the stores which was not listed as essential services were ordered to closed as a measure to curb the spread of COVID-19 virus. As this happened, customers have shifted their buying behaviour to online platform and

prefer delivery. As most people began to work from home by using the online platform, it was a convenient alternative for them to order meals online. After a certain period of MCO, some non-essential services were allowed to operate with strict SOP (Standard Operating Procedure) such as drive-thru facility with minimal contact between customers and employees. Either face-to-face or drive thru services, employees still face challenges in dealing with customers because of numerous reasons such as timing, wrong items delivered, and other issues.

As part of their service pledge, quick service restaurant employees typically expected to deliver exceptional service quality set by the organization despite facing with fussy customers (Amarnani et al., 2019). Quick service restaurant employees had to work more hours to earn a living because of their low salary structure (Fitzgerald, 2019). These employees are known to be the first point of contact behind the counter at the restaurants which usually exposing themselves to mistreatment and aggression (Garcia et al., 2019). This scenario are often regarded as inevitable as “customer always right” culture (Hur et al., 2015). This behaviour has becoming prevalent in most cases and it has negative impacts toward the employees’ emotional state (Okan et al., 2020). Challenges related to the interaction with customers quick service restaurants are customer mistreatment (Ahmed et al., 2021; Wen et al., 2016), harassment (Fitzgerald, 2019; Zhu et al., 2019), verbal aggression (Yeh, 2015) and bully (Li et al., 2020) that are one of the major causes of employee turnover.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Customer Mistreatment**

Baranik et al. (2016) defined customer mistreatment as an unwanted aggression and incivility attitude confronted by service employees because of service failure or customer’s unfulfilled demand. It is common scene for most restaurant or other hospitality typed of establishment as customers are expecting to get what they ordered. The nature of quick service restaurant operation that rely generally on the stipulated time frame set in producing a menu item often become the root of the problem. Customer mistreatment or incivility affects employees’ emotional state and in return discourage them to perform well at work. The main disadvantage of customer mistreatment is that it can lead to employees quitting their job (Gong & Wang, 2019) thus affects sales due to reduced manpower. Another potential problem is the increase in costs of recruiting and training new employees (Hur et al., 2015).

This is rather troubling as mistreatment encounter would also have an effect on customer repeat patronage (Yeh, 2015). Customer mistreatment not only causes customer engagement to be unpleasant, it also affects employees’ morale and motivation to work (Li et al., 2019). Knowing the work of the restaurant’s employees are operational and service driven, customers would expect to receive quality services. However, inability to meet customers’ expectation might also be the reason for such aggression and in return, lead to service sabotage by the employees themselves

(Hongbo et al., 2019; Yeh, 2015) and revenge (Bedi & Schat, 2017). Hongbo et al. (2019) found that such encounter could result in retaliation and incivility respond by employees.

Although studies have shown cases of customer mistreatment in other parts of the world, much less information about the issue has been done in the quick service restaurants in Malaysia (Shao & Skarlicki, 2014; Simillidou et al., 2020). In addition, the purpose of the study is to discover if there is any link or connection between customer mistreatment and emotional exhaustion of employees and how gender play a part in the relationship. To date, studies have also investigating the role of demographic factors such as gender, age and ethnic origin or race on the trigger point of customer mistreatment and incivility incidents (Amarnani et al., 2019; Houston et al., 2018; Okan et al., 2020). However, this study only focused on gender and its role in handling the incidents at a quick service restaurant setting. According to Dormann et al. (2017), male and female react differently in work situations. They found that male employees are more affected by the mistreatment as compared to female because of their nature and capability in handling difficult customers.

## **2.2 Emotional Exhaustion**

Emotional exhaustion can be defined as continuous feeling of tiredness and mental drain resulting from persistent pressure at work (Cho et al., 2016). Another way of understanding emotional exhaustion is through the way they are treated by which their talent are wasted and unappreciated (Goussinsky, 2012; Kashif et al., 2017). It can be the mental block that prevent employees from performing their duties as expected. One of the consequences that can be expected from this is the impacts on employees in the long run. Janurek et al. (2018) argued that by placing quick service restaurant's employees to work more hours than required, it has shown traces of emotional exhaustion. In addition, Ferreira et al. (2019) demonstrated how emotional exhaustion affect work routine of employees as it changes their mood and motivation. The lack of self-confident and fatigue resulting from long hours of work would become a challenge for restaurant managers.

The other impact of emotional exhaustion on employees is the inability to effectively perform their tasks as there are no longer interested to serve (Chen et al., 2019). This view is supported by McDowell et al. (2019) on other causes of the emotional exhaustion. They discovered the decrease in work satisfaction, job motivation and organizational commitment when employees are tired of dealing with the challenges of work at the counter. Similarly, Wang et al. (2019) identified external factors also add to the issue namely work-family conflict and work relationship between colleagues. The external factor surfaced mainly due to the hectic nature of work that these quick service restaurant employees have to go through on daily basis and less time for family. The other possible explanation is their well-being which often affected their time with family at home (Park & Kim, 2019).

### **2.3 The relationship between Customer Mistreatment on Employees Emotional Exhaustion**

The studies presented thus far provide evidence that customer mistreatment indeed has directly affected employees emotionally. Working in the quick service restaurant requires employees to be ready to face several different types of customers. There are customers that are easy to serve and there are also customers who difficult to handle (Jin et al., 2020). The different service standards set by each brand of quick service restaurants makes it mandatory for employees to follow even though in certain situation, it might have its own repercussion. The common standard of service in any quick service restaurants is timing (Rajput & Gahfoor, 2020). Customers expect to be served in short period of time after they have placed their order. It is the duty of service employees to prepare the food order as quick as possible without compromising on the brand's service standards (Watson et al., 2018).

Difficulties arise, however, when customers' expectations were not met. Despite the fact that most customers still able to accept delay and other service failures, there are certain time and situations where customers could not hold back their anger and frustration (Chen et al., 2021). This in return may be linked to unwanted response from customers such as verbal aggression and mistreatment. Consequently the mistreatment creates negative work environment and employees would develop sense of fear when dealing with customers over the counter (Anjum et al., 2020). Other studies showed the impact on employees' emotional health (Alola et al., 2019; Chen & Eyoun, 2021; Chen et al., 2019), unmotivated to do their job (Ferreira et al., 2019), absenteeism (Anjum et al., 2020) and tendencies to display aggressive behaviour (Chen et al., 2019).

The struggle in overcoming the feeling of fear and anxiety to face the customers actually has significant effect on the restaurant establishment itself. Li et al. (2019) showed how the issue affects employees job satisfaction thus unable to provide quality services. Findings also indicate the effect of customer mistreatment and incivility on employees' motivation, passion, less regard on teamwork and negative vibes among colleagues (Balaji et al., 2020; Zhan et al., 2021). Prolong encounter of such problem reduces employees intention to stay at the restaurants (Han et al., 2016). Employees knew their responsibilities are to serve their customer at their best and according to the service standard set by the restaurant brand. However, lowered self-esteem and feeling of failures to deliver among these employees have some drawbacks. One of the obvious drawback is the excitement of work may no longer be there and customers patronage at the restaurant would be an unpleasant experience (Lee et al., 2020). In addition, Hur et al. (2015) reported in some cases, customers intentionally hurt employees and blame them for the service failure although the problem was beyond their control. Therefore, this study intended to test the following hypothesis:

H1: Customer mistreatment significantly influences emotional exhaustion.

## **2.4 The moderating effect of gender on the relationship between Customer Mistreatment and Employees Emotional Exhaustion**

Differences in gender would see the extend of how male and female employees react to such mistreatment incidents. It would also bring to light how customers treat employees in the occurrence of mistreatment and incivility regardless of employees' gender. Previous studies also examine other demographic profiles of employees has anything to do with customer mistreatment behaviour such as ethnic background (Hsieh et al., 2015), work positions (Fitzgerald, 2019) and age (Amarnani et al., 2019). However, this study aims at finding out the effect of gender as one of the key points in the occurrence of mistreatment and incivility in Malaysian quick service restaurant scene.

In the restaurant operations, male is expected to be able to handle more responsibility as compared to female while female were regarded to be more calm and able to display their composure in handling difficult situations with customers (Dormann et al., 2017). In terms of the impact of customer mistreatment, Trzebiatowski and Triana (2018) found that male employees are more affected emotionally because of their family responsibilities and ability to control their anger. They also discovered that female employees to be easily drained and fatigue because of their fragile nature in facing work pressure and aggression from both their manager and customers (Anjum et al., 2020). Therefore, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H2: Gender moderate the relationship between customer mistreatment and emotional exhaustion.

## **3 Methodology**

### **3.1 Research Design**

The research implements descriptive research design because it was intended to examine and measure the relationships among variables. Quantitative research approach was employed through cross-sectional setting and self-administered questionnaire was used as the instrument to gather the result.

### **3.2 Population & Sampling**

The target population in this research was quick service restaurant's employees in Kuala Lumpur and major cities in Selangor, Malaysia. A total of 16 quick service restaurant employees were approached to participate in the study. By using G-power platform and taking into consideration of the number of variables in this study, a total of 140 participants were recommended to represent the population of the sample. Non-probability sampling through the application of purposive sampling was used as the intended respondents would be the front-line employees of the quick service restaurants who directly providing service to customers.

Table 3.1: Measures of the study variables

| Study Variables                        | No. of Items | Sources of Instrument Items | Type of Scale  |
|--|--------------|-----------------------------|--|
| Customer mistreatment                  | 9            | Park and Kim (2020)         | A five-point Likert-scale from (1) "Strongly Disagree" to (5) "Strongly Agree" |
| Emotional exhaustion                   | 7            | Wharton (1993)              | A five-point Likert-scale from (1) "Strongly Disagree" to (5) "Strongly Agree" |
| Demographic & Work Profile Information | 4            |                             | Selection of nominal & ordinal scales  |

A structured questionnaire based on the adaptation of instruments by Park and Kim (2020) and Wharton (1993). The questionnaire uses 5-point Likert scale to measure the extend of respondents' agreement on the questions and statement given in the questionnaire. Pilot test was done prior to actual fieldwork process to identify any issues with the structure, factors, grammar and understanding of the statements or questions. A total of 25 pilot test respondents were able to give feedback and amendments were made to improve the instrument and ensure the instrument is reliable. Reliability test was run and showed both variables to be reliable as shown in Table 3.2. The questionnaire was also constructed in both Malay and English language to ensure all respondents able to understand and respond to all of the questions.

### 3.3 Plan for Data Collection

The data collection was done at 16 quick service restaurant outlets from three (3) major restaurant brands in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur. Nine of the outlets are in Selangor and the remaining 7 outlets are situated in Kuala Lumpur. Due to the Movement Control Order (MCO) enforced by the government of Malaysia, only a few of the respondents were able to be approached personally. The rest were contacted through their phone number obtained from their colleagues (snowball technique) and an online questionnaire were sent to them. Follow up reminder were sent to ensure high response rate from the employees. A duration of three weeks was set for the fieldwork process and the returned questionnaires were analysed using SPSS statistical tools.

## 4 Findings

### 4.1 Response Rate

The study was conducted using a non-probability sampling through purposive sampling techniques. In total, 121 questionnaires were analyzed out of 140 that were returned. This accumulated to 86.4% response rate. The remaining 19 questionnaires were omitted because of errors such as incomplete and double answers. The 121 questionnaires were coded and analyzed to examine the reliability, any possible bias, relationship and moderating effect of the study variables.

## 4.2 Respondents' Demographic and Work Profiles

The following Table 4.1 outlines the respondents' demographic and work profiles which include gender, age, marital status, and income.

Table 4.1: Respondents' Demographic Profiles

| Profiles         | Categories                | Frequencies | Percentage (%) |
|------------------|---------------------------|-------------|----------------|
| Gender           | Male                      | 54          | 44.6           |
|                  | Female                    | 67          | 55.4           |
| Age              | Between 18 – 27 years old | 43          | 35.5           |
|                  | 28 – 37 years old         | 63          | 52.1           |
|                  | 38 – 48 years old         | 11          | 9.1            |
|                  | ≥49 years old             | 4           | 3.3            |
| Marital Status   | Single                    | 57          | 47.1           |
|                  | Married                   | 64          | 52.9           |
|                  | Others                    | -           | -              |
| Income (monthly) | <RM1,000                  | 17          | 14.0           |
|                  | RM1,001 – RM2,000         | 35          | 28.9           |
|                  | RM2,001 – RM3,000         | 59          | 48.8           |
|                  | >RM3,000                  | 10          | 8.3            |

As stated in Table 4.1, it shows that out of 121 respondents, there are 54 male respondents (44.6%) percent and 67 female respondents (55.4%). In terms of age, most of the respondents are between 28 and 37 years old with percentage of 52.1%, followed by 18 to 27 years old with the percentage of 35.5%, 38 to 48 years old with 9.1%. There are four (4) respondents (3.3 percent) with the age more than 49 years old.

According to the data gathered, there are 17 respondents (14%) with monthly income less than RM1,000, noting on the fact that some of them are working as part-timers. Thirty-five (35) respondents or 28.9% made between RM1,001 to RM2,000 per month. There are fifty-nine (59) respondents (48.8 percent) which contributes to the highest percentage, said that they have the income between RM2,001 and RM3,000 per month. There are 10 respondents (8.3%) who received salary of more than RM3,001 a month which mostly are Floor Manager or employees with more than 10 years of working experiences.

## 4.3 Mean and Standard Deviation of Variables Items

Table 4.2 presented the mean scores and standard deviation for customer mistreatment construct. All statements had recorded mean scores of above 1.27 with a meaningfulness sub dimension mean scores recorded range of M=2.79 (SD=1.168) for the statement; "Some customers even used condescending language to me." to M=4.28 (SD=0.744) for "Some customers were impatient in waiting for their orders." statement.

Table 4.2: Mean Scores and Standard Deviation of Customer Mistreatment

| Customer Mistreatment   | Mean | SD    |
|---|------|-------|
| Customer sometimes vented out their mood on me  | 3.51 | 1.119 |
| Some customers indeed have yelled at me.  | 3.18 | 1.232 |
| Sometimes customers spoke aggressively to me.   | 3.52 | 1.081 |
| Customers sometimes got angry at me even over small matter.   | 3.65 | .989  |
| There are times when customers did not listen to my explanation.                                    | 3.60 | 1.084 |
| Some customers even used condescending language to me.  | 2.79 | 1.168 |
| Some of the customers demanded special treatment.   | 3.58 | 1.250 |
| Some customers were impatient in waiting for their orders.  | 4.28 | .744  |
| Some customers even demanded things that are irrelevant to the service that my restaurant provides. | 3.49 | 1.285 |

The following Table 4.3 presented the mean scores and standard deviation for emotional exhaustion construct. All statements had recorded mean scores of above 1.27 with a meaningfulness sub dimension mean scores recorded range of  $M=2.79$  ( $SD=1.224$ ) for the statement; “I feel like I am at the end of my rope.” to  $M=3.58$  ( $SD=1.153$ ) for “I feel emotionally drained from my work.” statement.

Table 4.3: Mean Scores and Standard Deviation of Emotional Exhaustion

| Emotional exhaustion                          | Mean | SD    |
|---|------|-------|
| I feel emotionally drained from my work.      | 3.58 | 1.153 |
| I feel fatigued when I get up in the morning. | 3.53 | 1.155 |
| I feel burnout from my work.                  | 3.45 | 1.111 |
| I feel frustrated by my job.                  | 2.98 | 1.176 |
| I feel used up at the end of the workday.     | 3.40 | 1.215 |
| I feel like I am at the end of my rope.       | 2.79 | 1.224 |
| I feel like I am working too hard on my job.  | 3.50 | 1.330 |

#### 4.4 Reliability Analysis of Study Variables

Cronbach’s coefficient alpha measures the internal consistency of a scale (Pallant, 2016). The Cronbach’s Alpha Coefficient value for both study variables in the study revealed a range of coefficient values from .878 to .914 which is very high and reliable.

Table 4.4: Reliability Test (Cronbach’s Alpha and Mean) of study variables (n=121)

| Variables             | Number of items | Cronbach’s alpha |
|-----------------------|-----------------|------------------|
| Customer mistreatment | 9               | .878             |

|                      |   |      |
|----------------------|---|------|
| Emotional exhaustion | 7 | .914 |
|----------------------|---|------|

#### 4.5 Pearson Correlations Analysis of Competencies and Job Offer Decisions

According to Pallant (2016), the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient analysis is used to evaluate and explore the correlation relationship and direction between a study's variables. She went on to say that a minor correlation is enough to gain statistical significance with a big sample size ( $N > 100$ ). Small or moderate correlations that do not even achieve statistical significance at the level of  $p < 0.05$  with a small sample size, on the other hand, are acceptable (Pallant, 2016).

Table 4.5: Pearson Product-Moment Correlations Matrix of study variables

| Variables             |      | Mean | SD   |
|-----------------------|------|------|------|
| Customer Mistreatment | -    | 3.41 | .855 |
| Emotional Exhaustion  | .465 | 3.32 | .971 |

Note:  $N = 121$

As shown in the Table 4.5 above, a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between customer mistreatment and emotional exhaustion. There was no positive correlation between the two variables,  $r = .465$  ( $p > 0.05$ ). Therefore Hypothesis 1 (H1) was rejected.

#### 4.6 Moderating test of Gender on the relationship between Customer Mistreatment and Emotional Exhaustion

By using Process MACRO, the moderating effect of gender on the relationship between customer mistreatment and employees' emotional exhaustion was tested. The R square value indicates that gender moderates only 23.9 percent of the study conducted. However, the p-value is more than 0.05 (0.585) which means that moderation do not occur. In addition, zero lies between confident intervals thus it is not significant. Therefore Hypothesis 2 (H2) was also rejected.

#### 4.7 Discussion

From the result, it showed that customer mistreatment has significant relationship with employees' emotional exhaustion in quick service restaurants. The effect sizes for the customer mistreatment and emotional exhaustion relationship identified herein are similar to that of Anjum et al. (2020) ( $r = 0.480$ ). The development of this study on customer mistreatment and emotional exhaustion show that whenever any inappropriate actions happen, employees were able to control their emotion although in some cases made them feel emotionally drained (Anjum et al., 2020; Rhee et al., 2016).

Whilst it can be inferred that customer mistreatment cannot be the key factors affecting the dependent variable, the rise in customer mistreatment incidents in the quick service restaurants around the world is still a major concern for most employers (Chen et al., 2019; Hur et al., 2015). Employers should be looking at other factors that might

actually be the cause for customer mistreatment such as service sabotage, service failure, communication skills of employees and empowerment given to employees that could be misjudged and misused. For the moderating effect of gender, it was found that gender do not moderate the relationship between customer mistreatment and employees' emotional exhaustion in quick service restaurants in the country. Studies has found other contributing factors that are more prevalent in influencing customer's burst of anger towards restaurant employees such as age of the employees (Okan et al., 2020), lack of support from superior (Goussinsky & Livne, 2016), service sabotage (Cheng et al., 2020) and service failure (Zainol, 2010).

Emotional exhaustion can be the barrier for an employee from accomplishing their duties at the best quality. Added with long working hours and mobile work station, it could be the worst cause for job stress and burnout in the hospitality industry. Although customers in most incidents were actually trying to uphold their rights by complaining about the service, the lasting effect on employees will make them feel less appreciated, trusted and mentally exhausted. Customer mistreatment and incivility may have direct effect on employees' sense of self-confident and job insecurity. The impact might not only be negative on employees, but also on the organization and the brand. With the widely-manipulated social media platforms showing customer mistreatment (such as verbal aggression, racist remarks and shaming) and response or retaliation from employees, the organization had to publicly apologize in order to salvage their brand name.

## **5 Conclusion**

Working as a quick service restaurant's employee requires one to be able to face customers at the counter with different needs and requests. At time, it can be difficult to fulfil customer's request or limited time frame allocated to prepare and deliver their orders. Customers usually complaint and making if a fuss in the restaurant because of employees' own inability to deliver their promise as advertised. The finding in this study showed that it has nothing to do with employees' gender and it was also did not significantly affect employees' emotional exhaustion. This exemplify that these employees are used to the complaints and mistreatment that they received from customers.

Future research should focus on the employees' training either they were sufficiently trained and prepared to face and overcome such situation at work. The role of employer or superior in neutralizing the situation could be another perspective to look at. Revisiting the training kit and suggesting new recovery SOP in handling issues with customers could improvise the way it is handled. Employees are not easily intimidated by such incivility or mistreatment and move on. Coping with the prolong abuse and felt anger could have significant impact on employees' motivation to perform well. Employers should take greater role in addressing this issue as it could severely affect employees' psychological well-being and quality work life, and consequently damaging the restaurant brand name.

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