

# Customer mistreatment and employees' extra-role performance: A goal failure perspective

Do Uyen Tam<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Vietnam Aviation Academy, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

\*Corresponding author: tamdo@vaa.edu.vn

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## ABSTRACT

Although customer mistreatment has harmful consequences for employees and the organization, the boundary conditions of customer mistreatment have been largely neglected. This study conceptualizes Customer Mistreatment (CM) as a signaling failure regarding employees' pursuit of tasks and social goals at work and aims to examine the impact of CM on employees' extra-role performance through the mediating role of rumination. In addition, the moderating role of Hostile Attribution Bias (HAB) in the link between CM - rumination was also investigated. The Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) was used for data analysis, including measurement and structural assessment. Based on the data collected from 200 frontline staff working at Tan Son Nhat international airport, the findings revealed that CM indirectly affects employees' extra-role performance via rumination. Besides, although HAB did not moderate the CM - rumination relationship, it did impact employees' rumination. Limitations, recommendation for future research, and implications are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

All businesses have been adversely affected by the Covid-19 outbreak. Among those, the aviation industry is one of the most adverse industries caused by Covid-19 (Voorhees, Fombelle, & Bone, 2020). During this pandemic, the manner of staff-customer interactions has dramatically changed. Many regulations have been added to minimize the risk of human-to-human Covid-19 exposure. The airport frontline staff needs to change the serving process to ensure social distancing. They also require passengers to comply with all safety regulations, such as temperature checks and mandatory wearing of masks (Arora, Tuchen, Nazemi, & Blessing, 2021). The new regulations and processes, however, cause a reduction in the speed of service and more stress on passengers (Voorhees et al., 2020). Frontline employees (FLEs) often become a "punching bag" for stressful and angry passengers (Kyle, 2021). For FLEs working at the airport, experiencing mistreatment behavior by passengers occur more frequently than at any time in history (Kyle, 2021).

Unkind, aggressive customer behaviours can cause FLEs' negative emotions, change their work behaviors, and decrease service performance (Grandey, Dickter, & Sin, 2004). Service performance can be separated into in-role and extra-role performance. In-role performance refers to tasks based on job descriptions, while extra-role performance refers to

voluntary behaviors that are self-initiated, permanent, and ongoing, which go beyond the requirements outlined in the job description (Rank, Carsten, Unger, & Spector, 2007). These voluntary behaviors can improve service, helping to resolve potential customer service issues. Besides, previous studies have examined the relationship between CM and employee performance. However, job performance is mainly measured by general job performance or task performance, leaving the link between CM - extra-role performance remains limited (Rai & Agarwal, 2019; Zhu, Lam, & Lai, 2019). Howard and Russell (1996) suggest that the relationship between workplace interpersonal conflicts (e.g., CM) and job performance is an indirect effect rather than a direct impact. Based on cognitive rumination theories (Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, & Lyubomirsky, 2008) and Conservation Of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989), this research posits rumination as a mediator in this relationship.

Previous studies have shown that the adverse effects of CM can differ among employees with different traits (Torres, van Niekerk, & Orłowski, 2016). The COR theory suggests that individuals with different characteristics value resource losses differently. Our study posits the possibility of HAB as a moderator in the link between CM-rumination, thereby affecting employee extra-role performance. HAB is a characteristic that describes the degree to which an individual considers the worst motive for another's behavior and thus attributes responsible for their disruptive behavior (Adams & John, 1997). The author argues that higher levels of HAB can strengthen the negative impact of CM on employee rumination. In addition, we also test whether HAB directly impacts employees' rumination. The conceptual model is illustrated in Figure 1.

## **2. Theoretical basis**

### ***2.1. Customer mistreatment, rumination, extra-role performance***

Customer mistreatment is mistreatment behavior from customers towards service staff. These behaviors include verbal abuse, unreasonable demands, and disrespect toward service staff (Wang, Liao, Zhan, & Shi, 2011; Wang & Wang, 2017). Rupp and Spencer (2006) posit that mistreatment behaviors from customers can cause negative emotions for service staff and potentially further aggressive situations. The service interaction process between employees and customers is not only an interaction between individuals but also a fulfillment of psychological needs from both sides (Bradley, McColl-Kennedy, Sparks, Jimmieson, & Zapf, 2010). For example, while customers satisfy their utilitarian and recreational needs through services, employees gain a sense of accomplishment by demonstrating professional competence and achieving goals prescribed by the organization (Dormann & Zapf, 2004). Since then, from the employee's perspective, customer mistreatment represents a failure to achieve goals at work.

Based on cognitive rumination theories (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008) and Conservation Of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989), this study treats rumination as a mediating role in the link between CM - extra-role performance. According to cognitive theories of rumination (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008), rumination refers to conscious thinking about failure when pursuing a goal over a period of time. It occurs when individuals fail to progress toward important goals and ends when individuals achieve a goal, continue working toward it, or give up on it. The factor causing rumination is the experience of failure (Rothermund, 2003). CM, as mentioned above, can be considered a goal failure. The failure includes task-related (i.e., failure to succeed in customer-staff interaction) and self-related (i.e., failure to maintain positive views about oneself). During customer-staff interactions, FLEs are required to collaborate with customers, fulfill their requests and solve their problems (Dormann & Zapf, 2004). In addition,

during their interactions with customers, FLEs also strive to foster a sense of belonging and self-fulfillment and maintain a positive view of themselves (Dormann & Zapf, 2004). This type of goal is tied to the shared desire of individuals to be respected and appreciated (DeShon & Gillespie, 2005). CM usually relates to low customer satisfaction, deviating from the job goal (Harris & Reynolds, 2003). Furthermore, interpersonal conflict (e.g., CM) itself violates social norms of respect in interpersonal interactions. Thus, it can also threaten positive self-concept (Skarlicki, van Jaarsveld, & Walker, 2008). As a result, employees will be more likely to reflect on such incidents, which causes them to fail in their goals.

Besides, rumination can distract employees, which in turn can lead to reducing their performance. However, the impact can be more robust for extra-role behavior than task behaviors. This can be explained that extra-role behavior is often not included in the job description or not monitored by supervisors. Therefore, avoiding extra-role behavior when experiencing CM is a safe solution to protect employees' resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Emotion-centered models (Spector & Fox, 2002) also posit that interpersonal conflict (e.g., CM) elicits emotional and cognitive responses in employees (e.g., rumination), and employees tend to avoid and not engage in stranger-directed extra-role behaviors (e.g., helping customers). Previous studies have also shown that workplace interpersonal conflicts and extra-role performance are indirectly linked through a mediating mechanism. For example, Sulea et al. (2012) showed that job interpersonal conflict would negatively affect extra-role behavior through the mediating role of work engagement. Cheng, Dong, Zhou, Guo, and Peng (2020) also revealed that incivility from customers negatively affects the extra-role performance of FLEs by increasing negative affectivity. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

*H1: Rumination mediates the relationship between customer mistreatment and extra-role performance*

## **2.2. Hostile attribution bias and rumination**

Hostile Attribution Bias (HAB) is a "kind of interpretation bias in which individuals are more likely to interpret ambiguous situations as hostile than benign" (Wang, Cao, Dong, & Xia, 2019, p. 2). HAB can facilitate memory to recall hostile information and negative feelings (Epps & Kendall, 1995; Wilkowski & Robinson, 2010). Hertel, Mor, Ferrari, Hunt, and Agrawal (2014) assert that negative interpretations of a situation easily lead to rumination. HAB often automatically captures attention. An individual usually puts their attention on hostile information, which naturally causes rumination about negative information. Constantly allocating attention to stressful events is a feature of rumination (Wilkowski & Robinson, 2010). In addition, individuals with a high HAB are more likely to activate and recall hostile information in long-term memory. Thus, hostile attribution refers to the prolonged allocation of attention to negative emotion-inducing events and recalling those events, which is one of the key features of rumination.

Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

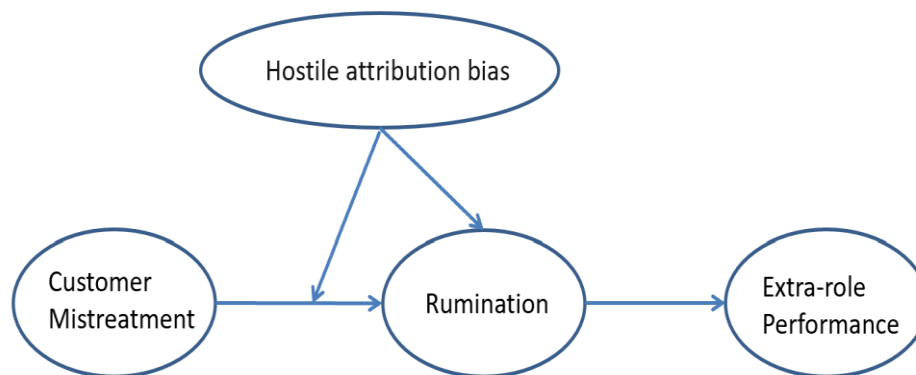
*H2: Hostile attribution positively impacts employees' rumination*

## **2.3. The moderating role of hostile attribution bias**

The COR theory suggests that people with different characteristics respond to and appraise resource loss differently (Hobfoll, 1989). Likewise, previous research has shown that while CM can cause negative affectivity among employees, the extent of its effect on employees

varies between individuals (Cho, Bonn, Han, & Lee, 2016). This study focuses on the role of HAB, an important trait that demonstrates the degree to which an individual is inclined to view the behavior of others as hostile (Epps & Kendall, 1995). Those with a high level of HAB may interpret adverse behaviors as meaningless even when it doesn't look like it (Matthews & Norris, 2002). When faced with CM, they tend to view the misconduct of others as intentional hostility. They are naturally more vulnerable to interpersonal conflict (i.e., CM) (Matthews & Norris, 2002), thus resulting in significant resource depletion. In contrast, people with a low level of hostile attribution bias prefer to attribute misbehavior to external factors and view it as justifiable. They may interpret CM as an unintended behaviour or attitude, thereby limiting the impact of such negative experiences and avoiding its negative outcomes, such as rumination. Thus, we proposed the following hypothesis:

*H3: Hostile attribution bias serves as the moderator between customer mistreatment and rumination. As such, the association is strengthened with a higher hostile attribution bias*



**Figure 1.** Conceptual model

### 3. Research method

#### Participants and procedures

We sampled our study of the check-in staff at Tan Son Nhat International Airport and used a cross-sectional survey to test the proposed theoretical model. The questionnaire was prepared in English and translated into Vietnamese for bilingual university researchers. We first conducted a group discussion with ten check-in staff to refine the questionnaire to ensure its clarity and relevance before the formal survey. We then contacted the Human resources manager of Saigon Ground Services company to obtain permission to collect data. The questionnaire was sent to 221 check-in staff. However, 200 questions were retrieved and used for data analysis after omitting missing answers. Of the 200 valid questionnaires, 62.5% of those surveyed were male. Most of the respondents hold a bachelor's degree (64%). 76% of respondents have an income of between 5 and 15 million VND. For respondents' tenure, 30% of those have work experience of more than 05 years, 37.5% have 03 to 05 years of work experience and the remaining 31% have working experience employment of fewer than 03 years.

#### Measures

*Customer mistreatment* was assessed with three items developed by Chi, Tsai, and Tseng (2013) using a 5-point Likert scale with 1 = never to 5 = very often. Sample items include: "Passengers complained about your service performance without reason."

*Rumination* was measured using nine items developed by Wong, Yik, and Kwong (2006) on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 = never to 5 = very often. Sample items include “I could not stop thinking about what passengers did to me.”

*Extra-role performance* was assessed with three items developed by Netemeyer, Maxham, and Pullig (2005) using a 6-point Likert scale with 1 = never to 5 = very often. Sample items include: “How often did you go above and beyond the “call of duty” when serving passengers?”

*Hostile attribution bias* was measured using nine items developed by Adams and John (1997) on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 = never to 5 = very often. Sample items include: “Most people make friends because friends are likely to be useful to them.”

#### 4. Research results

PLS-SEM was used for data analysis. Measurement assessment was tested first, followed by structural assessment. PLS path modeling was used to estimate the measurement and structural assessment because this method affords greater control complexity with the correction of various models and produces high levels of statistical indicators with small sample sizes (Abdullah, Samdin, Teng, & Heng, 2019).

##### 4.1. Measurement model

We first assessed the measurement model, including (a) the reliability, (b) convergence, and (c) the discriminant validity of constructs. Cronbach’s Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) are used to assess the constructs’ reliability. Cronbach’s Alpha and CR values of all constructs are greater than 0.7 so the reliability of constructs was verified (Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2013). Next, factor loading and Average Extracted Variance (AVE) were evaluated for convergent validity. Two indicators, R4 and R6, of the rumination construct have factor loadings less than the threshold of 0.5 (Table 1). The author omitted these indicators to ensure convergent validity. The AVE values of all constructs are greater than 0.5. In other words, the constructs explained more than 50% of the variance of its indicators. Therefore, the convergent validity of all constructs was verified.

**Table 1**

Reliability and convergence validity of constructs

Constructs	Indicators	Reliability		Convergence validity	
		Cronbach’s Alpha	CR	Loadings	AVE
Customer mistreatment	CM1	0.823	0.893	0.902	0.736
	CM2			0.816	
	CM3			0.854	
Rumination	R1	0.799	0.846	0.695	0.525
	R2			0.652	
	R3			0.633	
	R4			0.459	
	R5			0.662	

Constructs	Indicators	Reliability		Convergence validity	
		Cronbach's Alpha	CR	Loadings	AVE
	R6			0.417	
	R7			0.596	
	R8			0.679	
	R9			0.726	
Extra-role performance	EX1	0.704	0.814	0.753	0.525
	EX2			0.800	
	EX3			0.579	
	EX4			0.748	
Hostile attribution bias	HO1	0.811	0.832	0.686	0.509
	HO2			0.747	
	HO3			0.689	
	HO4			0.759	
	HO5			0.664	
	HO6			0.733	

The Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) was inspected for the discriminant validity of constructs. Its values should be less than 0.85 to verify the discriminant between constructs. The author also used the “bootstrapping” technique with 5,000 samples. If any HTMT confidence interval (significant level 5%) contains the value 1, the construct’s discriminant validity cannot be satisfied. Table 2 shows that all HTMT values are much smaller than the threshold of 0.85. In addition, because the confidence interval of HTMT values did not include value 1, the discriminant validity is confirmed.

**Table 2**

Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

	Extra-role performance	Customer mistreatment	Rumination
Customer mistreatment	0.157		
Rumination	0.319	0.386	
Hostile attribution bias	0.096	0.121	0.248

#### 4.2. Structural model

Mediation and moderation effects tests were performed using bootstrapping (N = 5,000). The Bootstrapping statistical resampling method estimates the coefficients from each bootstrap sample, ranks them in order, and establishes the desired confidence (Hayes, 2017). Hypothesis H1 proposed the mediation hypothesis, in which rumination plays a mediating role in the relationship between CM and employees’ extra-role performance. Table 3 showed that hypothesis H1 was supported ( $\beta = -0.074$ , p-value = 0.01) with the confidence interval not containing zero. In addition, CM did not directly affect employee extra-role performance (p =

0.789 > 5%). It can be concluded that the impact of CM on employees' extra-role performance was fully mediated by rumination. Hypothesis H2 proposed the direct effect of hostile attribution on employees' rumination. Table 3 showed that H2 was supported ( $\beta = 0.184$ ,  $p = 0.013$ ).

We also tested the moderating role of hostile attribution in the CM - rumination relationship (hypothesis H3). According to Table 3, H3 was rejected ( $p = 0.548$ ), indicating that hostile attribution did not moderate the effect of CM on rumination.

**Table 3**

Coefficient and its confidence intervals

	<b>Beta</b>	<b>2.5%</b>	<b>97.5%</b>	<b>p-values</b>
<b>Direct effect</b>				
HO -> RM	0.184	0.079	0.347	0.013
<b>Indirect effect</b>				
CM -> RM -> EX	-0.074	-0.142	-0.035	0.010
<b>Moderating effect</b>				
CM*HT -> RM	0.045	-0.091	0.196	0.548

Note: CM: customer mistreatment; RM: rumination; EX: extra-role performance; HO: hostile attribution bias

\*, \*\*, \*\*\*: significant at 5%, 1%, 0.1%

## 5. Discussion

This study aimed to examine the impact of customer mistreatment on the extra-role performance of FLEs. Hypotheses H1 test the mediating role of rumination in the relationship between CM and employees' extra-role performance while H2 examines the effect of hostile attribution bias on employees' rumination. Hypothesis H3 investigated the moderating role of hostile attribution bias in the relationship between CM and employees' rumination. The study results indicated that Hypothesis H1 and H2 were supported. CM indirectly affects the employee's extra-role performance via rumination. However, hypothesis H3 was rejected. Specifically, hostile attribution bias did not moderate the CM-Rumination relationship.

The full mediation role of rumination indicated that although CM did not directly impact employees' extra-role performance when these behaviors are combined with a high level of rumination, employees would decrease extra-role behaviours to protect their resources. Rumination accounted for underlying mechanisms that link CM - employees' extra-role performance. The indirect effect of deviant customer behavior on extra-role performance is also consistent with previous studies. For example, Sulea et al. (2012) show that workplace interpersonal conflicts will negatively affect extra-role behavior through the mediating role of work engagement. Cheng et al. (2020) also revealed that customer incivility reduces employees' extra-role performance of FLEs by increasing the level of negative affectivity.

The results also indicated that HAB directly affected employees' rumination. This finding was partly consistent with previous research in which ruminative thoughts were resulted from negative interpretations (Badra et al., 2017). Finally, contrary to expectations, the results revealed that HAB did not moderate the CM - rumination relationship. Thus, more important characteristics that are essential for the moderating role of CM - rumination should be investigated in the future research.

## **6. Conclusion**

### ***6.1. Theoretical contributions***

First, our results demonstrate that CM increases the employees' rumination, thereby reducing extra-role performance. This study adds to the research on customer mistreatment by investigating the underlying mechanisms that link CM - extra-role performance. Second, the concept of CM in previous research has been shaped as a work demand or job characteristic. However, considering this concept as the failure in frontline staff's goals during customer interactions has not received much attention from researchers (Wang et al., 2013). Different approaches to this research concept will lead to different results. For example, when CM is considered a violation of the norm of interpersonal interaction at work, this behavior will result in an immediate emotional response (e.g., anger, guilt, and frustration). When considering CM as a failure in job goals, the results may link to high levels of employee's rumination (Wang et al., 2013). Therefore, our findings complement previous studies on various employee psychological processes resulting from experiencing customer mistreatment and a more comprehensive view of the different outcomes of CM. In addition, because of the detrimental effect of extra-role performance on service companies, previous studies have attempted to examine its antecedents. This study contributes to the theory and practicals by revealing the associations between CM - employees' extra-role performance.

Secondly, although HAB did not moderate the CM - Rumination relationship, it did impact rumination. This study supported that hostile interpretation can lead to rumination (Wang et al., 2019). Existing research on the predictors of rumination has mainly examined personal factors such as self-control (Denson, Pedersen, Friese, Hahm, & Roberts, 2011), leaving hostile attribution remained limited. This study adds to this line of research by examining the effect of HAB on rumination.

### ***6.2. Practical implications***

This study has some practical implications for service firms. Research results show that CM affects FLEs' extra-role performance. Suppose CM is an unavoidable issue during the service interaction. In that case, managers need to take practical solutions to minimize its negative impact instead of only focusing on the idea that "the customer is always right". One of the most effective strategies is to organize training courses for employees to improve their skills in dealing with CM. Managers should encourage employees to participate in such training programs. Training will not be practical without the serious involvement of leaders. Leaders must put in the time and effort to ensure every training program has clear, relevant, and achievable goals. Since FLEs are busy serving customers, they may perceive the training as an interruption and pay little attention to it, failing to achieve the purpose of the training course. Therefore, leaders also arrange suitable schedules for FLEs to attend training sessions.

In addition, the aviation industry is characterized by a seasonal increase in passenger numbers, similar to most tourism industries. At this time, the airport becomes overloaded, and conflicts between passengers and staff happen more frequently. Therefore, the management board should also pay attention to having the plan to hire seasonal staff to assist passengers promptly to minimize conflicts between passengers and staff. Another simple way to reduce stress for FLEs after experiencing CM is to encourage employees to take short breaks during specific work hours. The "quiet space" in the organization should be designed so that employees

can meditate, refocus, or calm down without distractions (Heather, 2019). In addition, finding a quiet place to meditate can also be beneficial in reducing hostile attribution bias (Schans, Karremans, & Holland, 2020). Even for just 15 minutes, employees can be more focused, alert, and refreshed by completely taking a break from work. As a result, they reduce their level of rumination and further decrease their extra-role performance.

### **6.3. Future research directions**

The study is not without its limitations. First, this study only investigated mistreatment behavior from customer sources. Further study should combine workplace mistreatment from multiple sources, such as supervisors or coworkers. Second, this study was conducted in the aviation context. Future studies should consider studying the proposed model in different industrial contexts, such as hotels, restaurants, and banks to generalize the research findings. In addition, factors that can add to or mitigate the negative influence of CM on its outcomes, such as employees' personality characteristics, also warrant future research.

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