

Effects of customer incivility on frontline employees and the moderating role of supervisor leadership style

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ABSTRACT

Customer incivility toward frontline employees (FLEs) is a widespread phenomenon within tourism and hospitality industries, severely depleting the psychological resources of FLEs and delivered customer service. Drawing on the job demands-resources and conservation of resources frameworks, the current research compares the effects of the two most common forms of customer incivility on FLEs' psychological responses and behavioral intentions (study 1). Moreover, this work explores the degree to which supervisor leadership style can mitigate the depleting effects of these two forms of customer incivility on FLEs (study 2). Findings demonstrate that FLEs' responses to customer incivility episodes remain contingent upon supervisor's leadership style and acknowledge that an empowering (vs. laissez-faire) leadership style can better mitigate the depleting effects of both customer incivility forms on FLEs' role stress, rumination, retaliation and withdrawal intentions. The implications of these findings for tourism and hospitality theory and practicing managers are discussed.

1. Introduction

Chick-fil-A restaurant, Washington D. C., September 2018: A customer verbally attacks an order taker in front of other customers and other members of staff; the shift manager intervenes kindly asking the yelling customer to leave the restaurant. In response, the customer escalates into a fight with the employee, with other customers becoming involved, resulting in the shift manager physically attacking the perpetrator. Customer-captured videos of the event go viral, undermining Chick-Fil-A's long-standing reputation as the most friendly fast-food restaurant chain across the US (The Washington Post, 2018).

As the above incident showcases, customer incivility, defined as “the low-quality interpersonal treatment that employees receive from their customers during service interactions” (Koopmann, Wang, Liu, & Song, 2015), can have detrimental effects on employees, customer service experience, and the overall reputation of the brand. Customer incivility is a global phenomenon with a national survey of fast food workers in Australia revealing that 87% of them have been treated uncivilly by their customers (ABC News, 2018). Likewise, the 2017 Gallup survey among employees in the US, places mistreatment in the workplace by managers, coworkers and customers as the number one

cause of burnout (Gallup, 2018), whereas Porath and Pearson (2012) report from a sample of thousands of employees surveyed over 14-years, an astonishing 98% has repeatedly experienced uncivil behaviors. These alarming statistics have attracted scholarly attention on the management of incivility episodes in tourism and hospitality industries. Pertinent works uncover the detrimental effects of customer incivility towards FLEs' morale and subjective wellbeing including, emotional exhaustion (Hu, Hu, & King, 2017), increased turnover intentions (Han, Bonn, & Cho, 2016), as well as reduced service performance (Cho, Bonn, Han, & Lee, 2016).

However, as the well-established service-profit-chain model demonstrates (Heskett, Jones, Loveman, Earl Sasser, & Schlesinger, 1994; Hogreve, Iseke, Derfuss, & Eller, 2017), satisfied employees drive customer satisfaction and loyalty, and firm profitability, with recent research in tourism and hospitality confirming these relationships (e.g., Solnet, Ford, & McLennan, 2018). As such, the extensively documented deleterious effects of customer incivility on employee morale and subjective wellbeing (Koopmann et al., 2015) are likely to impede customer satisfaction, loyalty and ultimately harm firm performance.

Given the breadth and severity of the negative outcomes of customer incivility, the majority of research in management and tourism/

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hospitality literatures has focused on exploring the antecedents and boundary conditions that trigger customer incivility towards FLEs, as well as documenting the consequences of customer incivility towards FLEs (Cortina, Kabat-Farr, Magley, & Nelson, 2017; Gong, Yi, & Choi, 2014). Nevertheless, scarce evidence exists on the role of supervisors and their leadership style in helping FLEs regain the emotional and cognitive resources consumed during customer incivility episodes and restore their morale and subjective wellbeing, which are key in allowing FLEs to maintain their service performance standards (Myrden & Kelloway, 2015). With the exception of two studies that explore the buffering role of generic supervisor support on FLEs' responses to customer incivility (i.e. Han et al., 2016; Karatepe, 2011), research on other managerial actions, such as leadership style or interaction approach, that may mitigate the consequences of different forms of customer incivility on FLEs, is lacking (Cortina et al., 2017; Schilpzand, De Pater, & Erez, 2016; Zhu, Lam, & Lai, 2019).

Drawing on the premises of the job demands-resources (JD-R) (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001) and conservation of resources (COR) (Hobfoll, 1989) frameworks, we utilize an experimental methodological approach seeking to explore how two of the most common forms of customer incivility of FLEs (i.e., verbal aggression and demand for untenable service levels) affect FLEs' psychological responses and behavioral intentions (study 1). Findings add to the tourism/hospitality literature in confirming the differential effect of these two incivility forms on FLEs' role stress, rumination (i.e. psychological responses), retaliation and withdrawal intentions (i.e. behavioral intentions). In addition, this research also addresses the buffering effect of two common supervisor leadership styles (i.e. empowering and laissez-faire styles) on the aforementioned FLE outcomes during episodes of customer incivility (study 2), showcasing the value of different leadership styles in dealing with customer incivility.

The manuscript is organized as follows; first, we present the theoretical frameworks driving our conceptualization, the forms of customer incivility on which we focus, the variables of interest capturing FLEs' psychological and behavioral responses, and the two diverse supervisors' leadership styles. Next, a detailed description of the two experimental studies is presented. Finally, the implications of our findings for academics and managers in tourism/hospitality industries are discussed, followed by a presentation of the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical foundations

The current study is underpinned by two pertinent theoretical frameworks: the conservation of resources (COR) framework (Hobfoll, 1989) and the job demands-resources framework (JD-R) (Demerouti et al., 2001).

2.1.1. Job demands-resources

As a response to the numerous determinants of employee burnout and engagement, scholars have proposed the JD-R framework (Demerouti et al., 2001). JD-R argues that occupations have different sources of job stress for employees, which can be classified in two general categories (i.e. job demands and job resources) (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001). The framework also identifies a diverse set of personal and organizational factors that may act either as (job) demands or resources (Demerouti et al., 2001). In particular, JD-R acknowledges that employee burnout is caused by *job demands*, which include various “physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical and/or psychological effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and/or psychological costs” (Bakker & Demerouti, 2014, p. 501). On the contrary, employee engagement is primarily driven from *job resources*, which capture organizational, psychological and social

aspects of the job that determine one's achievement of work goals and reduce the psychological costs deriving from job demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). JD-R is instrumental in explaining the importance of interaction effects that different job demands and resources have on employee burnout and engagement. Building on this framework, we argue that customer incivility toward FLEs becomes a job demand that motivates them to seek out supportive resources available in their proximal environment (Bakker, Hakanen, Demerouti, & Xanthopoulou, 2007), whereas supervisor support, under specific circumstances, might represent a job resource for FLEs to tackle customer incivility.

2.1.2. Conservation of resources

Having identified how these two aspects of FLEs' working environment can act as job demands or resources, we draw on COR to shed light on the responses that FLEs are likely to take toward minimizing resource loss and/or recovering their lost resources caused by job demands (i.e. customer incivility). The key tenet of the COR framework is that individuals attempt to acquire, maintain and protect valued resources, such as objects (e.g., reservations system), conditions (e.g., position in the hotel hierarchy), personal characteristics (e.g., self-efficacy) and social support (e.g., supervisor support) (Hobfoll, 1989, 2011). COR suggests that a loss of valued resources results in increased stress and motivates employees towards seeking ways for replenishing lost resources (Halbesleben, Neveu, Paustian-Underdahl, & Westman, 2014; Hobfoll, Halbesleben, Neveu, & Westman, 2018). Resource loss impairs employees' morale and subjective wellbeing, as it leads to increased employee burnout (Halbesleben, 2006), job dissatisfaction, and increased turnover intentions (Grandey & Cropanzano, 1999) among others. Simultaneously, social support (from supervisors, co-workers) is one of the most commonly sought-after resources from employees seeking to replenish resources depleted in their work (Bordia, Restubog, Bordia, & Tang, 2017; Campbell, Perry, Maertz, Allen, & Griffeth, 2013) and restore their damaged morale and subjective wellbeing. Hence, COR adds explanatory power to the effects of job demands and resources on FLEs' role (van Woerkom, Bakker, & Nishii, 2016) and delineates the conditions that trigger FLEs' quest for valued resources. Combining the JD-R and COR frameworks provides a solid theoretical underpinning of how and why supervisory support can mitigate the adverse effects of customer incivility of FLEs on their psychological responses and behavioral intentions.

2.1.3. Conceptual framework

As is depicted in Fig. 1, following JD-R, customer incivility towards FLEs represents a focal job demand, positively affecting FLEs perceived role stress and rumination, as well as FLEs' intentions to retaliate misbehaving customers, and withdraw from their role (study 1). Viewing supervisor support as the focal job resource and as a means for replenishing valued resources caused by customer incivility, as COR proposes, we subsequently explore whether supervisor support results in FLEs experiencing reduced role stress and rumination as well as lowering their intentions to retaliate against customers and withdraw from their role (study 2). However, rather than merely conceptualizing supervisor support as being either present or absent, we assume that the nature of supervisor support, and ultimately its effect on FLEs' psychological responses and behavioral intentions, is reflected upon supervisors' leadership style. Next, we introduce the constructs of our conceptual framework and present the corresponding hypotheses.

2.2. Customer incivility as job demand

Customer incivility can range from low-intensity deviance with ambiguous intent to harm customers (Andersson & Pearson, 1999) to psychological and physical aggression, whereby customers have unambiguous intention to harm the FLE or the organization (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001). While research within tourism and hospitality mostly focuses on more severe forms of customer

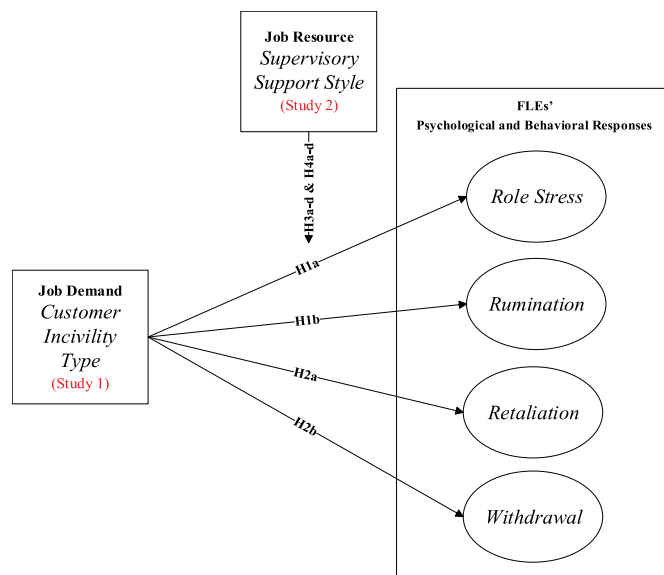


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework of the research.

incivility, including sexual harassment and physical assault (Bhati & Pearce, 2016; Ram, 2018), extensive evidence across other service industries suggests that other seemingly less severe forms of customer incivility are more prevalent but produce equally detrimental effects on FLEs (Cortina et al., 2017; Schilpzand et al., 2016).

In seeking to uncover the main causes of FLEs' stress and burnout in customer-employee interactions, Dormann and Zapf (2004) identified four main themes, two of which relate to customer incivility towards FLEs, namely customer verbal aggression and disproportionate customer demands. Confirming the prevalence of these two forms of uncivil customer behaviors towards FLEs, Koopmann et al. (2015) argue that uncivil behaviors (i.e. verbal aggression and demands for untenable service levels) associated with customers' urge to attain their consumption goals rather than to intentionally harm FLEs, are the most prevalent forms of customer incivility that threaten FLEs' morale and work well-being.

Following similar treatments of customer incivility towards employees in pertinent literature (e.g., Sliter, Jex, Wolford, & McInnerney, 2010; van Jaarsveld, Walker, & Skarlicki, 2010), we consider *verbal aggression and demands for untenable service levels* (henceforth excessive demands) as job demands, which deplete FLE resources (e.g., Goldberg & Grandey, 2007; Wang, Liao, Zhan, & Shi, 2011). These forms of customer incivility breach the norms of social interactions and place greater job demands (emotional and interpersonal) on FLEs, since service rules expect from FLEs to handle customers with professionalism, respect and courtesy (Grandey, Kern, & Frone, 2007; Sliter et al., 2010). In line with COR premises, FLEs experience a primary resource loss due to customer incivility and a secondary resource loss due to their efforts to deal with this episode, following customer service norms (Grandey, Foo, Groth, & Goodwin, 2012; Hobfoll et al., 2018).

2.3. FLEs responses to customer incivility

The FLEs' responses to customer incivility explored in the past literature can be grouped in two broad categories, namely psychological (emotional and cognitive) and behavioral ones (Cortina et al., 2017). To more accurately capture the effect of customer incivility on FLEs, we focus on both psychological and behavioral FLE responses.

2.3.1. Psychological responses

One of the most typical FLEs' emotional responses following customer incivility is *role stress* (Harris & Reynolds, 2003; Kern & Grandey,

2009). Role stress results from FLEs' need for flexibility while addressing each customer's unique needs, along with role expectations that should be met during interactions with customers (Wegge, Vogt, & Weckung, 2007). Role stress is influenced by managerial actions, including the extent to which managers clearly set priorities for employees, communicate tasks to be performed, and articulate evaluation mechanisms (Thomas & Lankau, 2009). Customer incivility acts as a role stressor to FLEs as it threatens their self-efficacy, goal success, and resources (Dormann & Zapf, 2004) and prior work affirms its impact on role stress of call-centre representatives (Wegge et al., 2007). Evidence in tourism and hospitality suggests role stress as a mediator between customers' incivility and FLEs' emotional exhaustion (Hu et al., 2017) and job satisfaction (Kim, Ro, Hutchinson, & Kwun, 2014). Similarly, a number of uncivil customer behaviours (e.g., disproportionate or ambiguous customer expectations, customer verbal aggression, customer negativity, etc.), which increase FLEs' stress and emotional exhaustion, are often investigated in the tourism and hospitality literature (e.g. Choi, Kim, Terry, Lee, & Lee, 2014).

FLEs' cognitive responses following customer incivility episodes have received comparatively less attention than their emotional counterparts. For example, customer incivility makes it harder for FLEs to recall customer-related information (Rafaeli et al., 2012) and reduces FLEs' ability for creative problem solving and their engagement in complex thought processing (Miron-Spektor, Efrat-Treister, Rafaeli, & Schwarz-Cohen, 2011). Despite the paucity of research on the cognitive consequences of customer incivility towards FLEs, pertinent work views employee *rumination* (i.e., the focused attention on the symptoms of one's distress, and on its possible causes and consequences, as opposed to its solutions - Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, & Lyubomirsky, 2008), as one of the most typical cognitive responses following customer incivility (e.g., Baranik, Wang, Gong, & Shi, 2017; Walker, van Jaarsveld, & Skarlicki, 2014; Wang et al., 2013).

FLEs may perceive customer incivility episodes as a signal of failure to fulfil their main task (i.e. serving the customer). However, unless the goal is achieved or abandoned, such episodes signal personal failure leading FLEs to "re-experience the failure and its negative emotion over time, because rumination increases negatively biased thinking and pessimism while reducing efforts toward goal completion and mood-enhancing behaviors" (Koopmann et al., 2015, p. 39). Indeed, within a call centre context, customer incivility results in driving customer reps to ruminate more the night following such episodes (Wang et al., 2013) and in more long-lasting effects on customer reps' rumination (Baranik et al., 2017).

2.3.2. Behavioral responses

Akin with psychological responses, researchers have explored, both directly and indirectly (i.e. via psychological responses), a number of FLE behavioral responses to customer incivility. For example, customer incivility blocks FLEs' key mental processes, such as memory and creative thinking, that are instrumental in their attempt to successfully handle customer demands, negatively affecting their job performance (Miron-Spektor et al., 2011; Rafaeli et al., 2012). Of the many possible FLE behavioral responses following incidents of customer incivility, two have attracted research scrutiny (Cortina et al., 2017; Schilpzand et al., 2016). First, *FLEs' retaliation behaviour* (including incivility and sabotage) towards uncivil customers can result in customer rage and negative exchange spirals (Bushman, Bonacci, Pedersen, Vasquez, & Miller, 2005; Groth & Grandey, 2012). In essence, FLEs' depleted resources from uncivil customers, lead to a failure to self-regulate (Vancouver, 2000), driving them to reciprocate such customer behaviours (Skarlicki, van Jaarsveld, & Walker, 2008).

The second behavioral response following customer incivility towards FLEs is withdrawal. Withdrawal is any purposeful behaviour through which FLEs aspire to avoid their job or reduce their psychological attraction to or interest in it (Sliter, Sliter, & Jex, 2012). Job withdrawal involves physical withdrawal from the workplace (such as

being absent or late) or intention to avoid or leave the organization. The focus of this work centres on employees' daily withdrawal from their job (Scott & Barnes, 2011; Sliter et al., 2012). Empirical evidence link customer incivility with withdrawal behaviour (Cortina et al., 2001), more frequent absenteeism (Sliter et al., 2012) and job resignation (Porath and Pearson, 2012). Complementary insights from tourism and hospitality literatures acknowledge the effects of customer incivility on FLEs' withdrawal behaviours, via emotional dissonance and exhaustion (Karatepe, Yorganci, & Haktanir, 2009) and confirm that customer incivility towards restaurant employees results in uncivil behaviours towards their co-workers (Kim & Qu, 2019).

2.4. Supervisor support as job resource

Supervisor support is defined as the extent to which immediate supervisors show an active interest in their role and value their subordinates' contribution (Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, & Rhoades, 2002; Zhu et al., 2019). Despite the various types of support that FLEs could receive from their peers or other customers, supervisor support remains one of the few firm-anticipated resources available to them (Zhu et al., 2019). Through their access to organizational resources, elevated decision-making status and managerial experience, supervisors represent a rich pool of resources where FLEs dealing with customer incivility can turn to, so to regain lost resources and restore their morale and subjective wellbeing (e.g., Casper, Harris, Taylor-Bianco, & Wayne, 2011; Crain et al., 2014).

Within tourism and hospitality, scholars advocate that supervisor support FLEs' morale and subjective wellbeing in several ways (Kara, Uysal, Sirgy, & Lee, 2013). For instance, supervisory support negatively affects FLEs' perceptions of work-family conflicts (Karatepe & Kilic, 2007), has a positive effect on FLEs' service performance through enhancing their perceptions of psychological safety (Guchait, Paçamehmetoğlu, & Dawson, 2014), and it enhances FLEs' leader-member exchange perceptions, which in turn increase FLEs' citizenship behaviors (Li, Kim, & Zhao, 2017). Nevertheless, a number of studies in the field also report mixed effects of supervisor support on FLEs' morale and subjective wellbeing. For instance, supervisory support appears to have no effect on all three components of work engagement within a sample of hotel FLEs (Karatepe, 2011; Karatepe & Kilic, 2007).

Drawing on the management literature, it appears that the effectiveness of supervisors' support largely depends on the way through which they handle their subordinates, or simply put, on their leadership style. Over time, researchers have developed a variety of leadership typologies, which comprise similarities and overlaps with regards to their conceptualization and operationalization (Anderson & Sun, 2017). One of the earliest typologies (Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939), comprises of three styles, namely *autocratic* leaders the “hands-on leaders who take charge and set clear expectations for the what, when, why, and how tasks done by followers should be completed ... take sole responsibility for making decisions without input from followers in the organization”; *democratic* leader who “promotes input on decisions, both large and small, from followers within the organization and further promotes a spirit of collaboration in the completion of goals and tasks”; and *laissez-faire* leaders who “are completely hands off when comes to how followers complete their tasks and provide significant amounts of decision making authority amongst followers” (Gandolfi & Stone, 2017, pp. 25–26).

Subsequent typologies of leadership styles (e.g. *full-range leadership theory*) appear to revolve around the same limited set of leadership behaviors giving birth to similar leadership styles (Antonakis, Avolio, & Sivasubramaniam, 2003; Antonakis & House, 2013), aspiring to capture leadership behaviors that are present across a wide range of situations/contexts (Anderson & Sun, 2017). However, such “broadband” leadership styles have led to concerns over their ability to account for situation/context-specific leadership behaviors, resulting in an explosion in research around situation/context-specific leadership styles (Anderson & Sun, 2017; Sun & Anderson, 2012).

Early research demonstrates that supervisor leadership style critically affects employee morale and subjective wellbeing with “employee-oriented” leaders to have a significantly more positive effect on employees' morale compared to a “production-oriented” leadership style (Pestonjee & Singh, 1977). Subsequent research consistently demonstrates the critical role of various supervisor leadership styles on employee morale and subjective wellbeing such as ethical leaders (Yang, 2014), transformational leaders (Vincent-Höper, Muser, & Janneck, 2012) and empowering leaders (Kim & Beehr, 2018), among others. Relatedly, Myrden and Kelloway (2015) demonstrate the crucial role of transformational leaders in enhancing the relationship among employee satisfaction, customer satisfaction and loyalty, and company profitability, in line with the premises of the service-profit chain model. However, besides positive effects, leadership styles can also have negative effects on employees' morale and subjective wellbeing (Seltzer & Numerof, 1988) such as the depletion of employees' resources (Tepper, Simon, & Park, 2017), job withdrawal (e.g., Chi & Liang, 2013), and negative role performance (Barling & Frone, 2017) among others.

In tourism and hospitality, researchers have pointed towards the instrumental role of empowering leadership style as a context-specific effective leadership behaviour in the relationship between supervisors and FLEs. For example, supervisors' empowering leadership style reduces FLEs' service sabotage behaviors through increasing FLEs' work engagement levels (Zhou, Ma, & Dong, 2018) and positively affects restaurant FLEs' psychological empowerment (Namasivayam, Guchait, & Lei, 2014). Essentially, supervisors employing an *empowering* leadership style provide their subordinates with the necessary authority and autonomy to exercise control over decisions regarding customer needs, without consulting or being guided by them (Gong et al., 2014; Kim & Beehr, 2018). During customer incivility episodes, empowering supervisors would adopt a more decentralized approach and empower FLEs to act based on their own judgement, without constant consultation with them.

Acknowledging the instrumental role empowering and laissez-faire leadership styles play in tourism and hospitality research (e.g., Elsetouhi, Hammad, Nagm, & Elbaz, 2018; Zhou et al., 2018), the current study explores the extent to which these two leadership styles moderate the effects of customer incivility on FLEs' role stress, rumination, retaliation, and withdrawal. The next two sections delineate the research hypotheses for each of the experimental studies and describe the experimental procedure, empirical analyses and results of the two studies.

3. Study 1

3.1. Hypotheses

The aim of study 1 is to compare the effects of two customer incivility forms (i.e. customer verbal aggression and excessive demands) on FLEs' psychological (role stress, rumination) and behavioral (retaliation, withdrawal) responses. Verbal aggression refers to situations where a customer raises their voice at an FLE, uses condescending language, and/or becomes irritated with an FLE (Grandey et al., 2007). Demanding customers place exorbitant demands on FLEs, that are evidently outside the FLEs' (and even the organization's) capacity to deal with them (Wang et al., 2011). Following the premises of JD-R, both forms of customer incivility represent a focal job demand for FLEs; not only do they breach social interaction norms, but also result in FLEs seeking ways to recover their lost cognitive and emotional resources, opening up a new round of resource depletion (e.g., Goldberg & Grandey, 2007; Wang et al., 2011). Despite evidence indicating the diverse effect of these two forms of customer incivility on FLEs' cognitive (vs emotional) resources and that they might be both experienced from FLEs during their shift (Wang et al., 2011), prior work has explored the effects of these two forms of customer incivility in an independent fashion (for an exception see Choi et al. (2014)).

To hypothesize the differential effects of each of the two forms of

customer incivility on FLEs, we first suggest that FLEs' responses can be grouped in two categories based on the psychological mechanism (emotional vs. cognitive) on which they ground and the immediacy at which these responses take place. More specifically, FLEs' role stress and retaliatory intentions are mainly premised on human affect. FLEs' efforts to respond to customer expectations while also becoming recipient of uncivil behaviours from the very same customers which they must serve, leads to increased levels of arousal combined with low levels of pleasure, a condition of distress (Russell, 1980). Likewise, retaliation is widely considered to be an outcome of failure in emotion self-regulation (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996), which points to the emotional basis of such employee reactions.

On the other hand, FLEs' rumination and withdrawal from job are more likely to be premised on human cognition. Rumination refers to FLEs' meta-thoughts about an uncivil customer episode, whereas given the important implications of quitting job, FLEs' withdrawal is likely to be the results of careful retrospection and assessment of alternatives. In both cases FLEs' cognitive activity is expected to be high (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008; Sliter et al., 2012).

Furthermore, emotional responses premised on human affect are more likely to be triggered by less expected, surprising stimuli, whereas stimuli that are less surprising are likely to trigger cognitive responses (Storbeck & Robinson, 2004). Compared to excessive demands, verbal aggression represents an unexpected violation of service encounter norms and interaction expectations (Zhan, Wang, & Shi, 2013). Further, verbal aggression tends to have a stronger effect on FLEs' emotional state (e.g. anger) (Lavelle, Rupp, & Brockner, 2007), due to the more intense (and negative) affective vocalizations characterizing the content of aggressive episodes (Zhan et al., 2013). Relatedly, customer verbal aggression is perceived as a status threat, inducing anger and/or perceptions of injustice that could increase FLEs' desire to reciprocate the source and punish the perpetrator (Lavelle et al., 2007), via sabotage activity or retaliatory acts (Skarlicki et al., 2008). Hence, we suggest that:

H1a. Customer verbal aggression has a stronger effect on FLEs' role stress, than do excessive customer demands.

H1b. Customer verbal aggression has a stronger effect on FLEs' intention to retaliate against customers than do excessive customer demands.

Alternatively, excessive demands are more likely to have a stronger effect on FLEs' cognitive state for two reasons. First, FLEs need to evaluate the extent to which a customer demand falls outside their role capacity and to decide whether they should meet it (or not), increasing the cognitive fatigue of such encounters. Second, excessive demands require that FLEs consume an increasing amount of resources to meet the goals of such encounters, depleting their cognitive resources faster (Wang et al., 2011; Zhan et al., 2013). Under such circumstances, this heightened accessibility of the goal failure experienced in FLEs' memory sets rumination an important cognitive outcome for FLEs. Relatedly, FLEs' coping with excessive customer demands results in them suffering resource deprivation and questioning their ability to successfully perform their role tasks. This increased role ambiguity, due to excessive customer demands, impairs their perceptions of personal well-being, which is often associated with increased withdrawal intentions (Walsh, 2011). Hence, we suggest that:

H2a. Excessive customer demands have a stronger effect on FLEs' rumination, than does customer verbal aggression.

H2b. Excessive customer demands have a stronger effect on FLEs' intentions to withdraw, than does customer verbal aggression.

3.2. Participants and procedures

Following recent recommendations from the customer incivility literature (e.g., Albrecht, Walsh, Brach, Gremler, & van Herpen, 2017; Jerger & Wirtz, 2017), we test these hypotheses using a scenario-based

experimental approach. A scenario-based approach mitigates many of the documented biases associated with retrospective self-reports, including memory lapse and rationalization tendencies, while offering a more rigorous and versatile operationalization of the study constructs (Smith, Bolton, & Wagner, 1999). Study 1 participants were full-time FLEs in five-star hotels. The frequency of interactions among hotel customers and FLEs and the likelihood for FLEs to experience customer incivility, including verbal aggression and excessive demands, increases the realism of the scenarios (Daunt & Harris, 2011).

The research team contacted all 46 five-star hotels located in Abu Dhabi (UAE), listed in Booking.com at the time the research took place, and solicited the collaboration of the hotel management. Eight out of the 46 hotels declined to take part in the study.¹ Following employees' consent guaranteeing anonymity of participation and responses, all participating hotels frequently conduct both off and online personnel surveys as part of their HR function, using third party independent research agencies. Following the same participation consent and anonymity policies, and in order to increase voluntary participation of FLEs' and reduce selection bias, an invitation to take part to this research project was sent to all FLEs of the 38 participating five-star hotels by the research team with a clear indication that this study had been approved and was supported by the respective hotel management. This process resulted in a pool of 653 eligible FLEs/respondents, 17 FLEs on average from each participating hotel. This group acted as a pool from which we randomly drew respondents for the needs of both studies. Every respondent took part in only one task across both studies.

A randomly selected sample of 30 FLEs from this pool were invited to partake in scenario development for study 1 (16 FLEs finally participated), a further randomly selected sample of 80 FLEs from the same pool were invited to pre-test the questionnaire for study 1 (59 FLEs took part). Additionally, a randomly selected sample of 179 FLEs from this pool were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions of study 1 (i.e., customer verbal aggression or customer excessive demands). Among the 179 FLEs assigned to study 1, 120 provided with responses with no missing data (response rate 67%). Approximately 41% of the subjects had 1–3 years working experience (whereas 50% of them had over 3 years of working experience), 66% of participants are females and their mean age was 31.3 years.

To better develop an understanding of the nature, type and frequency of incivility episodes experienced by FLEs within the hotel context and to make experimental scenarios as externally valid as possible, we conducted 16 in-depth interviews with FLEs from across the participating hotels (these respondents were excluded from both studies 1 and 2 and their respective pre-tests). An example of the customer verbal aggression scenario for a waiter working at the hotel restaurant (similar scenarios created for FLEs working on the hotel high-contact service offerings such as concierge, room service, restaurant, bars, spa, etc.) detailed that "(...) One of the customers you are serving yells at you for this delay saying "What sort of an effort do you call this? This is completely your own fault and you should get some more training before working here," whereas the customer excessive demands scenario stated that "(...) Once you bring the order to one of the tables, they ask you to take back their food because they claim it is not well cooked. Once you bring it back, they say that it is overcooked. You offer to bring a new dish, but once you serve it, they say that you're too late, and demand not to pay for their meal due to your inability to cater to their needs."

3.3. Pretesting

To assess the extent to which the two scenarios employed in study 1 are indeed depicting the two forms of identified customer incivility

¹ No significant observed differences exist among the participating and the non-participating hotels in terms of available services, rooms capacity, number of employees, location, and ownership (independent vs. affiliated).

Table 1
Correlations, descriptive statistics, reliability and validity of Study 1 variables.

	Mean (SD)	Cronbach's α	CR	FLE role stress	FLE rumination	FLE retaliation intentions	FLE job withdrawal intentions
FLE role stress	2.63(1.10)	0.806	0.84	(0.58)	(0.01)	(0.41)	(0.003)
FLE rumination	5.30(1.43)	0.899	0.92	.009	(0.65)	(0.08)	(0.62)
FLE retaliation intentions	2.62 (1.69)	0.876	0.88	.648**	.096	(0.60)	(0.01)
FLE job withdrawal intentions	5.20(1.71)	0.925	0.92	.057	.799**	.117	(0.80)

FLE = Frontline Employees; CR = Composite Reliability; AVE = Average Variance Extracted on the diagonal; Squared correlations above diagonal; ** denotes significance at the 1% level.

(i.e., verbal aggression and excessive demands), a pre-test took place, whereby after reading each scenario, 59 FLEs from the participating hotels (whom were excluded from both studies 1 and 2 as well as the scenarios development procedures), rated the statements “*To what extent do you think that this incident was ...*” on a scale from 1: “*a non-aggressive (non-demanding) customer behaviour*,” to 7: “*an aggressive (demanding) customer behaviour*”. Specific definitions of aggressive and demanding behaviour were presented to participants in line with pertinent literature (i.e. Zhan et al., 2013). Results indicate that both the customer verbal aggression [$M_{\text{aggr}}(\text{SD}) = 5.97(1.01)$, $t = 45.08$, $p < .001$] and the customer excessive demands manipulations [$M_{\text{dem}}(\text{SD}) = 6.05(0.93)$, $t = 49.63$, $p < .001$] are considered as such by respondents. Moreover, the same sample of FLEs examined the realism of the two scenarios by rating the statement “*To what extent do you think that this scenario is realistic?*” on a scale from 1: “*no realistic at all*” to 7: “*extremely realistic*”. Results indicate that both the customer verbal aggression [$M_{\text{aggr}}(\text{SD}) = 5.76(1.22)$, $t = 36.20$, $p < .001$] and the customer excessive demands scenarios [$M_{\text{dem}}(\text{SD}) = 5.63(1.53)$, $t = 28.24$, $p < .001$] were considered strongly realistic.

3.4. Measures and construct validity

To capture psychological and behavioral responses of FLEs resulting from the two forms of customer incivility (i.e., customer verbal aggression and excessive demands), we used the most commonly employed measurement scales within the incivility literature (Cortina et al., 2017; Schilpzand et al., 2016). FLEs' perceived role stress was measured using four items from Motowidlo, Packard, and Manning (1986), whereas FLEs' perceived rumination was captured with six items from McCullough, Bono, and Root (2007). FLEs' retaliation intentions were measured with the five items developed by Harris (2013), and withdrawal intentions were measured with three items from Scott and Barnes (2011). All measurement scales appear in the appendix at the end of the paper. Table 1 contains correlations among study constructs (below diagonal), as well as means and standard deviations, variances, reliability (Cronbach's α , Composite Reliability-CR) and validity (Average Variance Extracted-AVE on the diagonal, squared correlations above the diagonal).

Using confirmatory factor analysis all four constructs used in study 1 displayed good construct validity, as indicated from the CFA indices for role stress ($\chi^2 = 35.55$; Df = 2; CFI = 0.989; GFI = 0.988; IFI = 0.987; RMSEA: 0.036), rumination ($\chi^2 = 43.51$; Df = 9; CFI = 0.980; GFI = 0.954; IFI = 0.980; RMSEA = 0.018), and retaliation intentions ($\chi^2 = 5.58$; Df = 5; CFI = 0.998; GFI = 0.981; IFI = 0.998; RMSEA = 0.031). The study 1 measurement model indices (including all construct items) indicate an acceptable model fit ($\chi^2 = 451.98$; Df = 129; $p < .001$; CFI = 0.957; TLI = 0.935; IFI = 0.958; RMSEA: 0.078).

² As a reference, the main effect of the form of customer incivility on FLEs' retaliation intentions is not significant [$M_{\text{aggr}}(\text{SD}) = 4.77(1.03)$, $M_{\text{demand}}(\text{SD}) = 4.97(1.28)$; $F = 0.07$, $p > .05$].

3.5. Analyses and results

Study 1 adopts a single factor design, with customer incivility towards FLEs (excessive customer demands vs. verbal aggression) as the independent variable, and FLEs' perceptions of role stress, rumination, retaliation, and withdrawal intentions as the dependent variables. Moreover, to test the robustness the hypothesized effects, we control for two relevant variables. More particularly, it is plausible that FLEs who are often confronted with customer incivility in their work might have developed psychological coping mechanisms, eventually reducing and even turning insignificant the effects of customer incivility on the role stress, rumination, retaliation and withdrawal intentions of the more experienced FLEs (Grandey et al., 2007; Koopmann et al., 2015). To capture FLEs' prior exposure to customer incivility in their current post, we asked FLEs “*How often have you faced similar incidents in your daily work?*” To capture the extent to which FLEs have developed the ability to cope with customer incivility in a manner that does not produce further distress, we followed Epstein's (1994) recommendation and asked participants to rate themselves according to the following statement: “*I always take things personally at work*.” We use analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) to test for the effects of our focal variable (form of customer incivility) and the two FLEs' incivility experience-related covariates on each of the four FLEs' responses.

Results reveal a significant effect of customer incivility forms on role stress [$M_{\text{aggr}}(\text{SD}) = 2.98(1.14)$, $M_{\text{demand}}(\text{SD}) = 2.25(0.97)$; $F = 11.75$, $p < .001$], with customer verbal aggression having a significantly stronger effect on role stress, compared to excessive customer demands, fully confirming H1a. Of the two covariates prior exposure to customer incivility has a significant effect on role stress ($F = 46.76$, $p < .000$), but ability to cope with customer incivility has a non-significant effect on role stress ($F = 2.07$, $p > .05$). Results also indicate a significant main effect of customer incivility forms on FLEs' retaliation intentions [$M_{\text{aggr}}(\text{SD}) = 3.18(1.99)$; $M_{\text{demand}}(\text{SD}) = 2.05(1.07)$, $F = 10.25$, $p < .001$], with customer verbal aggression having a significantly stronger effect on retaliation intentions compared to excessive customer demands, fully confirming H1b. Of the two covariates prior exposure to customer incivility has a significant effect on retaliation intentions ($F = 129.49$, $p < .000$), but ability to cope with customer incivility has a non-significant effect on retaliation intentions ($F = 0.01$, $p > .05$).

Furthermore, study 1 results reveal a significant main effect of customer incivility forms on rumination [$M_{\text{aggr}}(\text{SD}) = 2.05(0.89)$; $M_{\text{demand}}(\text{SD}) = 2.70(1.27)$, $F = 3.12$, $p < .05$], with excessive customer demands having a significantly stronger effect on rumination compared to customer verbal aggression, fully confirming H2a. Of the two covariates prior exposure to customer incivility has a significant effect on rumination ($F = 60.88$, $p < .000$), but ability to cope with customer incivility has a non-significant effect on rumination ($F = 1.79$, $p > .05$). Finally, results reveal a significant main effect of customer incivility forms on FLEs' withdrawal intentions [$M_{\text{aggr}}(\text{SD}) = 4.59(2.05)$; $M_{\text{demand}}(\text{SD}) = 5.88(0.92)$; $F = 32.75$, $p < .000$], with excessive customer demands having a significantly stronger effect on withdrawal intentions compared to customer verbal aggression, fully confirming H2b. Of the two covariates prior exposure to customer incivility has a significant effect on withdrawal intentions ($F = 71.39$, $p < .000$), but ability to cope with customer incivility has a non-

Table 2
Summary of results from Study 1.

		Role stress		Rumination		Retaliation intentions		Withdrawal intentions	
Form of customer incivility	aggressive	2.98 (1.14)	F = 11.75**	2.05 (0.89)	F = 3.12*	3.18 (1.99)	F = 10.25**	4.59 (2.05)	F = 32.75**
	demanding	2.25 (0.97)		2.70 (1.27)		2.05 (1.07)		5.88 (0.92)	
Prior exposure to customer incivility		F = 46.76**		F = 60.88**		F = 129.49**		F = 71.39**	
Ability to cope with customer incivility		F = 2.07		F = 1.79		F = 0.01		F = 0.79	
Levene's test of equality of error variances		F = 0.166		F = 0.738		F = 2.05		F = 0.03	

Note: Values in italics represent mean and values in parentheses denote standard deviations. *, and ** denote significance at the 5%, and 1% level, respectively.

significant effect on withdrawal intentions ($F = 0.79$, $p > .05$). As a finale note Levene's test for equality of error variances is non-significant for all four FLEs' responses, suggesting that the variance across the two groups is equal. Table 2 summarizes results from Study 1.

Overall, study 1 results confirm that FLEs' psychological and behavioral responses to customers' display of verbal aggression and excessive demands vary significantly. Whereas customer verbal aggression is associated with higher FLE role stress and retaliation intentions, the display of excessive demands from the customers' side is associated with higher FLE rumination and stronger withdrawal intentions than verbal aggression. These results confirm prior findings on the impact of customer uncivil behaviours on FLEs, (e.g., Jerger & Wirtz, 2017; Wang et al., 2011), but extend current knowledge in demonstrating that the effects of different uncivil behaviours have a differential effect on FLEs' responses in a systematic and predictable way. Results suggest a diverse depletion of resources for FLEs (emotional vs cognitive), for which different treatments might be required. Nevertheless, these differential effects can be buffered from a variety of contextual factors during customer incivility episodes, prominent among which is supervisor leadership style. To explore this issue, we conducted study 2.

4. Study 2

4.1. Hypotheses

Study 2 examines the moderating role of supervisor leadership style on the effect of the two forms of customer incivility on FLEs' psychological and behavioral outcomes. This focus is warranted on two grounds; first, scarce and conflicting evidence exists concerning whether supervisor support remains effective in helping FLEs recover from customer incivility within tourism and hospitality contexts (Zhu et al., 2019). More specifically, within a hotel context, supervisor support did not moderate the relationship between customer incivility, and FLEs' psychological and behavioral responses (Karatepe, 2011). Countering this, within a full-service restaurant context, Han et al. (2016) found that supervisor support significantly moderates the effect of customer incivility on FLEs' psychological responses.

Second, the broader management literature documents that supervisor intervention on FLEs' role can be both destructive and constructive (Crawford, LePine, & Rich, 2010; Tepper et al., 2017) and that this largely relates to the supervisor leadership style adopted (Skogstad, Einarsen, Torsheim, Aasland, & Hetland, 2007). Despite that supervisors constitute the only proximal resource that can be enacted to help FLEs cope with customers incivility and its disruptive consequences (Gong et al., 2014), to this point no study has explored whether different supervisor leadership styles moderate the relationship between customer incivility and FLEs' psychological responses and behavioral intentions (Baranik et al., 2017; Walker et al., 2014). Drawing on COR premises, extensive research demonstrates that customer incivility results in the significant loss of psychological (emotional and cognitive) resources due to FLEs' efforts to handle the experienced negative affectivity caused by customer incivility via emotional regulation (Grandey, Dickter, & Sin, 2004). Study 1 findings reveal that customer verbal aggression has a stronger depleting effect on FLEs' emotional resources, whereas excessive customer demands have a stronger

depleting effect on FLEs' cognitive resources (Zhan et al., 2013). In other words, the two forms of customer incivility have a significant adverse effect on both FLEs' psychological (i.e., role stress and rumination) and behavioral (i.e., retaliation and withdrawal intentions) outcomes, albeit, to differing extents.

According to COR, following resource depletion, FLEs will try to minimize the experienced resource loss and attempt to replenish lost resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018). In this case, supervisor support can be enacted as a resource protection/replenishment mechanism (Guchait et al., 2014; Karatepe, 2011; Karatepe & Kilic, 2007; Li, Kim, Zhao, & Roy, 2017). As supervisor support remains contingent upon their leadership style, the latter could support FLEs in recovering some of the resource depletion they suffered; it could also reduce the amount of personal resources needed to invest themselves so that they deal with such disruptive episodes (Gong et al., 2014). Indeed, research on leadership suggests that various leadership styles result in significant variation in how subordinates experience managerial actions such as selection, support, rewards, etc., (Bass & Bass, 2008).

Among the many attributes extant research associates with leadership styles (Anderson & Sun, 2017), two of them are particularly relevant during customer incivility episodes. The first one concerns the extent to which supervisors provide their FLEs with guidance regarding their customer service role (i.e., description of the tasks excellent customer service consists of, and articulation of how to perform such tasks successfully) (Martin, Liao, & Campbell, 2013). The second one concerns the extent to which supervisors provide FLEs with the autonomy to perform their customer service roles (Pieterse, van Knippenberg, Schippers, & Stam, 2009). The two leadership styles of interest, vary significantly across these two leadership attributes. More specifically, empowering leaders are characterized by high guidance and high autonomy, whereas laissez-faire leaders by low guidance and high autonomy (Avolio & Bass, 2004; Bass & Bass, 2008).

Empowering supervisors provide FLEs with extensive autonomy at handling customers, without being inattentive of their interactions with customers. Rather, empowering supervisors show confidence in the ability of FLEs to handle customers and in their judgment, especially when consultation is needed for dealing with difficult customers (Spreitzer, De Janasz, & Quinn, 1999). The trust that empowering supervisors instil in FLEs and the opportunity for FLEs to consult them during customer incivility episodes, makes empowering supervisors a repository of resources that FLEs can utilize for replenishing consumed resources and reduce the adverse effects of customer verbal aggression (Hobfoll, 1989; Zhu et al., 2019).

Despite the relatively high amount of autonomy, empowering and laissez-faire supervisors provide FLEs with, the reasons behind it differ markedly. In the case of empowering supervisors, autonomy is the product of their trust on FLEs' ability to handle such episodes; For laissez-faire supervisors, FLEs' autonomy stems by their reduced interest and their intention to minimize involvement in FLEs' interactions with customers, increasing FLEs' exposure to problem customers (Bass & Bass, 2008; Skogstad, Hetland, Glasø, & Einarsen, 2014). In this respect, it is likely that laissez-faire supervisors will neither intervene in episodes of customer verbal aggression nor be prone to consult FLEs, resulting in FLEs feeling more threatened when working without immediate access to supervisor support (Zhu et al., 2019). This would

result in FLEs experiencing more intense resource loss and disruptive psychological and behavioral outcomes (Hobfoll, 2011; Hobfoll et al., 2018).

In short, empowering supervisors, regardless of their intention to intervene in episodes of customer aggression, actively display trust to FLEs with regards to their ability to handle such episodes. Moreover, they act as a psychological shield for FLEs, reducing resource loss and the adverse effects on their psychological responses and behavioral intentions caused by customer verbal aggression (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll et al., 2018). Contrary, laissez-faire supervisors are characterized by a lack of attention to FLEs' interactions with customers and are less likely to intervene for supporting FLEs or/and being available for consulting FLEs. Therefore, they are expected to increase FLEs' resource loss and the adverse effects on their psychological responses and behavioral intentions caused by customer verbal aggression (Hobfoll, 1989, 2011; Hobfoll et al., 2018). Put formally:

H3. Customer verbal aggression has a significantly higher effect on FLEs' (a) role stress, (b) rumination, (c) retaliation intentions, and (d) withdrawal intentions under a laissez-faire supervisor compared to an empowering supervisor.

In the case of excessive customer demands, FLEs judge such demands against organization-provided guidelines with regards to the minimum standards of customer service they should provide customers (Hartline & Ferrell, 1996). If such information has been clearly articulated to FLEs, it is likely that the perceived loss of resources and the subsequent adverse effects on their psychological and behavioral outcomes caused by excessive customer demands might be reduced (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 1989, 2011).

Motivated by their inclination towards supporting FLEs to successfully handle customer needs and requests (Conger & Kanungo, 1988), empowering supervisors provide FLEs with detailed description and guidance on how to perform their customer service tasks, limiting the range of available options FLEs could make when dealing with difficult customers. While unlikely to intervene by themselves for regulating customers persistently demanding service levels above those FLEs are expected to provide, empowering supervisors are available to do so in case FLEs seek their intervention (Lauzun, Morganson, Major, & Green, 2010). Hence, clear guidelines on customer service levels provided by empowering supervisor and their readiness to intervene upon FLEs' request, are likely to reduce FLEs' resource loss and the subsequent adverse effects on their psychological responses and behavioral intentions caused by excessive customer demands (Hobfoll, 1989, 2011; Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Laissez-faire supervisors remain less prone to provide FLEs with clear guidance on how to perform their role tasks (by themselves or following FLEs' request), especially when dealing with customers with unreasonable demands (Bass & Bass, 2008; Skogstad et al., 2014). However, such a lack of clear guidance on the range of acceptable customer service responses that FLEs have, coupled with the low likelihood of intervention by laissez-faire supervisors, increase FLEs' uncertainty on how to handle excessive customer demands. This results in an increase in FLEs' perceived resource loss and drives negative psychological responses and behavioral intentions (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 2011).

In all, empowering supervisors are more likely than laissez-faire supervisors to provide FLEs with detailed guidance on how to meet their role expectations, while they remain more willing to intervene (arbitrarily or following FLEs' request) for regulating customers persistently demanding service levels above those FLEs are expected to provide. As a result, it is anticipated that empowering supervisors will reduce FLEs' resource loss and the subsequent adverse effects on their psychological responses and behavioral intentions caused by excessive customer demands, compared to laissez-faire supervisors (Hobfoll, 1989, 2011; Hobfoll et al., 2018). Put formally:

H4. Excessive customer demands have a significantly higher effect on

FLEs' (a) role stress, (b) rumination, (c) retaliation intentions, and (d) withdrawal intentions under a laissez-faire supervisor compared to an empowering supervisor.

4.2. Participants and procedures

Study 2 adopts a scenario-based experimental approach and utilizes a 2 (customer incivility: verbal aggression/excessive demands) x 2 (supervisor leadership style: empowering/laissez-faire) between-subjects design. The 364 randomly selected employees that were not used in study 1 comprised the pool of FLEs/respondents for Study 2. One hundred and sixty-five randomly selected FLEs from this sample were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. Among them 122 FLEs completed the survey with no missing data (response rate of 74%). Approximately 38.5% of the respondents had 1–3 years working experience, whereas 49.5% reported over 3 years of working experience. Almost half of the sample were females, and their mean age was 32.03 years.

Study 2 participants were administered the exactly same two scenarios used in study 1 for customer incivility, one of the two experimental factors in study 2. To capture supervisor leadership styles, we draw on the 16 in-depth interviews with FLEs used for study 1 (these 16 respondents were also excluded from study 2). This process yielded two supervisor responses to FLEs, each one representing a different supervisor leadership style (i.e., “your supervisor is authorizing you to handle this issue using your own discretion and act as you think is right in this case” -empowering supervisor; “your supervisor is asking you to do whatever you think is right and handle this incident on your own, as it is your responsibility to deal with customers' problems” -laissez-faire supervisor).

4.3. Pretesting

To check the extent to which the two supervisor leadership styles scenarios employed in study 2 correspond to definitions of the two leadership styles (i.e., empowering and laissez-faire) provided by the research team, a pre-test took place with the 129 FLEs from the participating hotels who did not take part in any other part of study 1 or 2. Specific definitions of the empowering and laissez-faire styles were presented to participants in line with pertinent literature (Bass & Bass, 2008; Skogstad et al., 2014). Results based on 107 FLEs (response rate 82%) indicate that respondents rated the responses for each supervisor style on a single question (1: Strongly Disagree – 7: Strongly Agree); responses coming from an empowering supervisor as corresponding to the definition of empowering leadership style [$M_{\text{empower}}(\text{SD}) = 5.42(1.05)$; $t = 53.12$, $p < .001$], and a laissez-faire supervisor as corresponding to the definition of laissez-faire leadership style [$M_{\text{laissez-faire}}(\text{SD}) = 5.36(1.21)$; $t = 45.58$, $p < .001$]. Moreover, these same 107 FLEs indicated the realism of the two supervisor responses by rating the statement “To what extent do you think that this supervisor response is realistic?” on a scale from 1: “no realistic at all” to 7: “extremely realistic”. Results indicate that responses were considered highly realistic for both the empowering style [$M_{\text{empower}}(\text{SD}) = 5.31(1.61)$; $t = 33.79$, $p < .001$], and the laissez-faire style [$M_{\text{laissez-faire}}(\text{SD}) = 5.07(1.97)$ $t = 26.64$, $p < .001$].

4.4. Measures and construct validity

To capture psychological and behavioral responses of FLEs the same measurement scales employed in study 1 were used. All measurement scales appear in the appendix at the end of the paper. Table 3 contains correlations among study constructs (below diagonal), as well as means, variances, reliability (Cronbach's α , Composite Reliability-CR) and validity (Average Variance Extracted-AVE on the diagonal, squared correlations above diagonal).

Using confirmatory factor analysis all four constructs used in study

Table 3
Correlations, descriptive statistics, reliability and validity of Study 2 variables.

	Mean (SD)	Cronbach's α	CR	FLE role stress	FLE rumination	FLE retaliation	FLE job withdrawal
FLE stress	2.61(1.04)	0.861	0.86	(0.60)	(0.41)	(0.08)	(0.36)
FLE rumination	2.53(1.08)	0.900	0.90	.648**	(0.62)	(0.10)	(0.61)
FLE retaliation	4.81(1.36)	0.930	0.93	-.286**	-.318**	(0.73)	(0.06)
FLE job withdrawal	2.95(1.18)	0.894	0.89	.607**	.783**	-.247**	(0.73)

Note: FLE = Frontline Employees; CR = Composite Reliability; AVE = Average Variance Extracted on the diagonal; Squared correlations above diagonal; ** denotes significance at the 1% level.

1 displayed good construct validity, as indicated from the following CFA indices; for role stress ($\chi^2 = 10.35$; Df = 2; CFI = 0.974; GFI = 0.971; IFI = 0.975; RMSEA = 0.052); for rumination ($\chi^2 = 21.61$; Df = 9; CFI = 0.979; GFI = 0.961; IFI = 0.979; RMSEA = 0.076) and for retaliation intentions ($\chi^2 = 17.26$; Df = 5; CFI = 0.983; GFI = 0.962; IFI = 0.984; RMSEA = 0.046). The measurement model (with all construct items) indices in study 2 indicate a good model fit ($\chi^2 = 206.319$; Df = 129; $p < .001$; CFI = 0.980; TLI = 0.975; GFI = 0.916; IFI = 0.980; RMSEA = 0.045).

4.5. Analyses and results

Study 2 adopts a 2×2 factorial design and the variables manipulated are the two most frequent forms of customer incivility towards FLEs (customer verbal aggression and excessive customer demands) and two supervisor leadership styles (i.e. empowering and laissez-faire). Similarly to Study 1, we test the robustness of the hypothesized effects by controlling for FLEs' prior exposure to customer incivility and ability to cope with customer incivility, and we use analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) to test for the effects of our two focal variables (i.e., form of customer incivility and supervisor leadership style), their interaction effect, and the two FLEs' incivility experience-related covariates on each of the four FLEs' responses.

With regards to the moderating effect of supervisor leadership style on the effects of both forms of customer incivility on FLEs' role stress, ANCOVA results confirm our expectations. More specifically, the main effect of supervisor leadership style on FLEs' role stress is significant ($F = 8.29$, $p < .005$), with FLEs' role stress being significantly lower under an empowering supervisor [$M_{\text{empower}}(\text{SD}) = 2.43(1.03)$] compared to a laissez-faire supervisor [$M_{\text{laissez}}(\text{SD}) = 2.94(0.92)$], across both forms of customer incivility (see Fig. 2). These results fully support H3a and H4a. As expected, neither the main effect of the form of customer incivility [$M_{\text{aggr}}(\text{SD}) = 2.76(0.87)$, $M_{\text{demand}}(\text{SD}) = 2.60(1.13)$; $F = 0.73$, $p > .05$], nor its interaction with supervisor leadership style ($F = 0.03$, $p > .05$) have a significant effect on FLEs' role stress, providing with additional support H3a and H4a. Of the two covariates prior exposure to customer incivility has a significant effect on role

stress ($F = 7.85$, $p < .01$) but ability to cope with customer incivility has a non-significant effect on role stress ($F = 0.16$, $p > .05$).

Moreover, regarding the moderating effect of supervisor leadership style on the effects of both forms of customer incivility on FLEs' rumination, ANCOVA results also confirm our expectation. More specifically, the main effect of supervisor leadership style on FLEs' rumination is significant ($F = 9.58$, $p < .005$), with FLEs' rumination being significantly lower under an empowering supervisor [$M_{\text{empower}}(\text{SD}) = 2.49(1.09)$] compared to a laissez-faire supervisor [$M_{\text{laissez}}(\text{SD}) = 3.04(0.93)$], across both forms of customer incivility (see Fig. 3). These results fully support H3b and H4b. While the main effect of the form of customer incivility on FLEs' rumination is significant [$M_{\text{aggr}}(\text{SD}) = 2.56(1.01)$, $M_{\text{demand}}(\text{SD}) = 2.96(1.06)$; $F = 6.13$, $p < .05$], its interaction with supervisor leadership style has no significant effect ($F = 0.15$, $p > .05$) on FLEs' rumination, providing with additional support H3b and H4b. Of the two covariates prior exposure to customer incivility has a significant effect on rumination ($F = 4.84$, $p < .05$), but ability to cope with customer incivility has a non-significant effect on rumination ($F = 0.80$, $p > .05$).

In addition, regarding the moderating effect of supervisor leadership style on the effects of both forms of customer incivility on FLEs' retaliation intentions, ANCOVA partially confirms our expectation. More specifically, the main effect of supervisor leadership style on FLEs' retaliation intentions is significant ($F = 6.82$, $p < .01$), with FLEs' retaliation intentions being significantly lower under an empowering supervisor [$M_{\text{empower}}(\text{SD}) = 4.59(1.28)$] compared to a laissez-faire supervisor [$M_{\text{laissez}}(\text{SD}) = 5.17(0.95)$]. However, this effect does not hold across both forms of customer incivility as the significant interaction between supervisor leadership style and form of customer incivility suggests ($F = 7.55$, $p < .01$)². To further explore the moderating effect of each of the two supervisor leadership styles on the effect of each of the two forms of customer incivility on FLEs' retaliation intentions, we run simple effects analysis. Results suggest that while empowering supervisors are more effective than laissez-faire supervisors at reducing FLEs' retaliation intentions in situations of excessive customer demands [$M_{\text{empower}}(\text{SE}) = 4.46(0.20)$; $M_{\text{laissez}}(\text{SE}) = 5.49(0.20)$; $F = 5.04$, $p < .05$], the two types of leadership are equally effective at reducing FLEs' retaliation intentions in situations of customer verbal aggression

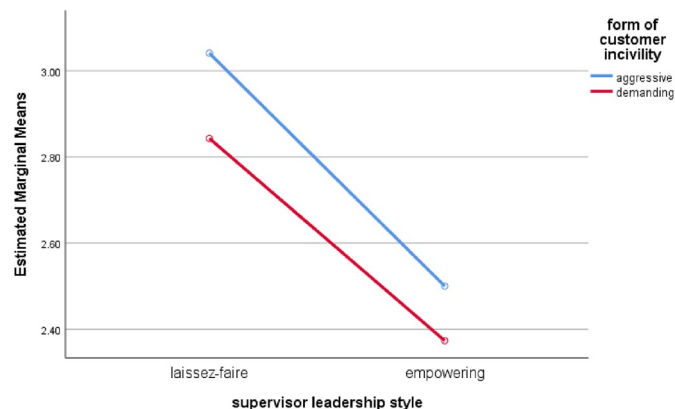


Fig. 2. Estimated marginal means of role stress.

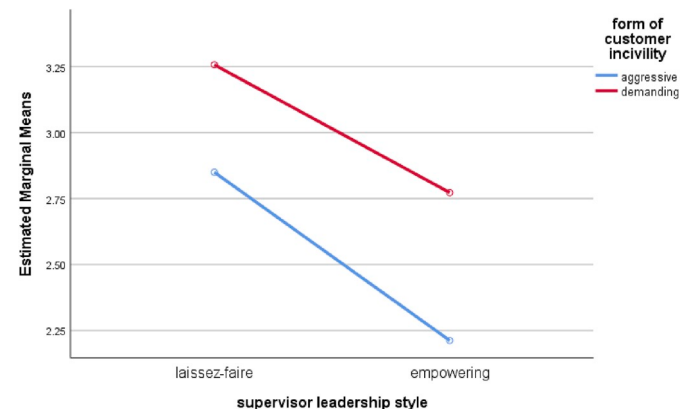


Fig. 3. Estimated marginal means of rumination.

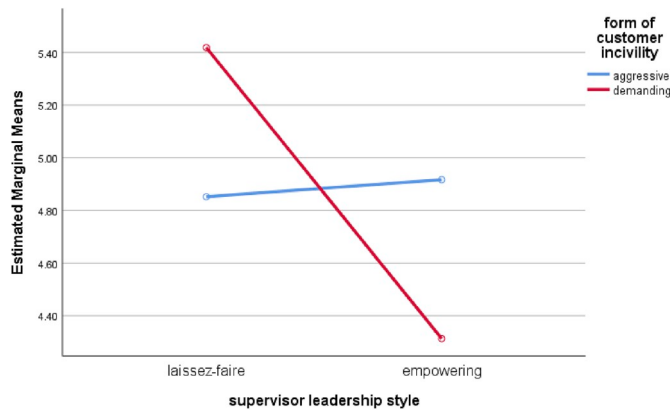


Fig. 4. Estimated marginal means of retaliation intentions.

[$M_{\text{empower}}(\text{SE}) = 4.71(0.19)$; $M_{\text{laissez}}(\text{SE}) = 4.84(0.20)$; $F = 0.79$, $p > .05$] (see Fig. 4). These results fail to provide support for H3c but fully support H4c. Of the two covariates ability to cope with customer incivility has a significant effect on retaliation intentions ($F = 7.10$, $p < .01$), but prior exposure to customer incivility has a non-significant effect on retaliation intentions ($F = 0.53$, $p > .05$).

Finally, regarding the moderating effect of supervisor leadership style on the effects of both forms of customer incivility on FLEs' withdrawal intentions, ANCOVA results also confirm our expectation. More specifically, the main effect of supervisor leadership style on FLEs' withdrawal intentions is significant ($F = 17.25$, $p < .000$), with FLEs' withdrawal intentions being significantly lower under an empowering supervisor [$M_{\text{empower}}(\text{SD}) = 2.80(1.20)$] compared to a laissez-faire supervisor [$M_{\text{laissez}}(\text{SD}) = 3.58(0.92)$], across both forms of customer incivility (see Fig. 5). These results fully support H3d and H4d. While, the main effect of the form of customer incivility on FLEs' withdrawal intentions is significant [$M_{\text{aggr}}(\text{SD}) = 2.87(1.08)$, $M_{\text{demand}}(\text{SD}) = 3.51(1.11)$; $F = 11.97$, $p < .005$], its interaction with supervisor leadership style has no significant effect ($F = 0.60$, $p > .05$) on FLEs' withdrawal intentions, providing with additional support H3d and H4d. Of the two covariates prior exposure to customer incivility has a significant effect on withdrawal intentions ($F = 5.18$, $p < .05$), but ability to cope with customer incivility has a non-significant effect on withdrawal intentions ($F = 0.36$, $p > .05$).

Levene's test for equality of error variances is non-significant for all four FLEs' responses, suggesting that the variance across all groups is equal. Table 4 summarizes results from Study 2. Overall, study 2 results suggest a degree of variation with regards to the role of the two leadership styles on the effects of customer aggression and customer excessive demands on FLEs' psychological responses and behavioral intentions. Study 1 findings reveal that customer verbal aggression is

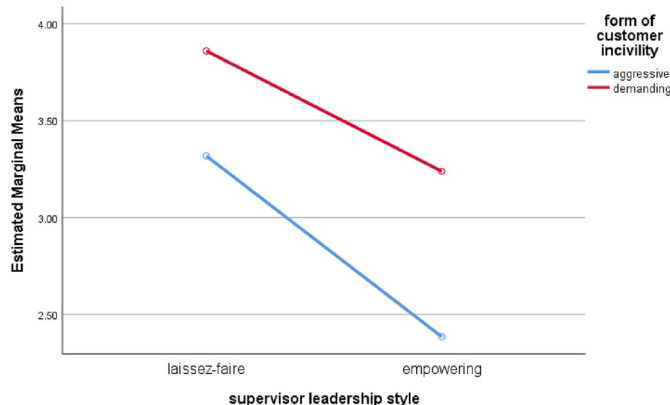


Fig. 5. Estimated Marginal Means of Withdrawal intentions.

associated with higher FLE retaliation intentions and role stress whereas the display of excessive customer demands is associated with higher FLE rumination and withdrawal intentions than verbal aggression. Building on these insights, study 2 results confirm our expectations that the supervisor's leadership style is not equally instrumental in each form of customer incivility.

To detail, FLEs' role stress remains significantly lower under an empowering leadership style compared to a laissez-faire one, for both forms of customer incivility. Similarly, FLEs' rumination remains lower under an empowering leadership style compared to a laissez-faire one, for both forms of customer incivility. FLEs' retaliation intentions remain lower in empowering leadership, compared to laissez-faire one, but for excessive customer demands only. Last, FLEs' withdrawal intentions remain lower under an empowering leadership style compared to a laissez-faire one, across both forms of customer incivility.

From a customer incivility perspective, study 2 results suggest that supervisor leadership style (empowering vs. laissez-faire) can significantly mitigate the depleting effects of excessive customer demands on both FLEs' psychological responses and behavioral intentions. However, in episodes of customer verbal aggression supervisor leadership style (empowering vs. laissez-faire) can claim a mitigating effect on the negative effect of such episodes on FLEs' behavioral intentions (i.e., retaliation and withdrawal) but not on FLEs' psychological responses.

5. Implications for tourism management

National surveys and academic research eloquently demonstrates the deleterious effects of customer incivility on employee morale and subjective wellbeing as evidenced by FLEs' increased levels of job stress and psychological distress (e.g., Cortina et al., 2001; Lim & Cortina, 2005) an increased occurrence of negative emotions Wegge et al., 2007, lower job satisfaction (e.g., Penney & Spector, 2005), lower afterwork psychological detachment and next-morning recovery (e.g., Nicholson & Griffin, 2015), higher work-to-family conflict (e.g., Lim & Lee, 2011), incivility perpetration (e.g., van Jaarsveld et al., 2010), and higher turnover intentions (e.g., Wilson & Holmval, 2013) among others. However, within high contact service contexts, such as tourism and hospitality, FLE morale and subjective wellbeing critically affect customer satisfaction and loyalty and the profitability of the firm (Heskett et al., 1994).

Driven by these observations this work aspires to examine first, the effects of customer-perpetrated verbal aggression and excessive demands on FLEs' psychological and behavioral responses and second, assess the moderating role of supervisory leadership style on these effects. Distinct from previous research in tourism and hospitality literatures, which typically centre on the most severe forms of customer incivility, the current study contributes to this field via the application of an alternative foci. That is, the current study differentiates between two of the most pertinent forms of customer incivility and investigates how these forms individually impact FLEs' psychological and behavioral responses. The study findings contribute to our understanding of the impact of customer incivility because they reveal that different forms impact FLEs' psychological and behavioral wellbeing to different degrees. Thus, our results indicate that theoretically and practically not all forms of customer incivility are equal with regards to their impact on FLEs.

The current study is also the first to discern between the roles that different styles of leadership support play in buffering episodes of customer incivility for FLEs. Building on the nuanced findings of study 1 and on extant literature which considers the critical role that supervisor leadership style has on employee morale and subjective wellbeing (Pestonjee & Singh, 1977; Seltzer & Numerof, 1988), study 2 findings show that support per se does not necessarily have a positive impact on employees' psychological and behavioral responses to negative episodes. Rather, the style of support is important to determine the

Table 4
Summary of results from Study 2.

		Role stress		Rumination		Retaliation intentions		Withdrawal intentions	
Supervisor leadership style	empowering	2.43 (1.03)	F = 8.29*	2.49 (1.09)	F = 9.58*	4.59 (1.28)	F = 6.82**	2.80 (1.20)	F = 11.97**
	demanding	2.94 (0.92)		3.04 (0.93)		5.17 (0.95)		3.58 (0.92)	
Form of customer incivility	aggressive	2.76 (0.87)	F = 0.73	2.56 (1.01)	F = 6.13*	4.77 (1.03)	F = 0.07	2.87 (1.08)	F = 11.97**
	demanding	2.60 (1.13)		2.96 (1.06)		4.97 (1.28)		3.51 (1.11)	
Supervisor leadership style x Form of customer incivility		F = 0.03		F = 0.15		F = 7.55**		F = 0.60	
Prior exposure to customer incivility		F = 7.85**		F = 4.84*		F = 0.53		F = 5.18*	
Ability to cope with customer incivility		F = 2.07		F = 0.80		F = 7.10**		F = 0.36	
Levene's test of equality of error variances		F = 1.41		F = 1.06		F = 1.13		F = 1.02	

Note: Values in italics represent mean and values in parentheses denote standard deviations. *, and ** denote significance at the 5%, and 1% level, respectively.

outcome for the targeted FLE. Taken together results from both studies shed light on the mixed findings in recent studies that have sought to assess the consequences of different forms of customer incivility on the one hand, and the role of supervisor support across a number of FLEs' responses, on the other (Guchait et al., 2014; Karatepe, 2011; Karatepe & Kilic, 2007; Li et al., 2017). More specifically, by exploring the effects of more than one customer incivility forms (i.e., customer verbal aggression and excessive customer demands), on both FLEs' psychological responses and behavioral intentions, under two distinctive supervisor leadership styles (i.e., empowering and laissez-faire), our research can confidently suggest that the effects of customer incivility across FLEs' psychological responses and behavioral intentions differ in predictable ways (study 1 and study 2), and the nature of supervisor support is contingent upon the supervisor leadership style (study 2).

The current study also makes an important theoretical contribution to our understanding of the dynamics between customer incivility and FLE outcomes via the simultaneous application of COR and JD-R frameworks (Demerouti et al., 2001; Hobfoll, 1989). The fusion of these two complimentary frameworks offers new insights into the roles of job demands and job resources for FLEs who face different forms of customer incivility. Specifically, we show that COR adds to the explanatory power of JD-R because the framework elucidates the processes through which resource loss is mitigated, minimized and recovered. Our findings demonstrate that FLEs experience reduced role stress, rumination and withdrawal intentions when managed under an empowering leadership style compared to FLEs confronting a laissez-faire supervisory style for both customer incivility conditions. That is, regardless of whether an FLE confronts customer perpetrated verbal aggression or excessive demands, our findings show that an empowering leadership style, which embodies supportive resources, mitigates the negative impact on FLEs psychological and behavioral wellbeing to a greater degree than does the less resource centered laissez-faire supervisory style.

The current study makes an important methodological contribution to the field of hospitality and tourism research as it utilizes an experimental design that enables the collection and examination of causal data, enabling the investigation of statistical cause and effect relationships. Furthermore, the current study employs a large sample of real-life FLE workers, who hold experience of working in the hospitality industry and attending to real customers. Thus, our identified sample were well placed to engage with the scenarios (and indeed a sample of which were involved in their development). The combination of data that enables causal inference from a research sample who have first-hand experience of work on the frontline of hotel services and thus can more accurately project uncivil customer events compared with a sample obtained from the general population, increases the validity, reliability and rigor of our data and associated research findings.

The current study also makes an important contribution to practitioners. In drilling down the intricacies of different episodes of customer incivility in a hospitality/tourism context, our findings provide an important steer for those working in the tourism industry as to the negative impact of customer incivility on FLEs' psychological health

and associated behaviors. First, the study findings show that not all forms of customer incivility affect FLEs in the same manner and that different forms of uncivil customer behaviour can produce different negative effects for FLEs. Armed with this insight, managers might consider if their firm is vulnerable to specific forms of customer incivility, or if within their organization certain frontline facing roles are more likely to encounter certain forms and act accordingly. For example, FLEs working in roles that face excessive customer demands might be offered extra support, training and the opportunity to rotate roles in order to pacify potential job withdrawal intentions. The current findings also provide insight into guidance to managers regarding how best to support FLEs who have encounters uncivil customer behaviour. For example, our findings show that FLEs who have encountered an episode of customer verbal aggression are likely to experience increased role stress and increased retaliatory intentions. Utilizing this knowledge can aid managers in where best to focus their managerial efforts. Thus, managers may implement FLE training (e.g. mindfulness practices) that assists employees to not personally absorb the stress associated with their role and instead repurpose this energy in a more constructive manner.

Second, our study reveals important nuances between the impact of the leadership style enacted within the firm. Overwhelmingly, our findings show that an empowering leadership style has a more positive impact on FLEs' wellbeing than does a laissez-faire style regardless of the form of uncivil behaviour encountered (except for retaliatory intentions where both styles performed equally). These findings highlight the importance to tourism and hospitality firms to provide colleagues working on the front line of service provision with a supportive and encouraging working environment. Customer incivilities are dynamic and inflammatory. Fostering a working culture in which FLEs are empowered and well-equipped to tackle such negative incidences not only increases the resilience and wellbeing of FLEs, but also creates a customer-centric environment in which employees can respond to customers' needs and deescalate potential situations before they gain traction. In this sense, our work demonstrates that the benefits of an empowering leadership style go beyond those traditionally documented (Hobfoll et al., 2018) and highlights that leadership style is an important factor in the management of the prevalent upwards trend of customer misbehavior within tourism settings (Ram, 2018).

6. Limitations and suggestions for future research

Despite the contributions described above, this research has several limitations. First, the current research centres its investigation on two pertinent forms of customer incivility. However, these forms are not exhaustive and while they focus on uncivil behaviour, tourism firms may find themselves faced with a wide range of forms of customer misbehaviours. As a result, future research might examine the impact of a broader range of customer misbehaviours that vary both with regards to their severity of harm against the FLE, the frequency of perpetration and their public visibility, and probe the different impacts that such unwanted customer behaviours have on FLEs' psychological and

behavioral wellbeing.

Second, although the current research was led by extant literature as to the importance of the two leadership styles investigated, this focus limits a broader understanding of the role that nuanced types of supervisory leadership styles might play in mitigating or fuelling negative FLE outcomes following incidents of customer incivility. In this vein, future research might investigate the impact of additional types of supervisory styles such as a directive, servant, or transformational leadership style.

Third, while our study demonstrates that supervisor support is an indispensable resource in FLEs dealing with customer uncivil behaviours, in practice, FLEs can also draw from alternative organizational resources. For example, research has demonstrated that co-worker support reduces employee stress caused by mistreatment behaviours (Sloan, 2012) and employee turnover (Tews, Michel, & Ellingson, 2013). Hence, an avenue for future research is to compare the relative impact of supervisor to co-worker support on FLEs' ability to dealing with various forms of customer incivility. For example, following from results of study 2, we would expect that given a laissez faire supervisor,

co-worker support would be far more effective at reducing the negative effects on FLEs' psychological and behavioral responses.

Finally, this research utilised a large sample size from multiple FLEs working in multiple hotels within a single country. As such, the generalisability of our findings to other countries and cultures might be limited. In response, future research should investigate the mechanisms of interest across diverse geographical regions and cultures. Such investigations might yield insight into cultural nuances of forms of customer uncivil behaviours and differences in supervisory styles and their resulting effects on FLEs.

Author Contribution

Achilleas Boukis: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft. **Christos Koritos:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft. **Kate Daunt:** Conceptualization, Writing – original draft. **Avraam Papastathopoulos:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Project administration.

Appendix. Study 1 and 2 variables measures and standardised factor loadings (Study 1/Study 2)

Role stress (based on Motowidlo et al., 1986) - After this incident:	
RS1: I think that this job is extremely stressful	(0.66/0.81)
RS2: I am stressed because of the work	(0.65/0.82)
RS3: A great deal of stress was caused to me because of the job	(0.83/0.81)
RS4: I think my job is extremely stressful	(0.68/0.78)
Rumination (McCullough et al., 2007) - After this incident:	
R1: I couldn't stop thinking about what they did to me	(0.75/0.80)
R2: Even when I was engaged in other tasks, I thought about how these customers hurt me	(0.83/0.80)
R3: I found it difficult not to think about the hurt that they caused me	(0.85/0.83)
R4: Strong feelings about what these customers did to me kept bubbling up	(0.95/0.79)
R5: Thoughts and feelings about how they hurt me kept running through my head	(0.59/0.76)
R6: Images of the incident kept coming back to me	(0.67/0.66)
Retaliation intentions (adapted from Harris, 2013) - After this incident, I could consider:	
RE1: doing something bad to this customer	(0.78/0.72)
RE2: causing troubles to other customers	(0.68/0.86)
RE3: taking action to get other customers annoyed	(0.92/0.89)
RE4: getting this customer get what he deserves in a future visit to the restaurant	(0.86/0.92)
RE5: punishing this customer somehow in a future visit to the restaurant	(0.61/0.88)
Daily job withdrawal (Scott & Barnes, 2011) - After this incident:	
JW1: I thought about being absent	(0.85/0.83)
JW2: I daydreamed	(0.93/0.88)
JW3: I thought about leaving current job	(0.92/0.87)

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