How Rude! Emotional Labor as a Mediator Between Customer Incivility and Employee Outcomes

Michael Sliter, Steve Jex, and Katherine Wolford  
Bowling Green State University

Joanne McInnerney  
Novelis, Atlanta, GA

Because of the large number of people employed in service occupations, customer incivility has become an increasingly prevalent and important workplace stressor. Unfortunately, relatively little research has examined the effects of customer incivility; of the research that does exist, virtually all of it has focused solely on employee mental health outcomes. The present study was designed to replicate previous research linking customer incivility to the emotional exhaustion dimension of burnout and to expand on previous research by examining the effects of customer incivility on customer service quality. In addition, two models were proposed and tested in which emotional labor mediated the relationship between customer incivility and outcomes. Data from 120 bank tellers revealed that customer incivility was positively related to emotional exhaustion and negatively related to customer service performance. In addition, both proposed models were supported. Theoretical and practical implications of the findings and future directions are discussed.

Keywords: customer incivility, emotional labor, service performance, emotional exhaustion, workplace mistreatment

Customer service representatives are the front line of any service-oriented organization. These employees are typically required to endure the complaints and frustrations of customers along with other possible stressors often associated with service jobs: low pay, limited hours, abusive supervision, and so forth. Despite this, relatively little research has examined the effects that rude, uncivil behavior from customers might have on customer service employees. Especially lacking is research on the impact of customer incivility on the performance of such employees. This is a serious omission considering that service quality is a key variable to the survival and success of service organizations. The present study seeks to remedy these gaps in the incivility literature by linking customer incivility to employee service performance, as well as by proposing and testing two models in which customer incivility relates to emotional exhaustion and customer service performance through the mediating variable of emotional labor.

Customer Incivility

The most widely cited definition of workplace incivility is that provided by Andersson and Pearson (1999), who stated that incivility is, “low intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect” (p. 457). These behaviors are rude, impolite, and/or discourteous. Incivility, by this definition, is interpersonal, consisting of a perpetrator (the person being uncivil) and a target (the person perceiving the incivility). Typically, workplace incivility has been investigated from the standpoint of employee-to-employee interactions. However, incivility also occurs with the customer as the perpetrator of the incivility and an employee of the organization as the target. This is customer incivility, or low-intensity deviant behavior, perpetrated by someone in a customer or client role, with ambiguous intent to harm an employee, in violation of social norms of mutual respect and courtesy.

The nature of incivility has caused the construct to be confused, or lumped in, with other interpersonal conflict variables, such as bullying (Estes & Wang, 2008), mobbing (Davenport, Schwartz, & Elliott, 1999), and abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000). Unlike these con-
Structs, which involve intentional behaviors, incivility focuses on situations in which the intent to harm is ambiguous. As such, the construct of incivility seems to fit into two categories in the literature: workplace mistreatment (Andersson & Pearson, 1999) and daily hassles (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001). A daily hassle is an irritating, frustrating, or distressing occurrence experienced on a day-to-day basis that is harmful or threatening to a person’s well-being (Lazarus, 1984), such as familial issues, time pressure, or workplace stressors. Incivility would fit well under this term because dealing with rude, disrespectful people can be a daily occurrence at work, especially in the service industry. An omission of a “thank you” or a customer talking on a cell phone might seem like minor hassles but could have a serious effect on a person’s well-being over time. In fact, scales that assess daily hassles (e.g., Daily Hassles Scale; Delongis, Coyne, Dakof, Folkman, & Lazarus, 1982) contain items that overlap with incivility (e.g., “customers or clients giving you a hard time”). As such, workplace incivility can be considered a specific category of daily hassles: workplace interpersonal hassles.

Research on general life hassles has supported the assertion that daily hassles are more predictive of negative health outcomes, job performance, and absenteeism than less frequent but more serious life stressors (e.g., Ivancevich, 1986). Among the most damaging hassles are those related to the social environment, such as relationship issues with coworkers or clients. For instance, Beaudoin and Edgar (2003) found that nurses felt that social hassles, such as interprofessional relations and nurse–client relations, were the most damaging to their mental well-being, job satisfaction, and desire to remain with the organization. Incivility fits in this category of social–environmental hassles. Clearly, the potential deleterious effects of customer incivility on organizational and personal outcomes demonstrate a real need to further examine this construct.

The prevalence of customer incivility represents another reason why research on this construct is important. The number of service-related jobs has increased dramatically in recent years (Hecker, 2005), placing more people in positions in which customer incivility may occur. Furthermore, research has shown that customer service employees report experiencing aggression, a much more serious form of social norm violation than incivility, more often from customers than from their coworkers (Grantey, Kern, & Frone, 2007). It stands to reason that lesser forms of deviant behavior, such as incivility, also occur more often from customers than coworkers; therefore, this is an important stressor for employers to consider in service occupations.

Another reason that service employees are at risk is that they have relatively low power in relation to customers. In general, workplace incivility tends to filter downward (Cortina et al., 2001). That is, employees with less power tend to be the targets of incivility from those with higher levels of organizational power. Past research has shown that lower level employees—most particularly, women—report experiencing the highest levels of incivility (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). However, customer service employees’ jobs place them in an unusual situation. Despite the fact that the employee is providing a service to the customer, and therefore should be in a position with higher power, the very concept of customer service creates a power differential favoring the customer. Organizations cannot function without clients or customers, which puts the power in the hands of these individuals.

In addition to factors specific to the service provider role, Pearson, Andersson, and Porath (2000) have suggested that there are cultural reasons for increased customer incivility. They have argued that society has reached the age of “whatever,” with people showing little consideration for others in most social situations. Providing more support for this post, Twenge and Foster (2008) and Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, and Bushman (2008) found evidence of an increase in self-report ratings of narcissistic personality traits in nationwide college samples from 1982 to 2007, indicating that young people are becoming more inwardly focused than they were in the past. This research has been shown to generalize outside of college samples as well, where narcissism remains a stable trait from the early 20s until well into middle age (Wink & Donahue, 1995). Additionally, today’s consumers understand that they have the power in the consumer–provider relationship. Choices for most products are numerous (think of how many brands of soap there are!), and customers recognize these choices as power. Consumers want the best service and the best price, and they are not afraid to use their power (i.e., “I’ll take my business elsewhere!”) to get what they want.

Effects of Incivility

Despite the fact that it is a common phenomenon, few studies have explicitly examined the effects of customer incivility. This is likely due to the fact that the construct is still emerging (Burnfield, Clark, Devendorf, & Jex, 2004). Because of this lack of
research, it is beneficial to draw from different, yet related, areas to form a theoretical understanding of the effects of customer incivility. The literature on daily social hassles in the workplace provides one such option. For instance, Beaudoin and Edgar (2003) found that all hassles—social hassles, in particular—were related to interference with productivity and job satisfaction. Luong and Rogelberg (2005) found that meeting overload (considered primarily a social hassle) related positively to daily fatigue and perceptions of workload.

In the literature explicitly measuring customer incivility, the outcome most consistently linked to the construct is the emotional exhaustion facet of burnout (Dorman & Zapf, 2004; Jex, Yugo, Burnfield-Geimer, & Clark, 2008; Von Dierendonck & Mevissen, 2002). Burnout can be defined as “a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by long-term involvement in situations that are emotionally demanding” (Pines & Aronson, 1988, p. 9). The emotional exhaustion facet of burnout refers to feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and entrapment—feelings that are likely to occur when exposed to constant incivility while in a position of low power, as a customer service employee is. On the basis of this previous research, the following hypothesis was proposed:

**Hypothesis 1:** Perceptions of customer incivility will be positively related to emotional exhaustion.

Although some studies have examined the relationship between customer incivility and employee well-being, we found none examining the relationship between customer incivility and performance. Of particular interest to us was the relationship between customer incivility and service quality. Intuitively, one would assume that experiencing uncivil behavior from customers would make service providers less motivated to provide high-quality service and, thus, result in decreased service quality. In such instances, a service provider may simply want to complete a transaction as quickly as possible to end the uncivil interaction.

Related research has shown that workplace stressors such as role conflict, role ambiguity, and organizational constraints are negatively related to both in-role and extrarole performance (Abramis, 1994; Jex, Adams, Bachrach, & Sorenson, 2003; Spector & Jex, 1998). Customer incivility, as a social hassle, can certainly be considered a workplace stressor—an aspect of the work environment that invokes feelings of stress or anxiety among employees (Hall, Royle, Brymer, Perrewé, Ferris, & Hochwarter, 2006). Daily workplace hassles have been examined as stressors in the past (e.g., Kinney & Stephens, 1989; Steptoe, Lipsey, & Wardle, 1998). On the basis of this reasoning—the link between hassles and decreased performance—the following hypothesis was proposed:

**Hypothesis 2:** Perceptions of customer incivility will be negatively related to ratings of customer service quality.

**Modeling Incivility and Its Outcomes: Emotional Labor as a Mediator**

Up to this point, we have proposed that service employees who experience incivility from customers experience higher levels of emotional exhaustion and provide lower quality service to customers. However, these are more powerful implications if we can determine an underlying reason or explanation for these proposed relationships, answering the question of “why?” To do this, we examined emotional labor as a possible mediating variable between customer incivility and its outcomes.

Emotional labor is a process through which employees manage their emotions in the workplace. Most workplaces, especially those in the service industry, have prescribed display rules, or formally set display expectations for emotional expression in the workplace (Diefendorff, Richard, & Croyle, 2006). A common display rule is the well-known “service-with-a-smile” rule, which requires that employees maintain an unerring positive expression throughout customer service encounters (Grandey, 2003). Display rules such as this govern when and how specific emotions are to be expressed while in the workplace.

The process of emotional labor itself typically involves two common processes: suppressing the negative emotions that one is feeling and faking positive emotions that one is not feeling (Glomb & Tews, 2004). A customer service employee would frequently have to manage his or her emotions to provide quality customer service, especially when faced with uncivil or aggressive customers. Past research has shown that service providers routinely engage in both processes of emotional labor; for instance, they must smile and greet customers politely when not feeling well or hide annoyance when a customer is being demanding (Grandey, Fisk, & Steiner, 2005).

Faking positive emotions and suppressing negative emotions have been shown to have direct effects on employee well-being (e.g., Goldberg & Grandey, 2007;
Grandey (2003), and these forms of emotional labor may also be driving the relationship between customer incivility and the outcomes examined in the present study. Hence, we propose that customer incivility does not directly affect emotional exhaustion but that emotional labor acts as a mediator between these variables. The experience of incivility, from this perspective, does not directly lead to emotional exhaustion; rather, the effort required to control emotional responses elicited by incivility tends to sap limited emotional resources, and this, in turn, leads to exhaustion. This model is consistent with Hobfoll and Freedy’s (1993) conservation of resources (COR) theory, which states that people act to conserve their resources whenever possible. When resources cannot be conserved (i.e., when faking and suppressing of emotions are required), people become exhausted. Based on this, we hypothesized the following:

**Hypothesis 3:** Emotional labor (suppression of negative emotions and faking of positive emotions) will fully mediate the relationship between customer incivility and emotional exhaustion (see Figure 1).

Second, we proposed that emotional labor would act as a partial mediator between customer incivility and customer service performance. Again, consistent with COR theory, when people begin to notice that they are losing resources, they become unwilling to continue sapping those resources. We believe that, to regain resources at work, employees who are experiencing customer incivility will stop providing good customer service: The emotional labor necessary to do so can be very tiring in the face of an uncivil customer. Additionally, after an incident of incivility, an employee will likely still need to “recover” from this experience (Hobfoll & Freedy, 1993), which can affect their customer service quality across the next several customers.

Furthermore, research on emotional labor indicates that, when a person fakes positive emotions, other people can tell. Research by Grandey, Fisk, Mattila, Jansen, and Sideman (2005) has shown that individuals in customer roles can identify authentic smiles versus fake smiles, and the knowledge that someone is using a fake smile can affect ratings of a service encounter. In the case of service quality, the positive emotions that one is attempting to project are likely to be perceived by customers as not being genuine; hence, the perceived level of service will likely be lower (Grandey et al., 2005). This would be especially noticeable when the customer is already being uncivil; when faced with an uncivil customer, an employee might even be motivated to be overly “fake” in their display of positive emotions. This increased faking in the face of incivility would likely further exacerbate the effects of emotional labor.

However, we do not believe that this relationship will be fully mediated. The proposed partial mediation in the model stems from the fact that customer incivility may still have a partial direct effect on service quality because of the motivational processes behind providing customer service. An employee, when being exposed to incivility, might be tempted to provide reduced customer service beyond simply faking positive emotions. An employee might take incivility personally, and whereas some employees might be motivated to “kill with kindness” by being overly positive, others may be motivated to deviate from the display rule of service with a smile and actually return uncivil sentiments to the customer. This would be a reciprocal incivility spiral, similar to that proposed by Andersson and Pearson (1999). Hence, the following hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 4:** Emotional labor (faking of positive emotions) will partially mediate the relationship between customer incivility and customer service performance (see Figure 2).

Note that we are not including suppression of negative emotions as a mediator in the relationship between customer incivility and customer service performance. This is an intentional omission. First, as a simple point of definition, faking of positive emotions and suppression of negative emotions are both unique sources of emotional labor and need not exist together for emotional labor to occur (Morris & Feldman, 1996). As such, faking positive emotions, on its own, can be considered to be emotional labor. Second, we could locate no study that provides compelling evidence that people can detect the suppression of negative emotions in others. Third, there is evidence that when people suppress emotions, they can
do it without being detected. For instance, Gross and Levenson (1997), in a laboratory study, found that people can suppress emotions (both positive and negative) very well when exposed to a variety of emotion-evoking video stimuli. These lab results have been duplicated (e.g., Daniels et al., 2010), and these results suggest that suppressing negative emotions is actually easier than suppressing positive emotions. Similarly, in a face-to-face customer simulation study, Sliter and Gillespie (2010) found that, when individuals have even 6 months of customer service experience, they could suppress negative emotions in response to a hostile customer to the point that the negative emotions can rarely be detected even by trained observers. Hence, if suppression of negative emotion can only rarely be detected by others, we have no theoretical reason to believe that it would affect ratings of customer service quality.

The Present Study

The present study was designed to test the aforementioned hypotheses with a sample of bank tellers. Bank teller positions are representative of a typical customer service job in today’s business environment, dealing with most of the modern demands of customer service representatives. These employees are responsible for maintaining customer service standards, selling customer accounts, dealing with complaints, answering the phones, and completing rather complex transactions quickly and accurately, all stereotypical duties for various types of face-to-face customer service jobs. They can be considered to be high risk for customer incivility, especially because people often become especially heated when dealing with money or finance-related transactions (Furnham & Okamura, 1999).

Method

Participants

A midsized Midwestern bank gave approval to survey all of its bank tellers in a single state. In total, 151 tellers from the company’s 32 branches were contacted through an e-mail message from Michael Sliter. This e-mail was preceded by a message from the bank’s regional manager endorsing the study and encouraging participation. Of the 151 tellers initially contacted, 146 e-mail addresses were functional. Of these 146, a total of 120 bank tellers chose to participate in the survey, representing a response rate of 82%. The majority of respondents were female (84%), with a mean age of 34.7 (SD = 12.04) years; were White (79.7%); and had either finished college or at least completed some college coursework (73.2%). Other information collected included years employed at the bank, years of experience as a teller, and position at the bank (customer service representative). All participants had at least 6 months of experience and were no longer in their initial probationary period.

Participants provided employee identification numbers and mail codes to receive a monetary incentive. This information was used to link survey responses to customer service scores. Two weeks after the data collection, participants were mailed a $10 gas card as compensation for participation. Individual responses were kept confidential from management of the bank, and a technical report summarizing the results provided the bank with only aggregate data.

Self-Report Measures

Customer incivility. Customer incivility was assessed with a scale developed by Burnfield, Clark, Devendorf, and Jex (2004). The scale consisted of 11 items, each measuring one of two dimensions of customer incivility: customer condescension (i.e., customers putting down the efficacy of an employee) and displaced customer frustration (i.e., customers taking out their own frustrations on employees). Originally, an insulting remarks dimension existed in this scale. However, the items for the insulting remarks dimension assessed overt, intentional hostility (e.g., “Customers make rude comments about employees’ physical appearance”), which did not fit with our definition of incivility as having an ambiguous intent to harm. Additionally, the Insulting Remarks subscale included an item assessing sexual
harassment (i.e., “Customers make offensive sexual comments to employees”), which is a construct related to, but psychometrically distinct, from customer incivility (Lim & Cortina, 2005). These issues considered, we decided against including the Insulting Remarks subscale in the present study.

Respondents were given the following instructions: “Thinking about the past month, please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements.” Each statement was rated with a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) indicating perceptions of uncivil behaviors. Because the two subscales (condescension and frustration) have been shown to be highly intercorrelated (Burnfield et al., 2004), responses to the 11 items were combined into an overall composite score. Possible scores ranged from 11 to 55. This composite measure had acceptable internal consistency (.90) in the present study.

Emotional exhaustion. Emotional exhaustion was measured with the Emotional Exhaustion subscale of the Burnout Measure (Pines & Aronson, 1988). The Burnout Measure consists of three subscales, each with seven items: Physical Exhaustion (i.e., being tired), Emotional Exhaustion (i.e., feeling hopeless), and Mental Exhaustion (i.e., feeling rejected). Factor analysis has shown that these three dimensions tend to be able to be replicated in different samples (Enzmann, Schaufeli, Janssen, & Rozenman, 1998). Respondents were asked to think about and indicate the frequency of these symptoms over the past month using a 7-point Likert-type scale with the following response options: never, once in a great while, rarely, sometimes, often, usually, and always. Alpha reliability for the emotional exhaustion scale in the present study was .89.

Emotional labor. Emotional labor was assessed with the Discrete Emotions Emotional Labor Scale (Glomb & Tews, 2004). The scale consists of three parts: genuinely expressed emotions, false expression of emotion, and suppressed emotions. For the present study, the latter two scales were used to measure the suppression of negative emotions and the faking of positive emotions. For each of these measures, participants were asked how often during the past month they had expressed emotions while not actually experiencing them (faking) and how often they had kept experienced emotions to themselves (suppression). Emotions presented and rated in the scale included both positive emotions (e.g., happiness, enthusiasm) and negative emotions (e.g., irritation, anxiety). For each emotion, participants were asked to rate their level of suppression or expression using a 5-point scale ranging from many times a day (5) to never expressing/feeling this emotion (1). Glomb and Tews (2004) have found evidence of convergent, discriminant, and criterion-related validity for the scale. In the present study, coefficient alpha reliabilities for the faking of positive emotions and suppression of negative emotions subscales were .87 and .91, respectively.

Control variables. Previous research on workplace incivility has indicated that women might report experiencing more incivility than men (Anderson & Pearson, 1999). Therefore, we controlled for sex in all analyses. Although the present sample was mostly made up of women (84%), we wanted to control for the possibility of men reporting lower average levels of customer incivility. Sex was dummy-coded, with 1 indicating male and 2 indicating female to allow for analysis.

We also controlled for tenure, as research has shown that burnout tends to increase through experience with the job, possibly as a result of monotony and lack of challenges (Stevens, 2007). Note that, in our study, the measure for tenure that was used was experience as a bank teller as opposed to experience at the particular organization being surveyed. Because the demands of bank tellers tend to remain stable across organizations, we deemed general experience as a teller to be a more accurate measure of tenure. Tenure was coded as length of experience as teller in years.

Non-Self-Report Measures

Customer service quality. The bank that participated in the present study routinely collects customer service quality data on its tellers using a telephone follow-up system. Under this system, actual customers are selected at random and called for a telephone interview within 24 hr of conducting business at a branch. During this interview, customers are asked about their experiences with the customer service representative with whom they interacted. Customers are asked about the tellers’ performance with regard to four facets of service: sales (Did they ask about a relevant product?), professionalism/friendliness (Did they appear professional?), the transaction (Was the transaction quick and accurate?), and appreciation (Did the employee express appreciation?). Each of these dimensions is rated on a 5-point scale, with 5 indicating the highest level of service and 1 indicating the lowest. Ratings on each of the service dimensions are summed to form a composite and
multiplied by 25. The final customer service score is out of 100.

Because of the relatively variable nature of customer service scores, 3 months of customer service data were collected for each participating employee. Data were collected from the company regarding the 3 months immediately after the completion of self-report data collection. The archival data for these 3 postsurvey months were averaged to obtain a mean customer service score.

Tellers were, on average, assessed an average of 16.66 times (SD = 6.4) during this time period, with an average total score of 94.71 (SD = 3.85) on these customer service surveys out of a possible range of 25 to 100 points. Because the bank only provided composite scores for each month, we were unable to compute a coefficient alpha reliability estimate.

Procedure

The self-report survey measures were distributed internally through Survey Monkey, an online survey distribution tool. Participants were first presented with an electronic informed consent document, which indicated that individual responses on the measures would be kept confidential. In addition, participants were informed that, by proceeding with the survey, they were authorizing the bank to release archival performance data.

A 2-week time period was allotted for participants to complete the 15- to 20-min survey. Two weeks after the end of data collection, participants were awarded a $10 gift card as a “thank-you” for their participation. Gift cards were mailed to participants through bank interoffice mail. Finally, the bank released the archival performance data 6 months after data collection.

Results

Branch Data

As the collected data were nested with 32 branches, we wanted to determine whether there were any systematic differences between branches in our predictor or outcome variables. The average number of respondents reporting per branch was 3.75 (SD = .95), with a minimum of response rate of 1 and a maximum of 6.

To determine whether there were systematic differences between branches in any of the variables being examined, we conducted a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), treating branch as the independent variable and customer incivility, customer service scores, emotional exhaustion, and emotional labor as the dependent variables. The results indicated that there were no significant differences between the branches in customer incivility, $F(31, 94) = 1.01$, $p = .474$; customer service scores, $F(31, 94) = 0.613$, $p = .931$; emotional exhaustion, $F(31, 94) = 0.635$, $p = .566$; or emotional labor, $F(31, 94) = 0.939$, $p = .666$.

Regression Results

Descriptive statistics, along with correlations among all study variables, are presented in Table 1. Customer incivility was found to significantly and positively predict emotional exhaustion ($\beta = 0.309$, $p < .001$), beyond the control variables of sex and tenure, which supported Hypothesis 1. Hypothesis 2 was also supported, with customer incivility significantly and negatively predicting customer service scores ($\beta = -0.346$, $p < .001$) while taking into account the control variables. With these hypotheses supported, we went further to explore the proposed

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<td>6. Suppressing negative emotions</td>
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*p < .05.  **p < .001.
mediation model of customer incivility and the dependent variables, with emotional labor as the mediator.

**Mediation Regression Analyses**

Hierarchal regression analysis was used to test the hypothesized mediation effects. We used the widely accepted procedures developed by Baron and Kenny (1986), which are considered to be a type of path analysis (MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002). This procedure involves four steps. First, a significant relationship between the initial variable and the outcome variable must be shown. Second, a significant relationship must be shown to exist between the initial variable and the mediator variable. Third, the mediator variable must continue to affect the outcome variable while controlling for the effects of the initial variable. Finally, to determine whether the mediation is full or partial, the relationship between the initial variable and the outcome variable is examined for any reduction after controlling for the mediator variable. If the initial variable is still significant, support is provided for a partially mediated model. In each of these steps, the control variables (sex and tenure) are added to the hierarchical regression equation in the first step.

Finally, to provide more support for the mediation model, we conducted a Sobel test for each model. The Sobel test examines whether the relationship between the independent and dependent variables (by means of the mediator) is significantly different from zero (Baron & Kenny, 1986). A significant Sobel statistic indicates evidence for mediation. However, this statistic cannot be interpreted without also examining the results from the aforementioned Baron and Kenny (1986) method, as it does not provide an indication of partial or full mediation.

**Model 1: Mediating Effects of Emotional Labor in the Relationship Between Customer Incivility and Emotional Exhaustion**

We conducted the aforementioned four-step process to test the hypothesis that emotional labor would fully mediate the relationship between customer incivility and emotional exhaustion. As a first step, customer incivility was shown to significantly predict emotional exhaustion ($\beta = 0.309, p < .001$) while controlling for sex and tenure. Second, customer incivility was shown to have a significant relationship with the mediating term of emotional labor ($\beta = 0.361, p < .001$), taking into account the control variables. Third, to determine mediation, emotional labor was shown to still be related to emotional exhaustion while controlling for customer incivility ($\beta = 0.376, p < .001$). The final step was conducted to determine whether emotional labor fully or partially mediated the relationship. When controlling for emotional labor, customer incivility was no longer a significant predictor of emotional exhaustion ($\beta = 0.117, p = .197$), providing support for a fully mediated model. In addition, a Sobel test was conducted to provide more support for the model. The test indicated a significant mediating effect of emotional labor in the relationship between customer incivility and emotional exhaustion ($z = 2.46, p = .014$).

**Model 2: Partially Mediating Effect of Faking Positive Emotion in the Relationship Between Customer Incivility and Customer Service Performance**

Again, the Baron and Kenny (1986) regression method was used to test the hypothesis that faking positive emotions would partially mediate the relationship between customer incivility and customer service performance. In the first step, customer incivility was shown to be a strong, significant predictor of customer service performance ($\beta = -0.346, p < .001$) while controlling for sex and tenure. As a second step, customer incivility was found to be a significant predictor of faking positive emotions ($\beta = 0.185, p < .05$). Third, to determine the efficacy of faking positive emotions as a mediator, customer incivility was entered as a control variable. Faking positive emotions was still found to be a significant predictor of customer service performance ($\beta = 0.198, p < .028$), even while controlling for customer incivility, sex, and tenure. Finally, to determine whether faking positive emotions was a full or partial mediator, faking positive emotions was used as a control in determining whether the magnitude of the relationship between customer incivility and customer service performance decreased. We found that the magnitude of the relationship did decrease (from $\beta = -0.346$ to $\beta = -0.318$), but remained significant ($p < .001$), which supported the hypothesis for a partially mediated model. Hence, the model proposed in Hypothesis 4 was fully supported. In addition, a Sobel test indicated a significant mediating effect ($z = 2.01, p = .03$).
Discussion

With a growing number of people seeking and obtaining jobs in the service sector, it is increasingly important to examine the effects of customer incivility on both personal, health-related outcomes and on organizational, performance-based outcomes. To this end, the present study replicated previous research results suggesting that customer incivility may lead to higher levels of emotional exhaustion among service providers. Additionally, the present study extended the literature on customer incivility by examining whether employees who experience high levels incivility from customers provide lower overall levels of service.

Customer service performance is an especially important criterion in the current struggling economic climate, as increased serviced performance can lead to increased sales and customer loyalty. Determining which variables can lead to reduced (or increased) customer service performance should become a primary goal for both researchers and practitioners alike. We began to fill this gap through linking customer incivility to service performance.

The primary contribution of the present study is a greater understanding of the “why” of the link between customer incivility and two key outcomes: emotional exhaustion and customer service performance. Namely, we believed that emotional labor—the process of regulating emotions while at work—was the driving force behind the negative effects of customer incivility. We proposed that the impact of customer incivility would be fully or partially caused by employees (1) faking positive emotions and/or (2) suppressing negative emotions to perform their jobs. With respect to emotional exhaustion, we found evidence that faking positive emotions and suppressing negative emotions fully mediated the effects of customer incivility.

Stated differently, we found that customer incivility was positively related to emotional exhaustion through the perceived emotional labor demands of one’s job. This is a clear addition to previous research, which has established a consistent, direct link between customer incivility and emotional exhaustion. Our findings suggest that this relationship occurs because of the emotional responses used by the employee to cope with customer incivility. In other words, the experience of customer incivility is not emotionally exhausting per se, but rather the mechanism for dealing with incivility—the required increase in emotional labor—causes the emotional exhaustion associated with incivility. Our results suggest that, if the customer service representative were able to express his or her feelings, or otherwise cope with them without the need for active suppression, emotional exhaustion would be less likely to occur. These findings are consistent with COR theory, as the theory predicts that emotional exhaustion occurs when people do not have adequate emotional resources to meet the demands of interpersonal stressors and/or work demands (Lee & Ashforth, 1996). Emotional labor saps emotional resources and, hence, leads to emotional exhaustion.

With respect to customer service quality, the present results suggest that faking positive emotions (a common type of emotional labor) likely plays a role in the relationship between customer incivility and customer service performance. More specifically, that relationship was partially mediated by how often employees faked positive emotions. That is, when employees were confronted with more uncivil customers, they received generally lower customer service scores when they faked positive emotions. These results are interesting and may have several interpretations.

In terms of the partial mediator, we can examine what is known as the Duchenne smile (Grandey, Fisk, Mattila, Jansen, & Sideman, 2005), which is an identifiable authentic smile. Earlier, we mentioned that Grandey et al. (2005) found that individuals in customer roles can identify authentic smiles, which can affect ratings of the customer–employee encounter. The present results build on these findings by adding the knowledge that customer identification of inauthentic emotion can actually decrease ratings of the encounter.

A possible explanation of this model is that the most appropriate response to customer incivility may be emotional neutrality. Service providers who fake positive emotions when dealing with an uncivil customer may come off as patronizing or as if they are minimizing the customer’s concerns. On the other hand, expressing negative emotions to an uncivil customer may lead to what Andersson and Pearson (1999) termed a spiral of incivility and, ultimately, a more dissatisfied customer. However, service providers who project a relatively neutral emotional tone make customers feel as though their concerns are being heard and that they will be addressed. Both of these explanations are obviously speculative but certainly could be explored further in future research.

Practical Implications

The present study, in combination with past findings, suggests that customer incivility has a negative impact on the emotional well-being of service employees and the service quality given to customers,
mediated by the process of emotional labor. Given this negative effect, organizations should pay attention to the emotional needs of service providers. Providing stress management or wellness programs may be one way to do assist employees who regularly deal with customer incivility. Organizations may also consider allowing a short break at the employees’ discretion after a particularly uncivil customer. This would give some power back to the employee, allowing him or her to feel more control, and provide time to recover resources that were lost through the regulation of emotions. Research has shown that job control can reduce the effects of stressors (e.g., Bond & Bunce, 2001), and an impromptu rest break could have these positive benefits.

The present findings also suggest that proper training of service employees could help in dealing with uncivil customers. The present findings suggest, for example, that either being very positive or very negative may makes things worse in such situations. Organizations may consider implementing “lens-of-the-customer” training or empathy-type training; both types of training could help the employee be more understanding of how customers feel and help them to understand that the displaced frustration is not personally directed at that employee and that there is no intended attempt to harm. Also, results indicated that faking positive emotions can affect quality of customer service; implications of this finding could be the development of a potential training program in expression of genuine positive emotion, or deep acting, to increase customer perceptions of the encounter (Shulei & Minter, 2006).

**Strengths, Limitations, and Considerations**

The present study exhibited several strengths that should be taken into account when interpreting the results. First, the customer service data were not self-reported—the employees were not rating their own service quality. Rather, the customers themselves rated service quality in a removed, objective manner. Hence, these particular data do not suffer from single-source bias. Also to be considered is that a random selection of customers was contacted for these customer service ratings, minimizing the chances that the personality or mood of any individual customer overly affected the ratings. Finally, these ratings of customer service were already assessed and used as a performance criterion at the bank, which supports their efficacy as actual ratings of service.

Another strength of the present study is that it used a sample from a single job from a single organization. As such, we could make certain assertions that could not be made in other similar studies (e.g., Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002). First, the job itself was identical across all participants, having the same general tasks, procedures, and mission. Additionally, the emotional labor demands were constant for this job. Studies that look at multiple samples face the confounding variable of differing emotional labor demands. That is, a bank teller does not regulate the same emotions that a hospice care worker does. In addition, when using multiple samples, the manner in which clients or customers present with incivility would be different. Again, the type of incivility experienced by a bank teller is dramatically different from that experienced by a hospice worker. However, when working with a single position, we know that the job difficulty, emotional labor demands, and type of incivility experienced are relatively the same across all employees with that position, hence increasing the strength of our model.

However, as with any study, the present study was not without limitations. As always, the common method bias should be taken into account, as only self-report measures were used for emotional labor, emotional exhaustion, and customer incivility (Doty & Glick, 1998). This may be the best method existing for measuring perceptions of customer incivility; incivility is, by nature and definition, a matter of personal perception and interpretation. Incivility affects each person differently, and what might be considered incivility to one person might not bother another. However, as incivility does consider “norms of mutual respect.” (Andersson & Pearson, 1999, p. 9), coworker reports of incivility might be used in concordance with self-report in future studies. Additionally, because the present study utilized correlational data for the assertions made about emotional exhaustion, causality cannot be inferred in these relationships.

Second, we did not control for negative affect (NA), which might be considered to be a limitation by some researchers. NA is a dispositional trait characterized by a tendency to experience negative emotions, such as sadness, anger, and fear (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Many studies in occupational health psychology use NA as a default control variable, as people high in NA might report, rather than experience, higher instances of negative events. Brief and colleagues (1988) found that, when NA was partialed out in stressor-strain relationships, the magnitude of these relationships diminished or become insignificant, leading some researchers to believe that people high in NA might perceive rather...
than experience stressors in the workplace. However, Spector, Zapf, Chen, and Frese (2000) have contended that controlling for NA can lead to illogical inferences or a distorted perception of the variables’ relationships with each other. More specifically, when NA is controlled for, it is unclear whether important, substantive variance is being removed from the analysis. In addition, many other researchers have found little or no effect on the stressor–strain relationship when partialing out NA (e.g., Schaubrock, Ganster, & Fox, 1992; Spector, Chen, & O’Connell, 2000). These findings question the efficacy of blindly controlling for NA in stress research.

Aside from the debate on the use of NA as a control variable, recent research has suggested that people who are high in NA might be actually experiencing more incivility. Milam, Spitzmueller, and Penney (2009) suggested that people who are high in NA might be provocative targets, perceiving innocent words or actions as incivility and retaliating with incivility of their own. As such, a person high in NA might be both perceiving and experiencing more workplace incivility, which complicates the idea of partialing out NA in a study of incivility. It is clear that the relationship between NA and incivility is a substantial and potentially complex research question, beyond the scope of the present study, and we recommend that future researchers explore this relationship in more detail.

Additionally, we echo Spector and colleagues (2000) in their recommendation that NA is not the only substantial variable to consider in stressor–strain relationships. In the case of customer incivility, several variables might influence the experience of incivility, including other personality traits such as agreeableness (where people who are more agreeable perceive less incivility) and other individual differences. For instance, in an ongoing study, Wolford, Sliter, and Jex (2010) found that instances of workplace incivility positively correlated with Body Mass Index, indicating that heavier individuals are more likely to experience incivility. As such, further research is required to understand both the perception and experience of incivility by targets.

Returning to the limitations of the present study, there could be potential biases with regard to the use of this type of customer service data. Customers who provided customer service quality scores were chosen at random by the bank; thus, we have no real way of knowing whether these customers were the perpetrators of incivility or whether they were involved in typical, mutually civil service encounters. However, as customer incivility has a rather low base rate (estimated at around 9%, per Totterdale & Holman, 2003), we can be relatively confident that the majority of these ratings came from transactions in which incivility was not present. The average number of teller transactions during the 3 months of this study was 1,451.67 (SD = 523.49), and the average number of customers surveyed for service scores was 16.66 (SD = 6.40), indicating that only approximately 1% to 2% of total customers were surveyed for these customer service scores (although these estimates are likely low, as a single customer might be responsible for multiple transactions). As such, we recommend interpreting these results with some caution, as uncivil perpetrators may affect the results if they were reporting customer service quality (although this is statistically unlikely).

Another consideration to take into account when interpreting the results involves the theoretical assumptions made about the data. The proposed theoretical model (e.g., incivility leads to emotional labor, which leads to decreased service quality and increased exhaustion) is at the individual level. That is, the service representative experiences incivility from a customer, which causes emotional labor, which in turn causes an increase in emotional exhaustion and a decrease in the quality of subsequent service encounters. However, the manner in which the data in our study were gathered precludes making linkages between specific instances of incivility, emotion regulation due to those instances of incivility, and the impact of emotion regulation on the study outcomes (emotional exhaustion and service quality). As such, the assumptions made about individual service encounters cannot be tested, given the manner in which our data were collected.

However, we do not think that this invalidates the results and interpretation of the present study for two reasons. First, most stress models, such as the Institute for Social Research model of stress (Katz & Kahn, 1978), imply that stressors have an immediate impact on a person in that moment. In addition to considering the immediate impact of stressors, most of these models also propose that psychological, physical, and behavioral strains come about as a result of the cumulative effect of experiencing these stressors over time. As such, it is likely that these results represent the cumulative effects of incivility on emotional labor and their outcomes. A similar approach has been used with success in incivility research (e.g., Lim, Cortina, & Magley, 2008).

Second, ample theory on interpersonal mistreatment demonstrates that negative emotions and emotional labor follow from negative workplace events.
and not the other way around (e.g., Glomb, Munson, Hulin, Bergman, & Drasgow, 1999; Goldberg & Grandey, 2007). It is a realistic assumption that the results of the present study simply reflect the cumulative effects of individual encounters of incivility over time. Ultimately, the findings of our study need to be augmented with controlled laboratory studies in which incivility in specific service encounters can be more closely linked to emotional labor and other outcomes.

A final consideration is that the sample consisted only of bank tellers. This potentially limits the generalizability of the findings because the dynamics of financial transactions may be different from service-related transactions in other sectors, such as retail sales, medical care, and so forth. Although the concentration on one job can be considered a strength (as mentioned earlier), it should also be noted that, because all participants in the study were performing the same job and had the same emotional requirements, the variability for many of the study variables may have been restricted. As a result, the findings reported in this study may very well be an underestimation of the mediation effects.

Future studies are needed to continue to investigate and research the construct of customer incivility, as well as to examine specific effects of customer incivility. Performance outcomes of customer incivility have been largely ignored, and investigators should begin to focus on objective criteria as outcomes, as well as on ways in which to reduce the negative effects of this incivility. More specifically, researchers could examine the efficacy of some of the potential solutions that we proposed (e.g., rest breaks and empathy training).

Additionally, now that we have established a basic and predictive link between customer incivility, emotional exhaustion, and service performance, future studies should continue to examine what sorts of people are predisposed to be targets of customer incivility or at least are predisposed to perceive incidents of incivility. We did not examine personality variables in the present study, and we believe that personality factors might be important moderators in the relationships between incivility and possible outcomes. As mentioned earlier, NA is an important variable to consider in incivility research and should be considered in future research. Additionally, personality attributes that might buffer the negative effects of incivility (or reduce perceptions of incivility), such as self-esteem and agreeableness, could be studied to determine what sorts of people might thrive (or at least survive) in jobs where incivility might be the norm.

Finally, further studies could be conducted to examine the impact of customer incivility over time. For instance, it may be that emotional exhaustion from incivility compounds over time, leading to continually greater negative effects. On the other hand, the opposite may be true; people may develop strategies to cope with uncivil behavior over time, meaning that the negative effects may actually diminish with time. Despite controlling for tenure, the present study was unable to determine whether there was a true, longitudinal effect of exposure to incivility on health outcomes.

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