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Conflict-solving as a mediator between customer incivility and service performance

论冲突解决作为客户不文明行为和服务绩效之间的中间变量

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ABSTRACT

The customer incivility literature has primarily focused on emotional exhaustion and burnout as *emotion-focused* mediators that channel the effect of customer incivility. Drawing on conservation of resources (COR) theory, the current research proposes a new *problem-solving-focused* mediator, namely, *conflict-solving behavior*. The authors test the mediating role of conflict-solving behavior between customer incivility and customer service performance while controlling for emotional exhaustion and employee incivility as parallel mediation mechanisms. The results from three studies provide strong support for a negative relationship between customer incivility and conflict-solving behavior and for conflict-solving behavior as a full mediator between customer incivility and customer service performance. Furthermore, the negative effect of customer incivility on conflict-solving behavior is mitigated when customer service employees are promotion-focused and as investment in customer relationship building increases. The findings extend the scope and generalizability of customer incivility research from the business-to-customer to the business-to-business context. Managerial implications for employee training and hiring as well as the importance of cultivating customer relationships as a buffer to dampen the effect of customer incivility are discussed.

摘要

客户不文明行为的相关文献主要将情绪相关变量作为解释客户不文明行为的影响的中间变量，例如情绪衰竭和过度疲劳。本文借鉴资源保存理论（COR），提出了一种新的以问题为中心的中间变量，即冲突解决行为。作者测试了冲突解决作为影响在客户不文明和客户服务绩效之间的中间变量作用，同时控制了情绪衰竭和员工不文明作为平行中间变量。三项研究结果均有力地支持了客户不文明行为与冲突解决行为之间的负向关系，同时表明了冲突解决行为是客户不文明行为与客户服务绩效之间的完全中间变

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Customer incivility; conservation of resources; regulatory focus theory; conflict solving; customer relationship

关键词
客户不文明; 资源保存; 调节定向理论; 冲突解决; 客户关系

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量。另外，当客户服务员工是专注促销的时候，以及对建立客户关系的投资增加的时候，客户不文明行为对于冲突解决的负面影响将会得到减少。研究结果将客户不文明行为研究的范围和普适性从企业对消费者（B2C）扩展到企业对企业（B2B）的商业环境。本研究在对管理者的启示部分也讨论了员工培训和招聘以及培养客户关系的重要性作为抑制客户不文明影响的缓冲作用。

Customer incivility—defined as 'low-intensity deviant behavior perpetrated by someone in the customer or client role, with ambiguous intent to harm an employee and in violation of social norms of mutual respect and courtesy' (Sliter et al., 2010, p. 468)—manifests as taking out anger, making condescending remarks, and engaging in personal verbal attacks (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Kwon & Yi, 2021; Yoon, 2022). The dominant explanation for the deleterious effects of customer incivility on employee performance has been rooted in emotional exhaustion and burnout (Sliter et al., 2010). While emotional exhaustion and burnout are *emotion-focused* mechanisms, the consequences of customer incivility can also be explained by intervening mechanisms other than emotion-based factors. Across three studies, we focus on conflict-solving behavior as an alternative *problem-solving-focused* mediation mechanism linking customer incivility to customer service performance (hereinafter, 'service performance'). We study conflict-solving behavior because unlike emotional exhaustion, which centers on just one side (i.e. the psychological toll on employees), we want to better understand how customer incivility affects the degree to which service employees[1] can address conflict because conflict can have a detrimental influence on both parties (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). Both parties can be adversely affected because if service employees cannot resolve conflict, this can negatively affect the relationship, leading to relationship termination and loss of business (Beitler et al., 2016; Palmatier et al., 2006; Samaha et al., 2011).

We define conflict-solving behavior as actions that service employees engage in to reduce tension and friction with customers. Because customer incivility can potentially escalate into conflict that is fraught with tension and friction, an examination of conflict-solving behavior can shed new light on how to manage customer incivility to minimize its dysfunctional effects (Cortina et al., 2001b). The extant literature has yet to study the effect of customer incivility on service employees' conflict-solving behavior. Although an established body of literature considers conflict management at the group (e.g. Korsgaard et al., 2008), departmental (e.g. Song et al., 2000), and firm (e.g. Koza & Dant, 2007) levels, there is a dearth of empirical research on conflict-solving behavior at the service employee level in the face of uncivil customers. When conflict arises, the likelihood that service performance will suffer also increases (Sliter et al., 2010). Therefore, from a theoretical and practical perspective, it is important to understand how customer incivility is detrimental to service performance apart from and in conjunction with the emotional exhaustion explanation.

In addition to the unexplored mediation mechanism of conflict-solving behavior, sparse research exists on how employees with different regulatory foci and different levels of investment in customer relationship building manage resources that can affect conflict-solving behavior. The moderating role of regulatory foci and customer relationship building on the customer incivility–conflict-solving behavior relationship is important to investigate from both theoretical and practical perspectives. On the one

hand, from a theoretical perspective, both moderators involve how resources are managed, which is related to the overarching net of conservation of resources (COR) theory. For example, prevention-focused employees manage resources differently from promotion-focused employees because they are more protective and cautious (Halbesleben et al., 2014). On the other hand, from a practical perspective, because both moderators can be influenced by management intervention through effective hiring, training, and education, even when customer incivility does occur, conflict-solving behavior can be adequately deployed. Thus, with effective decision making about human resources, firms can influence regulatory focus and customer relationship building strategies to their advantage.

Using COR as our overarching theoretical framework (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001), this research accounts for (a) how customer incivility is related to service performance and the mediation mechanism and (b) the contingency factors that shape the relationship between customer incivility and the mediator. We draw on two tenets of COR theory—resource conservation and resource acquisition—to develop our conceptual model and hypotheses. We use these two tenets to capture how service employees engage in different resource management strategies to protect and accumulate resources that will help them cope with stressful situations that can occur when dealing with uncivil customers. COR is an effective overarching theoretical framework for our model because it allows us to examine (a) how employees manage resources in exercising conflict-solving behavior when faced with customer incivility that entails resource depletion and (b) how employees with different regulatory foci (i.e. promotion vs. prevention focus) and different levels of customer relationship building manage resources differently. By drawing on COR, we are able to investigate how employees with different approaches to the workplace will respond differently when encountering customer incivility from a resource management (i.e. protection vs. acquisition) perspective. Accordingly, this research makes the following contributions.

First, although extant literature has mainly focused on emotional exhaustion as the core mediation mechanism of customer incivility, we propose an alternative mediation path that has received limited attention yet is theoretically and practically relevant and important. In doing so, we control for the parallel mediating effects of emotional exhaustion and employee incivility (van Jaarsveld et al., 2010; Walker et al., 2014) to bolster our findings regarding conflict-solving behavior as an alternative mediation mechanism.

Second, in addition to shedding light on the process through which customer incivility affects service performance via conflict-solving behavior, this study illuminates how firms can mitigate the detrimental effect of customer incivility on service performance by taking a contingency approach. For example, we provide support for notion that promotion-focused (vs. prevention-focused) employees are less adversely affected by customer incivility and thereby can engage more effectively in conflict-solving behavior in the face of customer incivility (Neubert et al., 2008; Wallace et al., 2009). We further show that when employees build strong customer relationships, such relational capital functions as a buffer that attenuates the negative impact of customer incivility on conflict-solving behavior, thus weakening the effect of customer incivility on service performance (Palmatier et al., 2008).

Third, most, if not all, research on customer incivility has been conducted in a business-to-customer (B2C) context (e.g. between passengers and flight attendants) (e.g. Van

Kenhove et al., 2003) and only recently in the peer-to-peer context (e.g. Airbnb) (e.g. Ma et al., 2020). However, there is scant research on customer incivility in the business-to-business (B2B) context (e.g. between a supplier and a manufacturer) (for an exception, see Yi & Gong, 2008). Although customer incivility may occur more frequently in a B2C context, where an individual customer can vent and lash out at a service employee perhaps due to less risk and fewer consequences, similar behavior can have detrimental consequences in a B2B context because B2B relationships should be 'shaped by accepted social guidelines or norms which have become institutionalized' (Campbell, 1998, p. 199). This suggests that the stakes are higher in B2B contexts because such relationships are characterized as having fewer customers, a longer-term orientation, and more interaction opportunities (Homburg & Fürst, 2005).

When customer incivility from a buyer firm occurs, it can have severe consequences that influence conflict-solving behavior (e.g. conflict that starts out between individuals from the buying and selling firms can escalate into conflict between the firms and jeopardize the relationship or deal). Therefore, it is not only theoretically important but also practically relevant to examine whether customer incivility research can be extended to the B2B context. Given the differences between B2C and B2B relationships and the paucity of research on customer incivility in the B2B context, we address this void by empirically exploring whether our conceptual model (see Figure 1) can be extended from B2C relationships to the B2B context.

We organize our paper as follows: We begin with a discussion of COR theory and then develop our hypotheses. Then, we report the results from three studies. Study 1 uses data from the B2C financial services industry, while Study 2 uses data from multiple B2B service industries. Study 3 addresses some limitations of Studies 1 and 2 by drawing on multi-source (i.e. service employees and their managers) and time-lagged (i.e. Waves 1 and 2) data in the B2B context. We conclude with a discussion of theoretical and managerial implications, followed by limitations and directions for further research.

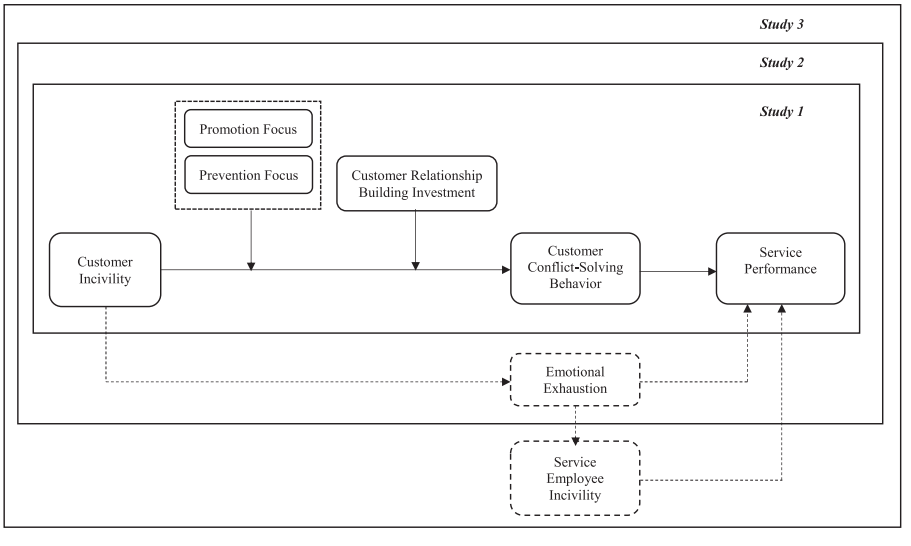

Figure 1. Model.

Theoretical background

COR theory

Customer service employees (hereinafter, 'service employees') have frequent and constant interactions with customers. The customer incivility concept captures rude and condescending verbal and behavioral responses from customers toward employees (Lee et al., 2020). Customer incivility can take an emotional toll on employees, and the damaging effect of customer incivility on the psychological well-being of service employees is well documented (e.g. Sliter et al., 2010; van Jaarsveld et al., 2010). For example, customer incivility leads to greater emotional exhaustion and withdrawal and eventually to turnover (e.g. Lim & Cortina, 2005). We draw on COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989) to elucidate the undermining effect of customer incivility (e.g. Al-Hawari et al., 2020; Alola et al., 2019; Cheng et al., 2020; Shin et al., 2022). Our research extends extant literature that has used COR theory to explore customer incivility (e.g. Cheng et al., 2020; Shao & Sharlicki, 2014; Shin et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2011).

COR theory asserts that people are motivated to protect, acquire, and retain resources (e.g. time, effort, physical and emotional energy, and attention, including self-esteem and self-worth) to manage stress (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001; Hobfoll & Freedy, 1993). COR theory has been widely used in management research on voice behavior (Ng & Feldman, 2012), in-role and extra-role performance (Halbesleben & Bowler, 2007), job engagement (Halbesleben et al., 2009), and stress (Westman et al., 2004), among others.

There are two primary tenets at the center of COR theory: *resource conservation* and *resource acquisition*. According to the resource conservation perspective, people are motivated to protect their current resources to avoid further resource depletion and loss. For example, Ng and Feldman (2012) find that under stressful work conditions, employees engage in less voice behavior because voice behavior itself requires the exertion of resources beyond those necessary to cope with workplace strain. That is, to avoid additional resource loss, employees are motivated to protect and conserve what resources they possess. According to the resource acquisition perspective, people are motivated to invest their current resources to acquire new resources that can, in turn, help them further protect existing resources or mitigate future resource loss. For example, Halbesleben and Bowler (2007) find that when employees are emotionally exhausted, they engage in a resource acquisition strategy by performing more organizational citizenship behaviors toward individuals (OCB-I). They explain this paradoxical result with COR theory, suggesting that when employees are emotionally exhausted, they actually invest fewer resources in their in-role performance and organizational citizenship behavior toward the organization (OCB-O) but surprisingly more in OCB-I that will help them protect and maintain interpersonal relationships and build social support.

COR theory is relevant as the overarching theoretical framework of the current research because customer incivility as a workplace stressor requires service employees to manage a job demand that depletes their emotional and physical resources (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). As a source of stress, customer incivility saps service employees' resources and leads to increased emotional exhaustion and burnout (Kern & Grandey, 2009; Sliter et al., 2010). Consistent with the resource conservation perspective of COR theory, customer incivility drains service employees' mental resources (e.g. self-esteem, self-worth, job engagement)

as they confront and try to cope with rude and condescending customer behavior. Under these circumstances, we expect that service employees will attempt to protect and preserve existing resources, which in turn will affect their conflict-solving behavior.

Although COR theory has been primarily used to explain employee behavior while under stress, we posit that there is ample room to synthesize COR theory with regulatory focus theory and customer relationship building (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Our central thesis rests on the argument that promotion-focused employees take more risks and are more concerned about growth, achievement, and obtaining gains rather avoiding loss, while prevention-focused employees are more risk averse and are interested in preservation, maintaining the status quo, and avoiding loss rather obtaining gains. This difference suggests that prevention-focused employees will be more inclined to submit to a resource conservation and protection strategy compared with promotion-focused employees, all else being equal. That is, we advance the notion that an employee's regulatory focus will influence how he or she manages resources when confronted with customer incivility. We also postulate that through customer relationship building, resources such as social and relational capital will be acquired, mitigating the negative effect of customer incivility on conflict-solving behavior.

Hypotheses development

Conflict-solving behavior is problem-focused (e.g. problem solving), as opposed to emotion-focused (e.g. withdrawal, disengagement, distancing), and reflects actions that service employees engage in as a means to find solutions to tensions, frictions, and conflicts. Conflict-solving requires service employees to deploy emotional and physical resources in the course of listening to customers' issues and to try to find an adequate solution to address the problem, all while overcoming personality differences that may interfere with finding a resolution (e.g. Selzer et al., 2021). Such actions require time and effort. As COR theory posits, a lack of resources leads people to adopt a defensive posture as a way to conserve remaining resources. Thus, service employees will be less motivated to exert additional resources to solve conflicts when experiencing customer incivility but instead will focus on protecting the limited resources they have. Thus, when cognitive and emotional are drained, conflict-solving behavior becomes compromised. Accordingly, we propose the following:

H1: Customer incivility is negatively related to conflict-solving behavior.

The mediating role of conflict-solving behavior

The downstream implication of customer incivility is important because customer incivility can result in detrimental consequences. Sliter et al. (2012) report that customer incivility leads to absenteeism and turnover and to diminished sales performance. Prior research has shown that customer incivility results in poor service quality that is mediated by emotional exhaustion (e.g. Sliter et al., 2010). The dominant view in the literature that explains how customer incivility leads to negative outcomes focuses on employees' depleted psychological well-being (e.g. Al-Hawari et al., 2020; Alola et al., 2019; Cheng et al., 2020; van Jaarsveld et al., 2010). Customer incivility takes an emotional toll on

employees and absorbs their energy and resources, leading to greater emotional exhaustion and burnout (Al-Hawari et al., 2020; Alola et al., 2019; Cheng et al., 2020; van Jaarsveld et al., 2010).

However, an important point of departure with our proposed mediation mechanism is that we extend the mediation mechanism from employees' emotional well-being, the dominant view in the extant literature, to include employees' conflict-solving behavior. While emotional exhaustion and burnout are emotion-focused mechanisms, conflict-solving is a problem-focused mechanism. Thus, the focus of attention shifts from 'the employee' to 'the problem.' The mediating role of conflict-solving behavior is a novel perspective for explaining how customer incivility is related to service performance, and we control for and partial out emotional exhaustion as a parallel mediation mechanism.

Drawing on the resource acquisition perspective of COR theory, we advance that conflict-solving behavior is positively related to service performance. As service employees exert resources to address conflict with customers, such actions should improve how supervisors perceive employees' service performance because conflict-solving behavior helps service employees accumulate tangible and intangible resources from supervisors that otherwise would not be possible (e.g. professionalism, empathy toward customers). If conflict resulting from customer incivility is not addressed adequately, this can hamper service performance, but if handled effectively, service performance can benefit (Jung & Yoon, 2018). Service employees who handle conflict effectively are viewed by their supervisors as caring, customer oriented, and competent, all of which can lead to more positive ratings on service performance from managers.

Therefore, while the customer incivility–conflict-solving behavior link predicts a negative relationship based on the resource conservation tenet, the conflict-solving behavior–service performance link predicts a positive relationship based on the resource acquisition perspective. In our research context, customer incivility leads to less conflict-solving behavior as a means to protect what remaining resources employees have, which results in the acquisition of fewer new resources to help improve service performance. This suggests that customer incivility can lead to diminished service performance unless service employees engage in effective conflict-solving behavior. Accordingly, we propose the following mediation hypothesis:

> **H2:** Conflict-solving behavior mediates the relationship between customer incivility and service performance.

Moderating roles of work regulatory focus and customer relationship building

Work regulatory focus. Regulatory focus theory (e.g. Higgins, 2000) maintains that people strive to achieve positive goals and avoid negative outcomes. Employees who pursue a gain-maximizing strategy based on growth, aspiration, and achievement are promotion-focused (Higgins, 1997). Promotion-focused employees 'play to win' and therefore take risks, are receptive to change, and are less amenable to the status quo. Because promotion-focused employees also want to minimize errors of omission (i.e. missing out on opportunities to address customer incivility to avoid conflict), they are likely to feel confident that they can manage customer incivility effectively.

Conversely, prevention-focused employees pursue loss-minimizing strategies and focus on security and stability. They 'play not to lose' and, as such, are risk averse and deliberate in their actions (Grant & Higgins, 2013). Therefore, prevention-focused employees try to minimize errors of commission (i.e. taking opportunities to address customer incivility to avoid conflict). This suggests that prevention-focused employees will be more protective and measured because they are more inclined to withhold effort to address customer incivility. As Liberman et al. (2001, p. 17) succinctly summarize, 'more risky, less conservative, less cautious strategies are expected in a promotion focus than a prevention focus.'

Halbesleben et al. (2014) propose that regulatory focus can enrich COR theory. Prevention-focused employees are likely to experience greater emotional exhaustion and less engagement at work, while promotion-focused employees are likely to experience more work engagement and less emotional exhaustion (Halbesleben et al., 2014). This implies that prevention-focused employees will rely on a resource conservation strategy to a greater degree than promotion-focused employees. Therefore, prevention-focused employees will be inclined to withhold effort when confronted with customer incivility due to their risk-averse and loss-minimizing tendencies. In contrast, promotion-focused employees will use a resource conservation strategy to a lesser extent because they will be receptive to tackling customer incivility due to their risk-taking and gain-maximizing proclivities (e.g. Khoa et al., 2021). This suggests that the effect of customer incivility on conflict-solving behavior will be contingent on regulatory focus, as resources will be managed differently depending on a person's promotion versus prevention focus. Thus, we propose the following:

> **H3:** Work regulatory focus moderates the negative relationship between customer incivility and conflict-solving behavior such that the negative relationship is (a) attenuated as promotion focus increases and (b) amplified as prevention focus increases.

Customer relationship building. As stated previously, we define customer relationship building as a service employee's effort and investment in building and maintaining a strong relationship with customers (Palmatier et al., 2008). When service employees take customer relationship building seriously, they seek to extend relationships by pursuing relationships that are long-term-oriented rather than short-term and transactional (Palmatier et al., 2007; Palmatier et al., 2006; Rokkan et al., 2003). According to COR theory, the more resources people acquire, the better they are at protecting resource loss by utilizing the resources at their disposal to minimize resource deprivation (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). When service employees invest resources (e.g. time, effort) to develop and build a new resource, such as a relationship with customers, they can use the newly acquired resource to mitigate potential future resource loss (e.g. self-worth) resulting from customer incivility (Hobfoll, 2001).

Halbesleben and Bowler (2007) show that even when employees feel emotionally exhausted, they still invest in organizational citizenship behavior toward their supervisors and coworkers (i.e. OCB-I) to acquire social support and capital. What this study suggests is that employees invest in resources (i.e. OCB-I) to acquire new resources (i.e. social support and capital) that can potentially help them prevent and avoid the further loss of resources (i.e. emotional drain and labor). Therefore, we also posit that when employees invest resources in building customer relationships, they can acquire new resources

such as relational and social capital that can help mitigate the resource loss resulting from customer incivility. Therefore, the negative effect of customer incivility on conflict-solving behavior will be attenuated as customer relationship building increases. Investment in customer relationships is an example of service employees investing current resources to acquire new resources (e.g. goodwill, relationship equity) to protect against future resource loss (e.g. relationship deterioration, termination). This implies that service employees who invest a lot in customer relationship building will be less negatively affected in terms of their conflict-solving behavior, even in the presence of customer incivility. Formally, we propose the following:

> **H4:** Customer relationship building moderates the negative relationship between customer incivility and conflict-solving behavior such that the negative effect of customer incivility is attenuated when customer relationship building is high (vs. low).

Moderated mediation. By integrating the mediating role of conflict-solving behavior between customer incivility and service performance (i.e. H2) and the interaction between customer incivility and the two moderators on conflict-solving behavior (i.e. H3 and H4), we derive a conditional indirect effect of customer incivility on service performance via conflict-solving behavior. We posit that the negative indirect effect of customer incivility on service performance via diminished conflict-solving behavior will be attenuated for promotion-focused employees and amplified for prevention-focused employees. We submit that customer relationship building moderates the indirect relationship between customer incivility and service performance by mitigating the negative effect of customer incivility on conflict-solving behavior. The moderated mediation argument rests on how conflict-solving behavior is affected by customer incivility, contingent on the moderators. When promotion focus and customer relationship building are high, conflict-solving behavior is not compromised by customer incivility, resulting in attenuation of the negative indirect effect. However, when prevention focus is high, conflict-solving behavior is compromised, resulting in amplification of the negative indirect effect . Thus, we propose the following:

> **H5a:** The negative indirect effect of customer incivility on service performance through conflict-solving behavior is moderated by a promotion focus such that the negative indirect effect is attenuated at a high (vs. low) promotion focus.

> **H5b:** The negative indirect effect of customer incivility on service performance through conflict-solving behavior is moderated by prevention focus such that the negative indirect effect is amplified at a high (vs. low) prevention focus.

> **H5c:** The negative indirect effect of customer incivility on service performance through conflict-solving behavior is moderated by customer relationship building such that the negative indirect effect is attenuated at high (vs. low) customer relationship building.

Overview of studies

We conduct three studies to test our hypotheses. In Study 1, we use data from a large bank in the B2C context. Respondents are private bankers who serve high-net-worth customers (customers with a cash accumulation of US$150,000 or more). In Study 2, we replicate Study 1 but use data from firms in multiple service sectors in the B2B context. Study 2

extends research in customer incivility from the B2C context, where most of the customer incivility research has been conducted, to the B2B context. Finally, Study 3 considers some limitations of Studies 1 and 2. Specifically, we address common method bias by employing a multirespondent design (i.e. employees and managers), and we examine lack of causality associated with cross-sectional data by using a time-lag design across two waves in the B2B context.

Study 1

Sample and data collection

The research setting was one of the largest banks in Turkey. The bank specializes in a variety of areas (e.g. retail banking, private banking, investment banking) and offers a broad range of financial services (e.g. wealth management, loans, investment consulting) to both individual customers and businesses. To test our model in a B2C context, our survey participants are private bankers who only serve individual customers. Private bankers work in the private banking center and provide services such as financial planning and investment strategies, insurance, total wealth management, and mortgages to high-net-worth clients (i.e. clients with a cash accumulation of US$150,000 or more, with high risk expectations, and who comply with the segmentation criteria applied by the bank). We contacted one of the senior managers at the bank to endorse our study by emphasizing the study's purpose and importance in terms of customer relationship management. After obtaining permission, a contact person from the bank sent a link that included the survey, a consent form, and a cover letter describing the study's purpose to the private bankers. The link was sent to 410 private bankers. After two reminders, we received 283 usable surveys (a response rate of 69%). Of the private bankers, 53% were female, average age was 36.80 years, and average tenure with the bank was 8.74 years.

Measures

We prepared the survey in English and then translated it into Turkish using translation and back-translation techniques (Brislin, 1986). Unless otherwise stated, we used a five-point Likert format (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*) (see Table 1).

Focal variables. We measured *customer incivility* with an 11-item scale (1 = *never*, 5 = *very often*) (Burnfield et al., 2004; Sliter et al., 2012). The scale comprises two dimensions: customer condescension and displaced customer frustration (Sliter et al., 2012). We assessed the two-dimensional nature of the scale with exploratory factor analysis. After we removed two cross-loaded items, the remaining nine items formed a unidimensional construct with an explained variance of 70.1%, which we used in our analyses. In line with our definition of conflict-solving behavior (i.e. service employees' efforts to reduce tension, friction, and clashes with customers), we measured *conflict-solving behavior* with four items adapted from Jehn's (1994) intragroup relationship conflict scale. We measured *work-based promotion focus* and *prevention focus* with six-item scales developed by Johnson and Chang (2008). Ferris et al. (2013) report the validity of both scales in their study, which tests the effects of work-based regulatory focus on workplace

Table 1. Measures and factor loadings.

	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3
Customer Incivility			
Some of my customers take out anger on me.	.616	d	.847
Some of my customers take out their frustrations on me.	.702	.646	.844
Some of my customers make insulting comments to me.	.853	.761	.860
Some of my customers treat me as if I was inferior or stupid.	.910	.803	.873
Some of my customers show that they are irritated or impatient.	d	.546	.813
Some of my customers do not trust the information that I give them and ask to speak with someone of higher authority.	.604	.736	.849
Some of my customers are condescending to me.	.868	.841	.876
Some of my customers make comments that question my competence.	.900	.847	.846
Some of my customers make comments about my job performance.	.898	.813	.689
Some of my customers make personal verbal attacks against me.	.916	.787	.880
Some of my customers make unreasonable demands.	d	.685	.803
Customer Conflict-Solving Behavior			
I can handle the friction between me and my customers.	.894	.835	.745
I can overcome personality conflicts evident between me and my customers.	.914	.862	.822
I can address the tension between me and my customers.	.838	.651	.673
I can solve the emotional conflict between me and my customers.	.883	.828	.812
Promotion Focus			
My goal at work is to fulfil my potential to the fullest in my job.	.716	.845	.729
I am focused on successful experiences that occur while working.	.808	.820	.780
In general, I tend to think about positive aspects of my work.	.654	.790	.803
I see my job as a way for me to fulfil my hopes, wishes and aspirations.	.654	.794	.652
I think about the positive outcomes that my job can bring me.	.778	.817	.824
I feel happy when I have accomplished a lot at work.	.602	.811	.755
Prevention Focus			
I am focused on failure experiences that occur while working.	.716	.770	.717
I am fearful about failing to prevent negative outcomes at work.	.764	.703	.802
In general, I tend to think about negative aspects of my work.	.650	.799	.789
I think about the negative outcomes associated with losing my job.	.777	.849	.811
I feel anxious when I cannot meet my responsibilities at work.	.620	.597	.752
I sometimes feel anxious at work.	.808	.686	.720
Customer Relationship Building			
I work hard to strengthen my customers' relationship with me	.750	.846	.746
I focus attention on building and maintaining my relationship with my customers	.758	.861	.812
I make significant investments in building a strong relationship with my customers	.872	.704	.764
I devote considerable time and effort to my relationship with customers	.705	.800	.825
Service Performance			
Being friendly and helpful to customers.	.813	.789	.758
Approaching customers quickly.	.875	.824	.747
Asking good questions and listening to find out what a customer wants.	.821	.838	.745
Being able to help customers when needed.	.870	.861	.735
Pointing out and relating item features to a customer's needs.	.775	.813	.821
Suggesting items customers might like but did not think of.	.778	.817	.717
Explaining an item's features and benefits to overcome a customer's objections.	.715	.747	.793
Emotional Exhaustion			
I feel emotionally drained by working with customers.		.738	.805
I feel burned out from working with customers.		.687	.890
I feel exhausted by working with customers.		.886	.962
I feel fatigued by working with customers.		.659	.942
Neuroticism			
I often feel blue.		.832	.801
I dislike myself.		.796	.802
I am often down in the dumps.		.909	.925
I have frequent mood swings.		.884	.808
Leader–Member Exchange			
I know where I stand with my manager.	.754		.775
My manager understands my work problems and needs.	.850		.841
My manager recognizes my potential.	.852		.814
My manager would use his/her power to solve my work problems.	.892		.781

(*Continued*)

Table 1. Continued.

	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3
I can count on my manager to 'bail me out' when I really need it.	.878		.769
I defend my manager's decisions, even when (s)he is not around .	.721		.705
My working relationship with my manager is effective.	.876		.864
Perspective Taking			
I believe that there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both.	.700		.680
When I'm upset at customers, I usually try to 'put myself in their shoes' for a while.	.661		.688
I sometimes try to understand my customers better by imagining how things look from their perspective.	.782		.743
If I'm sure I'm right about something, I don't waste much time listening to customers' arguments. (r)	d		d
I sometimes find it difficult to see things from customers' point of view.	d		d
I try to look at customers' side of a disagreement before I make a decision.	.720		.743
Before criticizing customers, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place.	.720		.715
Employee Incivility			
I am short with some customers.			.821
I am blunt with some customers.			.727
I do not listen to some customers.			.871
I raise voice to some customers.			.926
I am derogatory to some customers.			.926

Note: All loadings are significant at $p < .01$ level. r = reverse-scored item; d = deleted item.

success and job satisfaction. We measured *customer relationship building* with four items adapted from Palmatier et al. (2008). We measured *service performance* with seven items (1 = *needs improvement*, 5 = *excellent*) (Liao & Chuang, 2007).

Control variables. We included control variables that have theoretical and statistical effects on the dependent variables to minimize omitted variables bias and increase observed heterogeneity. Based on studies in the services and conflict management literatures (e.g. De Dreu et al., 2001), we controlled for the effect of leader–member exchange (LMX) and perspective taking on conflict-solving behavior and service performance. We measured LMX with seven items (Liden et al., 1993) and perspective-taking with seven items (McBane, 1995). We did not include any demographic variables, because they were not correlated significantly with conflict-solving behavior and service performance (cf. Carlson & Wu, 2012).

Analytic approach

We used structural equation modeling in MPlus 7.0 (Muthén & Muthén, 2012) to test the measurement model and the structural model. While testing the structural model, we used the following procedure. First, we used Ping's (1995) method to generate the latent interaction terms of customer incivility with the moderating factors (i.e. promotion focus, prevention focus, and customer relationship building). For example, to create the interaction effect (or latent product) of customer incivility and promotion focus, we first added the indicators that make up both constructs and then multiplied them. Cortina et al. (2001a) argue that Ping's (1995) method is the easiest to implement, the most parsimonious, and the least likely to generate convergence problems. Second, because both the interaction and the indirect effects do not follow a normal distribution, we estimated the model using Monte Carlo integration (20,000 bootstraps), and we obtained the 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (CIs). Third, we used the R-based computational tool

(Preacher et al., 2006) to determine the region(s) of significance (i.e. Johnson-Neyman technique) for the conditional values of the moderating variables where the influence of customer incivility on conflict-solving behavior is significant. We also plotted the simple slopes of the moderating variables at their full range (mean-centered). Finally, we adjusted for common method and endogeneity biases in the model estimation.

Results

Measurement model. The measurement model fit the data well after we removed items with low loadings ($\chi^2 = 1766.20$ $df = 1052$; Tucker–Lewis index [TLI] = .916; comparative fit index [CFI] = .921; root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = .049). As Tables 1 and 2 report, all factor loadings are statistically significant (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988), reliability coefficients are above .70, and average variance extracted (AVE) scores are greater than .50 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). The squared intercorrelations (the measurement error-adjusted interconstruct correlations) between two constructs were less than the AVE estimates of the respective two constructs for all pairs of constructs (Voorhees et al., 2016). These tests verify that the scales have discriminant and convergent validity.

Controlling for common method bias. We used the latent (or unmeasured) common factor technique to control for method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). This allowed us to both calculate the magnitude of the method bias and control the effect of method bias when estimating the structural model. Therefore, we first estimated the common method model, which is essentially created by adding a latent common factor to the measurement model. However, in the common method model, each manifest item loads onto the method factor as well as its respective latent construct. We found a significant chi-square difference between the measurement model and the common method model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 219.45$, $\Delta df = 48$, $p < .01$). The method factor and the focal variables explained 8% and 72% of the total variance, respectively. Next, we computed the predicted value of the method factor by performing a regression-based data imputation technique, which treats the method factor as missing data in which every observation on the variable is missing. Specifically, we estimated the common method factor using maximum likelihood to compute the unobserved values of each case as a linear

Table 2. Descriptive statistics, reliabilities and intercorrelations (Study 1).

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Perspective taking								
2. Leader–member exchange	.286**							
3. Customer incivility	−.103	−.126*						
4. Conflict-solving behavior	.291**	.290**	−.329**					
5. Promotion focus	.376**	.377**	−.163**	.480**				
6. Prevention focus	−.062	−.096	.314**	−.111	−.142*			
7. Customer relationship building	.236**	.410**	.052	.200**	.346**	.018		
8. Service performance	.319**	.207**	−..037	.401**	.452**	.024	.180**	
Mean	3.88	3.94	1.76	4.26	4.11	2.77	3.23	3.73
Standard deviation	.65	.89	.86	.65	.64	.87	.90	.62
Cronbach's alpha	.82	.94	.94	.93	.85	.86	.85	.92
Composite reliability	.84	.94	.95	.93	.86	.87	.86	.93
Average variance extracted	.52	.70	.67	.78	.50	.53	.60	.65

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$ (two-tailed test).

combination of the observed values for the same case. We saved the predicted values and used them to adjust for common method bias (e.g. Sarin et al., 2012; Ye et al., 2007).

Controlling for endogeneity bias. Conflict-solving behavior may create endogeneity bias due to omitted variables that are also correlated with the error term of service performance. Because we could not find instrumental variables to correct for endogeneity bias, we used the Gaussian copula technique (Park & Gupta, 2012). This enabled us to model the correlation between conflict-solving behavior and the error term of service performance (Datta et al., 2015). The Kolmogorov–Smirnov (K-S) test revealed that conflict-solving behavior did not conform to the Bernoulli distribution (K-S = .180, $p < .01$). Shapiro–Wilk tests indicated that conflict-solving behavior ($W = .953$, $p < .01$) was not normally distributed (i.e. skewed). Because the two assumptions of the copula method were met (Park & Gupta, 2012), we added the inverse of the cumulative distribution function of conflict-solving behavior to the model as a control variable (e.g. Magnotta et al., 2020).

Structural model and hypothesis testing. The modification indices for the initial testing of the structural model indicate that the model fit can be improved further by including paths from promotion focus and prevention focus to service performance. Thus, we reestimated the model by adding these two paths in the model. The structural model fits the data well ($\chi^2 = 2341.50$; $df = 1207$, $p < .01$; TLI = .928; CFI = .934; RMSEA = .042).

As Table 3 reports, customer incivility ($b = -.300$, $p < .01$) has a significant and negative effect on conflict-solving behavior (in support of H1), which in turn is related to service performance ($b = .256$, $p < .01$). Although customer incivility has no significant direct effect on service performance ($b = .059$, $SE = .064$, not significant [*ns*], 95% CI [–066, .184]), it has a significant indirect effect on service performance ($b = -.083$, $SE = .028$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [–.138, –.028]). These findings support H2; conflict-solving behavior mediates the customer incivility–service performance relationship.

Table 3. Results (Study 1).

	Dependent variables			
	Conflict-solving behavior		Service performance	
Variables	β	SE	β	SE
Controls				
Perspective taking	.093	.103	.183	.118
Leader–member exchange	.007	.061	–.035	.062
Main Effects				
Customer incivility	–.300**	.063		
Conflict-solving behavior			.256**	.071
Moderating Variables				
Promotion focus	.421**	.073	.392**	.086
Prevention focus	–.043	.044	.131**	.047
Customer relationship building	.087	.054		
Interaction Effects				
Customer incivility × promotion focus	.128*	.065		
Customer incivility × prevention focus	–.050	.048		
Customer incivility × customer relationship building	.224**	.052		
Common Method Correction	.076	.056	.113	.061
Copula Correction for Conflict-Solving Behavior			–.117	.065
R^2	.429		.366	

Note: Multicollinearity does not pose any threat because variance inflation factors (VIFs) are below the cutoff value of 10 (Neter et al., 1985) (Model 1: min = 1.04, max = 1.51; Model 2: min = 1.04; max = 1.57).
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$ (two-tailed test).

We find that promotion focus positively moderates the customer incivility–conflict-solving behavior relationship ($b = .128$, $p < .05$), suggesting that the negative effect of customer incivility on conflict-solving behavior becomes weaker (or less negative) when the level of promotion focus moves from low to high. We then used the J-N technique over the entire range of (mean-centered) promotion focus (–2.105 to .895). The slope of the customer incivility–conflict-solving behavior relationship is significant for all values of promotion focus that fall outside of the range [lower bound = .846, higher bound = 8.703]. The upper bound is meaningless because it falls outside of the measured range, and the confidence band does not cross zero. However, at .846 standard deviations above the mean value of promotion focus, the lower bound crosses zero (see Figure 2a). As the level of promotion focus increases from –2.105 (simple slope = –.642, SE = .152, $p <$ .01) to .846 (simple slope = –.163, SE = .083, $p < .05$), the negative effect of customer incivility on conflict-solving behavior weakens (or becomes less negative), in support of H2a. The interaction of customer incivility and prevention focus has no effect on conflict-solving behavior ($b = –.050$, *ns*). These results do not support H3b.

Customer relationship building moderates the customer incivility–conflict-solving behavior relationship positively ($b = .224$, $p < .01$). That is, when the level of customer relationship building increases from low to high, the negative effect of customer incivility on conflict-solving behavior weakens. Over the entire range of mean-centered customer relationship building (–2.232–1.768), the slope of the customer incivility–conflict-solving behavior relationship is significant for all values outside the region of [lower bound = .721, upper bound = 2.606. In particular, the upper bound is beyond the observed range, and the confidence band does not cross zero. The lower bound, however, reaches zero at .721 standard deviations over the mean value of customer relationship building (see Figure 2b). As the level of customer relationship building increases from –2.232 (simple slope = –.800, SE = .137, $p < .01$) to .721 (simple slope = –.138, SE = .071, $p < .05$), the negative effect of customer incivility on conflict-solving behavior diminishes (or becomes less negative). These results support H4.

The negative indirect effect of customer incivility on service performance through conflict-solving behavior is moderated significantly by promotion focus ($b = –.072$, 95% CI [–.143, –.035]). Over the entire range of mean-centered promotion focus (–2.105–1.768), the slope of the indirect effect of customer incivility on service performance is significant for all values outside the region of [lower bound = .362, upper bound = 12.648].

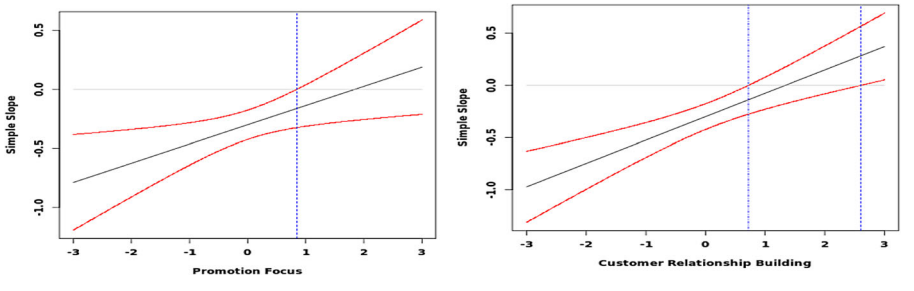

Figure 2. a. The simple slope of the customer incivility–conflict-solving behavior relationship as a function of promotion focus (Study 1). Figure 2b. The simple slope of the customer incivility–conflict-solving behavior relationship as a function of customer relationship building (Study 1).

The upper bound is not within the observed range, and the confidence band does not cross zero. The lower bound reaches zero at .362 standard deviations over the mean value of promotion focus. As the level of promotion focus increases from –2.105 (simple slope = –.179, SE = .055, $p < .01$) to .362 (simple slope = –.054, SE = .027, $p < .05$), the indirect effect of customer incivility on service performance is attenuated. These results support H5a. Because the interaction of customer incivility and prevention focus has no effect on conflict-solving behavior, the indirect effect of customer incivility on service performance through conflict-solving behavior is not moderated by prevention focus. These results do not support H5b.

Finally, the negative indirect effect of customer incivility on service performance through conflict-solving behavior is moderated significantly by customer relationship building ($b = –.087$, 95% CI [–.144, –.031]). Over the entire range of (mean-centered) customer relationship building (–2.232–1.768), the slope of the customer incivility–service performance is significant for all values of customer relationship building that fall outside of the range [lower bound = .462, higher bound = 4.826]. The upper bound falls outside of the measured range, and the confidence band does not cross zero. The lower bound crosses zero at .462 standard deviations above the mean value of customer relationship building. As the level of customer relationship building increases from –2.232 (simple slope = –.219, SE = .053, $p < .01$) to .493 (simple slope = –.060, SE = .030, $p < .05$), the negative effect of customer incivility on conflict-solving behavior is attenuated. These results support H5c.

Additional analyses. First, we tested the three-way interaction effects of customer incivility, promotion focus, and customer relationship building and customer incivility, prevention focus, and customer relationship building on conflict-solving behavior. The three-way interaction effect of customer incivility, promotion focus, and customer relationship building was not significantly related to conflict-solving behavior, and model fit (Akaike information criterion [AIC] = 32,006.77, Bayesian information criterion [BIC] = 32,772.31) did not improve significantly over the proposed model (AIC = 31,664.99, BIC = 32,405.02). Similarly, the three-way interaction effect of customer incivility, prevention focus, and customer relationship building was not significantly related to conflict-solving behavior, and model fit (AIC = 32,281.83, BIC = 33,047.37) did not improve significantly over the proposed model.

Second, we tested whether the relationship between conflict-solving behavior and service performance is also moderated by promotion focus, prevention focus, and customer relationship building (i.e. second-stage moderation). The interaction effects were not significantly related to service performance, and model fit (AIC = 32,856.84, BIC = 33,677.06) did not improve significantly over the proposed model (AIC = 31,664.99, BIC = 32,405.02). By ruling out the possibility of second-stage moderation effects, we confirm the robustness of the proposed model.

Study 2

Sample and data collection

We collected data in collaboration with a major consulting company in Germany. The company provides consultancy and training services to industrial service firms operating

in various German cities on issues such as management and leadership. We conducted a seminar with top managers of the consulting company, gave a presentation about the study we planned to conduct, and explained the potential importance of the results. We asked for permission to reach out to the B2B service firms in the consulting company's customer portfolio.

After obtaining permission, we contacted 12 firms across a variety of sectors, such as financial leasing and factoring, information technology (IT) and software development, logistics, and wholesaling. We emailed the human resources manager at each firm and asked them to distribute the survey to key participants who had direct contact with their business customers. We received a positive response from eight firms that agreed to participate in our study. The survey was distributed to 245 service employees via email along with a consent form and a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of their participation. Data were collected over a period of one month. We received 163 useable surveys (a response rate of 67%). Fifty-two percent of the respondents are women, the average age is 39 years, 63% are college graduates, the average experience in the company is 8.4 years, and the average work experience is 16.6 years. The distribution of respondents on the basis of sectors is as follows: leasing and factoring (21.4%), logistics (23.3%), IT and software development (20.2%), wholesaling (11.7%), international trade and marketing (14.8%), and energy and engineering services (8.6%).

Measures

We designed the survey in English and then translated it into German using the same techniques as in Study 1. Focal variables were the same as in Study 1, and we measured them using the same scales.[2] We controlled for the effects of demographics (i.e. age and experience) and neuroticism on conflict-solving behavior and service performance. Age and firm experience (in years) were self-reported measures. We measured neuroticism with four items (Mount et al., 1999). We transformed the raw values of firm experience with a logarithmic transformation to fit the normal distribution.

Alternative mediating variable. In line with relevant studies in the field (e.g. van Jaarsveld et al., 2010), we considered service employees' emotional exhaustion an alternative mediator between customer incivility and service performance (see Figure 1). This allowed us to further assess the robustness of the proposed model after controlling for emotional exhaustion. We measured customer-service-specific emotional exhaustion with four items (1 = *never*, 5 = *always*) (Singh et al., 1994).

Analytic approach

Because we collected data from multiple firms, we considered whether multilevel analysis was necessary. However, analysis of variance test results (conflict-solving = .678, $p > .05$; emotional exhaustion = .386, $p > .05$; service performance = 1.078, $p > .05$) and insignificant ICC(1) values (conflict-solving = .001, emotional exhaustion = .004, service performance = .001) suggest that the dependent variables did not differ across firms, and thus multilevel analysis was not necessary. It is worth noting that the Breusch–Pagan test confirmed the presence of heteroskedasticity (i.e. when the variability of a dependent

variable is not equal across the range of values of an independent variable predicting it) in our data ($p < .01$). While there is heteroskedasticity, the standard errors are skewed even when the regression estimates remain unchanged. To account for heteroskedasticity, we employed robust (i.e. cluster-adjusted) standard errors. We tested the measurement and structural models with structural equation modeling in MPlus 7.0, using the same procedure as in Study 1.

Results

Measurement model. The confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) indicated good fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 1495.75$, $df = 917$; TLI = .917; CFI = .923; RMSEA = .062) after we dropped two items in the perspective-taking scale due to low loadings. All factor loadings were statistically significant, and reliability coefficients and AVE scores exceeded their threshold values (see Tables 1 and 4). For all pairs of constructs, the squared term of error-adjusted correlation between any two constructs was less than the AVE estimates (Voorhees et al., 2016). These findings support convergent and discriminant validity of all multi-item scales.

Controlling for common method bias. We found a significant chi-square difference between the measurement model and the method model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 277.89$, $\Delta df = 45$, $p < .01$). The variance explained by the method factor and trait variables was 7% and 58%, respectively. As in Study 1, we controlled for method bias by including the imputed values of the method factor.

Controlling for endogeneity bias. Because conflict-solving behavior (K-S = .187, $p < .01$) and emotional exhaustion (K-S = .145, $p < .01$) did not conform to Bernoulli distribution and were not normally distributed (conflict-solving behavior: $W = .866$, $p < .01$; emotional exhaustion: $W = .941$, $p < .01$), we added the inverse of the cumulative distribution function of conflict-solving behavior as a control variable.

Structural model and hypothesis testing. Modification indices suggested that introducing paths from prevention focus to emotional exhaustion and from customer relationship building to service performance would improve the model's fit. As a result, the model fit the data well ($\chi^2 = 2277.20$, $df = 1228$; TLI = .911; CFI = .919; RMSEA = .040). Table 5 reports the results. Customer incivility is related negatively to conflict-solving behavior ($b = -.289$, $p < .01$), in support of H1, and conflict-solving behavior is related positively to service performance ($b = .515$, $p < .01$), even when we control for emotional exhaustion. Customer incivility has no significant direct effect on service performance ($b = .115$, $SE = .101$, *ns*, 95% CI [–.083, .314]), but its indirect effect on service performance is significant ($b = -.172$, $SE = .075$, $p < .05$, 95% CI [–.319, –.025]). Thus, conflict-solving behavior is an indirect-only mediator in the regulatory focus–service performance relationship. These results support H2. It is worth noting that customer incivility is related positively to emotional exhaustion ($b = .249$, $p < .01$), but emotional exhaustion has no direct effect on service performance ($b = -.029$, *ns*) when we control for conflict-solving behavior.

Promotion focus positively moderates the customer incivility–conflict-solving behavior relationship ($b = .370$, $p < .01$), implying that as the level of promotion focus increases, the negative effect of customer incivility on conflict-solving behavior weakens (or becomes less negative). Over the entire range of mean-centered promotion focus (–2.960–1.040), the slope for the customer incivility–conflict-solving behavior relationship is significant

Table 4. Descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and intercorrelations (Study 2).

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Age										
2. Firm experience (ln)	.423**									
3. Neuroticism	−.109	−.149								
4. Customer incivility	−.114	−.155*	.329**							
5. Conflict-solving behavior	.214**	.107	−.279**	−.356**						
6. Emotional exhaustion	−.186*	−.141	.307**	.482**	−.306**					
7. Promotion focus	.186*	.130	−.400**	−.189*	.458**	−.220**				
8. Prevention focus	−.158*	−.094	.371**	.483**	−.347**	.676**	−.231**			
9. Customer relationship building	.201*	.141	−.273**	−.149	.370**	−.183*	.675**	−.207**		
10.Service performance	.239**	.193*	−.261**	−.204**	.594**	−.255**	.453**	−.266**	.469**	
Mean	38.84	2.84	1.94	2.04	4.08	1.99	3.96	2.45	3.90	4.06
Standard deviation	12.53	.36	.93	.83	.76	.88	.76	.91	.82	.75
Cronbach's alpha	–	–	.92	.93	.86	.83	.92	.88	.87	.93
Composite reliability	–	–	.92	.93	.87	.83	.92	.88	.88	.93
Average variance extracted	–	–	.73	.57	.64	.56	.66	.55	.65	.66

Note: ln = natural logarithm.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$ (two-tailed test).

Table 5. Results (Study 2).

	Dependent variables					
	Conflict-solving behavior		Emotional exhaustion		Service performance	
Variables	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*
Controls						
Age	.004	.004	−.004	.003	.002	.004
Firm experience (Ln)	−.104	.147	−.109	.061	.170	.148
Neuroticism	−.034	.056	-.017	.097	−.045	.049
Main Effects						
Customer incivility	−.289**	.080	.249**	.051		
Conflict-solving behavior					.515**	.111
Emotional exhaustion					−.029	.107
Moderating Variables						
Promotion focus	.346*	.165				
Prevention focus	−.089	.083	.544**	.097		
Customer relationship building	.049	.133			.287**	.095
Interaction Effects						
Customer incivility × promotion focus	.370**	.090				
Customer incivility × prevention focus	.178**	.063				
Customer incivility × customer relationship building	.222**	.069				
Common Method Correction	−.114	.042	.059	.116	.049	.065
Copula Correction (Conflict-Solving Behavior)					−.083	.041
Copula Correction (Emotional Exhaustion)					.038	.087
R^2	.419		.501		.450	

Note: (1) Multicollinearity is not a concern because VIFs are well below the cutoff of 10 (Model 1: min = 1.10, max = 2.03; Model 2: min = 1.10, max = 2.87). (2) Cluster-adjusted robust standard errors are reported. (3) ln = natural logarithm. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$ (two-tailed test).

for all values of promotion focus that fall outside the region of [lower bound = .229, higher bound = 5.821]. Although the upper bound is not within the observed range and the confidence band does not cross zero, the lower bound does at .229 standard deviations above the mean value of promotion focus (see Figure 3a). As the level of promotion focus increases from −2.960 (simple slope = −1.384, SE = .421, $p < .01$) to .229 (simple slope = −.204, SE = .104, $p < .05$), the negative effect of customer incivility on conflict-solving behavior weakens (or becomes less negative). These results support H3a. Contrary to our hypothesis, the interaction of customer incivility and prevention focus on conflict-solving behavior is positive ($b = .178$, $p < .01$). These results do not support H2b.

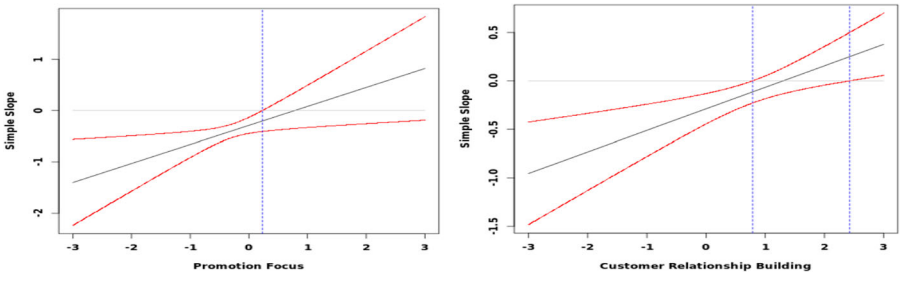

Figure 3. a The simple slope of the customer incivility–conflict-solving behavior relationship as a function of promotion focus (Study 2). Figure 3b. The simple slope of the customer incivility–conflict-solving behavior relationship as a function of customer relationship building (Study 2).

Customer relationship building moderates the customer incivility–conflict-solving behavior relationship ($b = .222$, $p < .01$), suggesting that the negative effect of customer incivility on conflict-solving behavior is weaker at high levels of customer relationship building than at low levels of customer relationship building. Across the entire range of mean-centered customer relationship building (–2.900–1.100), the slope for the customer incivility–conflict-solving behavior relationship is significant for all values of customer relationship building that fall outside the region of [lower bound = .787, upper bound = 2.428]. Although the upper bound is not within the observed range and the confidence band does not cross zero, the lower bound crosses zero at .787 standard deviations over the mean value of customer relationship building (see Figure 3b). As the level of customer relationship building increases from –2.900 (simple slope = –.933, SE = .263, $p < .01$) to.787 (simple slope = –.114, SE = .058, $p < .05$), the negative effect of customer incivility on conflict-solving behavior becomes weaker (or less negative), in support of H4.

The negative indirect effect of customer incivility on service performance through conflict-solving behavior is moderated significantly by promotion-focus ($b = –.111$, 95% CI [–.199, –.023]). Over the range of mean-centered promotion focus (–2.960–1.040), the slope of the indirect effect of customer incivility on service performance is significant for all values outside the region of [lower bound = .333, upper bound = 1.1644]. Although the upper bound is beyond the observed range, the lower bound reaches zero at .333 standard deviations over the mean value of promotion focus. As the level of promotion focus increases from –2.960 (simple slope = –.578, SE = .066, $p < .01$) to .362 (simple slope = –.059, SE = .030, $p < .05$), the indirect effect of customer incivility on service performance is attenuated, in support of H5a. However, the results do not support H5b, as the interaction effect of customer incivility and prevention focus is in the opposite direction.

The negative indirect effect of customer incivility on service performance through conflict-solving behavior is moderated significantly by customer relationship building ($b = –.092$, 95% CI [–.177, –.006]). Over the entire range of (mean-centered) customer relationship building (–2.900–1.100), the slope of the customer incivility–service performance relationship is significant for all values of customer relationship building that fall outside of the range [lower bound = .047, higher bound = 2.7158]. The lower bound crosses zero at .047 standard deviations above the mean value. As the level of customer relationship building increases from –2.900 (simple slope = –.489, SE = .152, $p < .01$) to .047 (simple slope = –.086, SE = .044, $p < .05$), the negative effect of customer incivility on conflict-solving behavior is attenuated, in support of H5c.

Additional analyses. We conducted additional analyses to check the robustness of the proposed model. First, akin to fixed-effects modeling, we estimated the model by adding firm dummies so that we could consider unobserved heterogeneity across firms in conflict-solving behavior, emotional exhaustion, and service performance. The proposed model indicates better fit (AIC = 19,456.59, BIC = 20,112.46) than the model with firm dummies (AIC = 19,638.53, BIC = 20,470.75), which provides support for the robustness of our model.

Second, we tested the three-way interaction effects of customer incivility, promotion focus, and customer relationship building and customer incivility, prevention focus, and customer relationship building on conflict-solving behavior. The three-way interaction effect of customer incivility, promotion focus, and customer relationship building was

not significantly related to conflict-solving behavior, and model fit (AIC = 19,363.65, BIC = 19,388.40) did not improve significantly over the proposed model. Similarly, the three-way interaction effect of customer incivility, prevention focus, and customer relationship building was not significantly related to conflict-solving behavior, and model fit (AIC = 19,334.33, BIC = 19,359.08) did not improve significantly over the proposed model.

Third, we tested whether promotion focus, prevention focus, and customer relationship building moderate the relationship between conflict-solving behavior and service performance (i.e. second-stage moderation). We find that the interaction effects are not significantly related to service performance and that model fit (AIC = 20,212.62, BIC = 20,930.37) does not improve significantly over that of the proposed model. This finding confirms the robustness of the model by ruling out the possibility of two-stage moderation effects.

Study 3

Sample and data collection

We collected data from three U.S.-based firms, each operating in separate industries: healthcare, IT, and financial consulting. Respondents were service employees and the managers who planned and supervised their work. To eliminate common method bias, we collected service employee data through two separate surveys. Managers evaluated the performance of service employees under their supervision in a separate survey.

In Wave 1, we sent the survey to 426 service employees. Service employees answered demographic questions and responded to the scales related to customer incivility, promotion focus, prevention focus, customer relationship building, LMX, perceptive taking, and neuroticism. We obtained 372 usable surveys from service employees (87% response rate). One month later, in Wave 2, we distributed the survey to service employees who responded to the scales of conflict-solving behavior, emotional exhaustion, and employee incivility toward customers. In Wave 2, we obtained 313 usable surveys from service employees (84% response rate). One month later, we sent the survey to 56 managers to evaluate the service performance of their subordinates. We received a 100% response rate from the managers. After matching the surveys, the data set consisted of 313 service employee–manager dyads (an effective response rate of 73%). Managers evaluated the performance of service employees (ranging from 3 to 18 service employees, with an average of 5.59). Of the service employees, 54.3% were female, average age was 40.5 years (SD = 11.5), 89.5% had a college degree, average firm tenure was 8.3 years (SD = 6.3), and average work experience was 15.4 years (SD = 11.0).

Measures and measurement model

Focal variables were the same as in Studies 1 and 2, and we measured them using the same scales.[3] We also added education, experience (in years), neuroticism, LMX, and perspective taking to control for their effects on the dependent variables. We measured neuroticism, LMX, and perspective taking using the previously described scales. Because the firms from which we collected the data operate in three different sectors, we included

the sector as a dummy variable in the model to control for sector-specific unobserved heterogeneity.

Alternative mediating variables. In Study 2, we considered emotional exhaustion an alternative variable mediating the relationship between customer incivility and service performance to better determine the robustness of the model. However, as discussed, we did not find a significant relationship between emotional exhaustion and service performance. In this study, we examine whether the effect of emotional exhaustion caused by customers' incivility on service performance can be further explained by employees' incivility toward customers (e.g. van Jaarsveld et al., 2010). We measured emotional exhaustion using the same scale as in Study 2. We measured employee incivility with five items (1 = *never*, 5 = *very often*) (van Jaarsveld et al., 2010).

We performed multilevel CFAs in MPlus 7.0 due to the multilevel nature of our data (Dyer et al., 2005). We first conducted an individual-level CFA on all multi-item measures. The individual-level CFA indicated good fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 2667.33$, $df = 1439$; TLI = .907; CFI = .913; RMSEA = .052) after we dropped items with low loadings. All factor loadings were statistically significant, and reliability coefficients and AVE scores exceeded their threshold values (see Tables 1 and 6). For all pairs of constructs, the squared term of error-adjusted correlation between any two constructs was less than their AVE estimates. These findings supported the convergent and discriminant validity of all multi-item scales.

Next, we conducted within- and between-group CFA models. Because each manager evaluated multiple service employees, we identified the service employees evaluated by the same manager as a group. Because we confronted the problem of model convergence common in multilevel CFAs, we used the parceling approach (Nasser & Wisenbaker, 2003; Zhang et al., 2021). Accordingly, we parceled out conflict-solving behavior, customer relationship building, emotional exhaustion, neuroticism, employee incivility, and perspective taking into two indicators; promotion focus, prevention focus, LMX, and service performance into three indicators; and customer incivility into four indicators. The multilevel CFA indicated good fit ($\chi^2 = 1097.2$. $df = 590$; TLI = .934; CFI = .950; RMSEA = .053; $SRMR_{between} = .082$; $SRMR_{within} = .053$), suggesting that the factor structure of the measures was consistent at both individual and group levels.

Model estimation

We tested the model simultaneously using two-level path analysis in MPlus 7.0 due to the nested nature of the data (i.e. each supervisor rated multiple service employees). Nevertheless, the ICC(1) value revealed that 17% of the variance in service performance may be attributed to supervisor-specific effects. We estimated the model in two stages (Preacher et al., 2016). We tested the direct-effects model first and then included interaction effects in the model. We tested the significance of the interaction-effects model over the direct-effects model using the log-likelihood ratio test. Because we defined all variables at the individual level and aimed to test between-individual effects, we centered all variables around their grand mean (Hofmann & Gavin, 1998). We used the parametric bootstrap (20,000 samples) method to compute indirect effects and simple slopes with a bias-corrected CI of 95% (Bauer & Curran, 2005; Preacher et al., 2010). As in Studies 1 and 2, we used the R-based computational tool developed by Preacher et al. (2006) to identify region(s) of significance (i.e. Johnson-Neyman technique) for the conditional values of

Table 6. Descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and intercorrelations (Study 3).

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Education													
2. Experience (ln)	–.051												
3. Neuroticism	.025	.031											
4. Perspective taking	–.097	.145*	–.217**										
5. Leader–member exchange	–.110	.109	–.182**	.199**									
6. Customer incivility	.189**	.044	.050	–.032	–.257**								
7. Conflict-solving behavior	–.113*	.012	–.160**	.327**	.243**	–.132*							
8. Emotional exhaustion	–.012	–.015	.249**	–.139*	–.102	.208**	–.094						
9. Employee incivility	.072	–.113*	.515**	–.241**	–.285**	.220**	–.205**	.463**					
10. Promotion focus	.004	–.099	–.252**	.026	.182**	–.300**	.241**	–.027	–.097				
11. Prevention focus	.142*	–.039	.201**	–.024	–.228**	.275**	–.014	.205**	.115*	–.265**			
12. Customer relationship building	.000	–.006	–.011	.307**	.156**	.021	.212**	–.026	–.019	.058	–.097		
13. Service performance	–.069	.146**	–.269**	.218**	.443**	–.199**	.368**	–.106	–.379**	.337**	–.238**	.182**	
Mean	—	4.46	2.99	3.70	3.91	2.21	4.24	2.80	3.06	3.36	2.35	3.67	3.55
Standard deviation	—	.98	.90	.94	.88	.82	.75	.57	.98	1.03	.94	.89	.84
Cronbach's alpha	—	—	.90	.82	.92	.96	.85	.95	.93	.89	.89	.86	.90
Composite reliability	—	—	.90	.84	.92	.96	.85	.95	.93	.89	.90	.87	.91
Average variance extracted	—	—	.70	.51	.63	.70	.59	.81	.74	.58	.59	.62	.58

Note: ln = natural logarithm.
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$ (two-tailed test).

the moderating variables when the effect of customer incivility on conflict-solving behavior is significant. We plotted the simple slopes of the moderating variables throughout their entire range (mean-centered). We also controlled for endogeneity bias while estimating the model.

Controlling for endogeneity bias. Because conflict-solving behavior (K-S = .119, $p < .01$), emotional exhaustion (K-S = .058, $p < .05$), and employee incivility (K-S = .151, $p < .01$) did not conform to Bernoulli distribution and were not normally distributed (conflict-solving behavior: $W = .949$, $p < .01$; emotional exhaustion: $W = .994$, $p < .01$; employee incivility: $W = .987$, $p < .01$), we added the inverse of the cumulative distribution function of conflict-solving behavior as a control variable.

Results

Main and indirect effects. The model achieved perfect fit after we added paths from prevention focus to employee incivility and from promotion focus to service performance. Table 7 (Model 1) reports the results of the main-effects model. Customer incivility is related negatively to conflict-solving behavior ($\gamma = -.178$, $p < .05$), in support of H1, and conflict-solving behavior is related positively to service performance ($\gamma = .215$, $p < .01$). Customer incivility has no significant direct effect on service performance ($\gamma = .111$, $SE = .079$, *ns*, 95% CI [–.044, .265]), but it has a significant indirect effect on service performance ($\gamma = -.041$, $SE = .017$, $p < .05$, 95% CI [–.079, –.012]) through conflict-solving behavior, in support of H2.

Regarding alternative mediation mechanisms, customer incivility is related to emotional exhaustion ($b = .210$, $p < .01$), which in turn increases service employees' incivility toward customers ($\gamma = .580$, $p < .01$). Employee incivility is related negatively to service performance ($\gamma = -.179$, $p < .01$).

Interaction effects. As Table 7 (Model 2) reports, promotion focus positively moderates the customer incivility–conflict-solving behavior relationship ($\gamma = .171$, $p < .05$). Over the entire range of mean-centered promotion focus (–2.407–1.750), the slope for the customer incivility–conflict-solving behavior relationship is significant for all values of promotion focus that fall outside the region of [lower bound = .081, higher bound = 27.077]. Although the upper bound does not fall inside the observed range and the

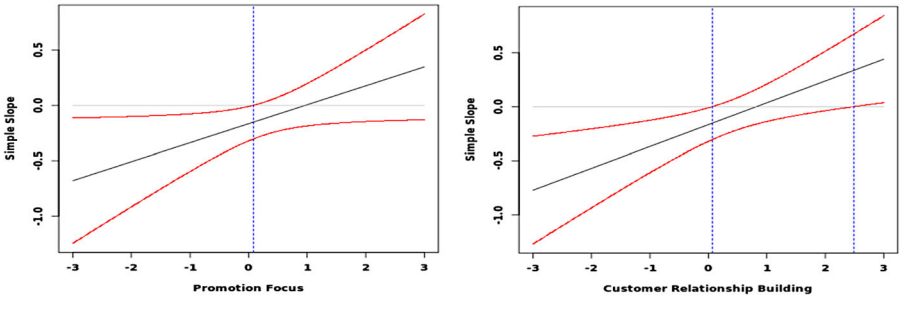

Figure 4. a. The simple slope of the customer incivility–conflict-solving behavior relationship as a function of promotion focus (Study 3). Figure 4b. The simple slope of the customer incivility-conflict-solving behavior relationship as a function of customer relationship building (Study 3).

Table 7. Results (Study 3).

	Model 1: main effects								Model 2: main effects + interactions							
	Conflict-solving behavior		Emotional exhaustion		Employee incivility		Service performance		Conflict-solving behavior		Emotional exhaustion		Employee incivility		Service performance	
Variables	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*
Controls																
Education	−.100	.110	−.087	.078	.084	.138	.015	.065	−.112	.110	−.087	.078	.085	.138	.015	.065
Experience (ln)	−.034	.046	−.011	.027	−.060	.048	.122	.087	−.037	.045	−.011	.027	−.060	.048	.122	.087
Neuroticism	−.018	.046	.150**	.036	.420**	.052	−.019	.036	.003	.047	.150**	.036	.420**	.052	−.019	.036
Perspective taking	.225**	.053	−.048	.049	−.059	.059	.013	.052	.231**	.052	−.048	.049	−.059	.059	.013	.052
Leader–member exchange	.111	.068	−.013	.039	−.177**	.044	.300**	.048	.113	.067	−.013	.039	−.177**	.044	.300**	.048
Main Effects																
Customer incivility	−.178*	.078					.215**	.063	−.166*	.077					.215**	.063
Conflict-solving behavior			.210**	.058							.210**	.058				
Emotional exhaustion					.580**	.080							.580**	.080		
Employee incivility							−.179**	.050							−.179**	.050
Moderating Variables																
Promotion focus	.187**	.055	.080*	.039			.190**	.045	.217**	.062	.080*	.039			.190**	.045
Prevention focus	.032	.063							.034	.062						
Customer relationship building	.075*	.037							.073	.038						
Interaction Effects																
Customer incivility × promotion focus									.171*	.082						
Customer incivility × prevention focus									.075	.085						
Customer incivility × customer relationship building									.202**	.070						
Copula Correction (Conflict-Solving Behavior)							−.014	.010							−.014	.010
Copula Correction (Emotional Exhaustion)					−.133	.100	.205**	.087					−.131	.100	.205**	.087
Copula Correction (Employee Civility)							−.073	.159							−.073	.159
Pseudo-R^2	.220		.126		.434		.383		.242		.126		.434		.383	
Log-Likelihood (df)					−1211.94 (34)								−1199.53 (31)			
Likelihood ratio test (df)											24.82** (3)					

Note: (1) Multicollinearity is not a concern because VIFs are well below the cutoff of 10 (Model 1: min = 1.10, max = 2.03; Model 2: min = 1.10, max = 2.87). (2) Robust standard errors are reported. (3) ln = natural logarithm. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$ (two-tailed test).

confidence band does not cross zero, the lower bound does at .081 standard deviations above the mean value of promotion focus (see Figure 4a). As the level of promotion focus values increases from –2.407 (simple slope = –.578, SE = .232, $p < .05$) to .081 (simple slope = –.152, SE = .075, $p < .05$), the negative effect of customer incivility on conflict-solving behavior weakens (or becomes less negative), in support of H3a. Contrary to our hypothesis, the interaction of customer incivility and prevention focus on conflict-solving behavior is not significant ($\gamma = .075$, *ns*). Thus, the results do not support H3b.

The interaction of customer incivility and customer relationship building on conflict-solving behavior is significant ($\gamma = .202$, $p < .01$). At the full range of mean-centered customer relationship building (–2.025–1.714), the slope for the customer incivility–conflict-solving behavior relationship is significant for all values of customer relationship building that fall outside the region of [lower bound = .066, upper bound = 2.485]. The upper bound is not within the observed range, and the confidence band does not cross zero. However, the lower bound crosses zero at .066 standard deviations above the mean value of customer relationship building (see Figure 4b). As the level of customer relationship building increases from –2.025 (simple slope = –.575, SE = .182, $p < .01$) to .066 (simple slope = –.153, SE = .075, $p < .05$), the negative effect of customer incivility on conflict-solving behavior weakens (or becomes less negative), in support of H4.

The negative indirect effect of customer incivility on service performance through conflict-solving behavior is moderated significantly by promotion focus ($b = –.065$, 95% CI [–.094, –.035]). Over the entire range of mean-centered promotion focus (–2.407–1.750), the slope of the indirect effect of customer incivility on service performance is significant for all values inside the region of [lower bound = –.54.236, upper bound = .865]. The lower bound is beyond the observed range, and the confidence band does not cross zero. The upper bound reaches zero at .865 standard deviations over the mean value of promotion focus. As the level of promotion focus increases from –2.407 (simple slope = –.135, SE = .039, $p < .01$) to .865 (simple slope = –.040, SE = .020, $p < .05$), the indirect effect of customer incivility on service performance is attenuated. These results support H5a. Because the interaction of customer incivility and prevention focus has no effect on conflict-solving behavior, H5b is not supported.

Finally, the negative indirect effect of customer incivility on service performance through conflict-solving behavior is moderated significantly by customer relationship building ($b = –.061$, 95% CI [–.091, –.031]). Over the entire range of (mean-centered) customer relationship building (–2.025–1.714), the slope of the customer incivility–service performance is significant for all values of customer relationship building that fall inside the range [lower bound = –50.868, higher bound = .781]. The lower bound falls outside of the measured range, and the confidence band does not cross zero. However, at .781 standard deviations above the mean value of customer relationship building, the higher bound crosses zero. As the level of customer relationship building increases from –2.025 (simple slope = –.120, SE = .034, $p < .01$) to .493 (simple slope = –.038, SE = .019, $p < .05$), the negative effect of customer incivility on conflict-solving behavior is attenuated, in support of H5c.

Additional analyses. First, we tested the three-way interaction effects of customer incivility, promotion focus, and customer relationship building and customer incivility, prevention focus, and customer relationship building on conflict-solving behavior. The three-way interaction effect of customer incivility, promotion focus, and customer

relationship building was not significantly related to conflict-solving behavior, and model fit (AIC = 2651.08, BIC = 2838.39) did not improve significantly over the proposed model (AIC = 2501.06, BIC = 2692.12). Similarly, the three-way interaction effect of customer incivility, prevention focus, and customer relationship building was not significantly related to conflict-solving behavior, and model fit (AIC = 2543.74, BIC = 2731.05) did not improve significantly over the proposed model.

Second, we tested whether promotion focus, prevention focus, and customer relationship building moderate the relationship between conflict-solving behavior and service performance (i.e. second-stage moderation). The interaction effects are not significantly related to service performance, and model fit (AIC = 2505.60, BIC = 2707.90) does not improve significantly over that of the proposed model (AIC = 2501.06, BIC = 2692.12). This finding confirms the robustness of the model by ruling out the possibility of two-stage moderation effects.

Discussion

Using COR as the overarching theoretical framework, this research develops and tests a model that unpacks the relationship between customer incivility and service performance across three studies. We propose and find support for an alternative mediation mechanism through conflict-solving behavior, while controlling for the parallel mediating effects of emotional exhaustion and employee incivility. The customer incivility–conflict-solving behavior relationship is further explicated through the contingency lens of promotion and prevention focus and investment in customer relationship building. Finally, we extend customer incivility research from B2C to B2B relationships. Next, we discuss the contributions to and implications for theory and practice.

Theoretical implications and contributions

Mediating role of conflict-solving behavior. Our research extends studies that have used COR to explain customer incivility (e.g. Shao & Sharlicki, 2014; Wang et al., 2011). Across three studies, we provide firsthand knowledge that, independent of emotional exhaustion (Studies 2 and 3) and employee incivility (Study 3) as alternative and parallel mediation mechanisms, conflict-solving behavior accounts for how customer incivility results in lower service performance. This is a novel finding in the extant literature, despite the potential for customer incivility to escalate into conflict. Considering the robust literature on how customer incivility affects employee incivility toward customers, the possibility for tension and friction between the two parties is likely to rise, and unless hostility is managed effectively, service performance will suffer.

This paper breaks new ground by identifying conflict-solving behavior as a problem-solving mechanism, which provides a fresh perspective to the extant literature that has primarily focused on emotional exhaustion and burnout as the conduit through which customer incivility unfolds. This new process is relevant and important because (a) while emotional exhaustion centered on the toll customer incivility takes on the employee (i.e. one side of the party), conflict-solving behavior addresses how tension and friction can be lowered for both parties, and (b) this mechanism shows that there can be two categorically different types of mediation mechanisms: one that is more

emotion laden (i.e. emotional exhaustion) and another that is focused more on the problem and its resolution (i.e. conflict-solving behavior). In finding support for conflict-solving behavior as a mediator after controlling for emotional exhaustion as a parallel mediator, we elevate the robustness of our model and results.

Our findings offer a new theoretical perspective based on how employees manage resources that brings to light how customer incivility is related to service performance. Recall the two tenets of COR: resource conservation and resource acquisition. Our results support the resource conservation tenet in explaining the customer incivility–conflict-solving behavior part of the conceptual model, while the resource acquisition tenet accounts for the conflict-solving behavior–service performance link in the model. That is, the two tenets seem to play different roles in different parts of our conceptual model based on whether resources need to be protected and conserved or invested for acquisition. The work of Ng and Feldman (2012) also supports the two tenets in explaining different parts of their model, such that the resource conservation tenet explicates the motivation for voice behavior while the resource acquisition tenet explains the consequences of voice behavior.

Furthermore, we replicated the findings from Studies 1 and 2 in Study 3 using a multi-respondent and time-lagged study design, which has the advantage of overcoming some weaknesses related to cross-sectional research. Consistent results across the three studies attest to the robustness of our conceptual model and lend confidence to the findings.

We find that the customer incivility–conflict-solving behavior–service performance path is supported not only in B2C but also in B2B relationships. This result offers new insight, given that the majority of customer incivility research has been conducted in B2C settings (e.g. Liu et al., 2015; Van Kenhove et al., 2003). Our results reveal that conflict-solving behavior is equally important as a conduit in B2B as in B2C relationships. Although customer incivility may be less frequent in the B2B than in the B2C context, the consequences can be greater in B2B than B2C relationships, and conflict-solving behavior becomes even more pivotal in explaining how customer incivility affects service performance, given that 'characteristics of business markets include, among others, a small number of customers, long-term business relationships, and a high degree of interaction between members of the supplier and the customer company' (Homburg & Fürst, 2005, p. 100). In addition to Yi and Gong (2008), our study is among the few to expand customer incivility research from a B2C setting to a B2B one. All the hypotheses (i.e. mediation and interaction) supported in the B2C context were also supported in our B2B context, thus corroborating the generalizability and robustness of our conceptual model.

The moderating role of regulatory focus and customer relationship building. Regulatory focus has been used in meta-analysis as a mediator linking personality factors to important work outcomes (e.g. task performance, organizational citizenship behavior, innovation, counterproductive behavior) (Lanaj et al., 2012). In our research, we provide new insights into the intersection between regulatory focus and COR theory (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Across three studies, and consistent with our prediction, we find that the effect of customer incivility on conflict-solving behavior is mitigated when service employees are promotion focused, in support of the logic that promotion-focused employees rely less on the resource conservation tenet of COR theory. However, we do not find support for the moderating role of prevention focus. This implies that counter to our expectation, prevention-focused service employees do not necessarily subscribe

to a resource conservation strategy. Although pinpointing the exact reason is beyond the scope of this research, a plausible explanation may be that having a prevention-oriented regulatory focus is viewed negatively for service employees, especially those who interact with customers. The data seem to support this view, as the mean for prevention focus on a 1–5 scale was low, with values of 2.77, 2.45, and 2.35 in Studies 1, 2, and 3, respectively. Furthermore, we find support for moderated mediation when promotion focus and customer relationship building were high. These results imply that the deleterious impact of customer incivility on service performance can be contained for employees who are promotion focused and build customer relationships because conflict-solving behavior is not compromised.

While the extant literature has examined intervention mechanisms, such as the role of transformational leadership (e.g. Arnold & Walsh, 2015) and organizational and supervisory support (e.g. Han et al., 2016), these factors are not focused on customers, the very source of customer incivility. This is a gap in the literature that our research fills by examining the moderating role of service employees' time and effort investments in building, developing, and maintaining relationships with customers, which can shape the impact of customer incivility on conflict-solving behavior. Our findings are consistent with the resource acquisition tenet of COR theory insofar as they support how investing in resources (i.e. relationships with customers) can help buffer resource loss that accompanies customer incivility and thereby neutralize the deleterious effect of customer incivility on conflict-solving behavior.

Managerial implications

Our research also provides actionable managerial implications for business practice. First, managers can help minimize negative effects on service performance due to customer incivility by emphasizing and investing in conflict-solving behaviors. Although some employees are naturally adept at solving conflicts, we provide the following prescriptive ways firms can assist employees in dealing with incivility. Training workshops that use role-playing, teaching employees to take others' perspectives, and showing them relevant instructional videos can be effective ways to enhance and encourage conflict-solving behavior. Providing opportunities for open discussion in which employees can share knowledge, emotions, and best practices or utilizing a mentor system in which employees struggling with customer incivility are paired with mentors who can provide advice and share experiences might also help equip employees and prepare them to anticipate and cope with customer incivility. During the COVID-19 pandemic, customer incivility in the airline industry has spiked. According to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), as of December 21, 2021, there had been a total of 5779 unruly passenger reports, of which 4156 were mask-related, and 37 incidents are under criminal investigation by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FAA, 2021). Recently, a Delta Airlines flight had to divert midflight due to an unruly passenger. It is not difficult to imagine that conflict will escalate in such circumstances, and the importance of conflict-solving behavior cannot be over emphasized.

Second, our research has implications for hiring practices in industries in which customer incivility is prevalent and increasing, such as those characterized by high-touch and frequent customer interactions (e.g. hospitality). In such industries, managers can

collaborate with the human resources department to target and hire promotion- rather than prevention-focused employees, as promotion-focused employees' conflict-solving behavior is less adversely affected when they experience customer incivility. If hiring on the basis of different work regulatory foci is difficult, managers can assign employees, based on which employees naturally exhibit a greater promotion focus, to positions that are vulnerable to higher levels of customer incivility. Third, providing resources to service employees to build customer relationships can help mitigate the negative effect of customer incivility on service performance. Providing rewards through tangible (e.g. compensation) or intangible (e.g. recognition) means, offering necessary resources (e.g. staff, budget), and eliminating barriers (e.g. removing approval processes in decision making) can collectively help employees build and maintain stronger business relationships and send a clear message to employees that customer relationship building is expected and valued. Finally, our research shows that the same negative consequences associated with customer incivility in B2C relationships are present and applicable in B2B relationships. Therefore, there is a need for more studies within the scope of B2B to explore the negative effects of consumer incivility.

Limitations and future research directions

This study is not without limitations, and these provide directions for further research. First, the organizational climate plays an important role in how employees appraise customer incivility. For example, a strong service climate that emphasizes service and customer satisfaction can help buffer the effect of customer incivility. A strong ethical climate can also play an important moderating role in addition to service climate, but perhaps in an opposite direction by establishing a high code of conduct and discouraging employees from dealing with customers who exhibit uncivil behavior. Second, although we addressed limitations such as common method bias and lack of causality in Study 3, service performance was still a perceptual measure, albeit reported by managers. Objective performance data could further bolster our findings. Our model focused on the outcome of customer incivility, not on the antecedents. Further research could explore customer-related and organization- or employee-triggered factors that initiate customer incivility. Finally, although this study centered on conflict-solving behavior as a problem resolution coping mechanism, other mechanisms could be studied as well, such as support seeking, avoidance, or accommodation strategies.

In conclusion, using the lens of COR theory, this research uncovers a new and alternative mediation channel, independent of emotional exhaustion and employee incivility. Conflict-solving behavior is a conduit even when emotional exhaustion and employee incivility are controlled for as parallel mediators. Consistent with the two tenets of COR theory, we show that conflict-solving behavior is less compromised by customer incivility when service employees are promotion focused and when they invest in customer relationship building. Finally, we have taken initial steps to show that customer incivility research can be expanded from the B2C context to B2B relationships. We hope this research sparks more interest in developing customer incivility models, especially in the B2B space.

Notes

1. In this paper, 'service employees' refer to frontline service employees who have direct contact and interaction with customers.
2. Exploratory factor analysis revealed that, after we removed one cross-loaded item, the remaining 10 items formed a unidimensional construct with an explained variance of 60.8%.
3. Exploratory factor analysis reveals that customer incivility is a unidimensional construct with an explained variance of 72.5%.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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