



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Their bad experiences make me think twice: Customer-to-colleague incivility, self-reflection, and improved service delivery

Wenyang Gao¹ | Qingxiong (Derek) Weng¹  |
Anastasiia Popelnukha¹ | Lincoln Jisuvei Sungu² 

¹School of Management, University of Science and Technology of China, Hefei, China

²International Institute of Finance, School of Management, University of Science and Technology of China, Hefei, China

Correspondence

Qingxiong (Derek) Weng, School of Management, University of Science and Technology of China, 96 Jinzhai Road, Hefei 230026, Anhui, China.
Email: wqx886@ustc.edu.cn

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Abstract

Prior research has shown that customer incivility impacts targeted employees' performance. Yet, whether such experiences also influence bystander employees has been overlooked. In this work, we take a third-party perspective and suggest that observed customer-to-colleague incivility may have a positive impact on bystander employees' service performance. Drawing on social learning theory, we develop a model where we study the consequence of observed customer-to-colleague incivility on service performance through self-reflection. A two-week experience sampling study with data collected from 99 nurses revealed that, observed daily customer-to-colleague incivility was positively related to bystander employees' daily self-reflection, which in turn was positively associated with their daily service performance. Moreover, we identified performance-based self-esteem (i.e., the importance of performance to self-esteem) as a key boundary condition that explains for whom witnessing customer-to-colleague incivility is more likely to engender higher self-reflection. The theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

KEYWORDS

bystander employees, customer incivility, self-esteem, self-reflection, service performance

INTRODUCTION

Customer incivility is a dominant form of customer mistreatment (Shin & Hur, 2022). It refers to “low-intensity deviant behavior, perpetrated by someone in a customer or client role, with ambiguous intent to harm an employee, in violation of social norms of mutual respect and courtesy” (Sliter et al., 2010, p. 468). A national survey of frontline employees in the fast food industry in Australia found that 87% of employees frequently experience uncivil behaviors from customers at work (Abc News, 2018). Also, Grandey et al. (2004) found that call center employees suffer from verbal aggression by customers on average 10 times a day. As a ubiquitous problem in the service industry, customer incivility is related to targeted employees' emotional exhaustion (Han et al., 2021), job burnout (Han et al., 2016), incivility toward coworkers (Torres et al., 2017) and customers (van Jaarsveld et al., 2010), and reduced job performance (Arasli et al., 2018).

Previous research has extensively explored the impact of experienced customer incivility on targeted employees (for reviews, see Yue et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2021), with limited attention to the effects of observed incivility (Han et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2022; Schilpzand et al., 2016). Although service employees observe more mistreatment from customers than within organizations (Sommovigo et al., 2019), studies on third-party effects have predominantly focused on the negative reactions of bystander employees to incivility from organizational insiders such as supervisor-to-coworker or coworker-to-coworker incivility (Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2007; Reich & Hershcovis, 2015; Totterdell et al., 2012). One exception is Baranik et al. (2022), who found that witnessing patients' mistreatment toward coworkers negatively affected nurses' performance. However, observed customer incivility may have a positive influence on bystander employees. These vicarious experiences have instrumental value as they contain important information about work (Matthews et al., 2022; Miner et al., 2018), which may help bystander employees understand and improve their own work behaviors. Examining such a possibility enriches knowledge of the consequences of vicarious incivility experiences. Given the difficulty for service employees to avoid customer incivility (Kamran-Disfani et al., 2023), our study may inform practice in that customer incivility incidents may be considered as growth opportunities, because observed incivility can be utilized as a learning resource for employees to improve their service delivery.

Another limitation in customer incivility research is the neglect of customer incivility as an experience that fluctuates daily. Because interactions between customers and service workers are random and temporary (Hur et al., 2022), directly experienced and indirectly observed customer incivility can fluctuate within persons on a day-to-day basis. However, the majority of studies on customer incivility have employed static between-person approaches (e.g., Bani-Melhem, 2020; Shin & Hur, 2022), which have limitations in capturing the dynamic nature of incivility (Beattie & Griffin, 2014) and examining its immediate or short-term effects (Chi et al., 2018; Niven et al., 2022). To address this gap, the current study utilizes a within-person perspective to examine how and when observed daily customer-to-colleague incivility may improve bystander employees' daily service performance.

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) suggests that others' experiences provide a vicarious learning opportunity for observers to engage in self-reflection, a cognitive process in which individuals inspect, evaluate, and clearly understand their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Grant et al., 2002). Self-reflection helps people make sense of their past behaviors, identify the areas for improvement, and change their future behaviors (Anseel et al., 2009; Kross et al., 2023; Pee et al., 2000; Peltier et al., 2005). Given that workplace incivility conveys valuable job information (Matthews et al., 2022; Miner et al., 2018), we speculate that observing daily customer-to-colleague incivility provides many vicarious learning opportunities for bystander employees to self-reflect, particularly on days when such experiences are frequent. This reflective process may lead to subsequent positive behavioral changes. Specifically, we propose that employees' self-reflection on colleagues' negative experiences on a particular day would enhance their service performance on the same day.

Observed customer incivility may not similarly influence all bystander employees. Social learning theory posits that individual characteristics influence the vicarious learning process (Bandura, 1977), providing a theoretical framework to understand when employees are more likely to self-reflect based on others' negative work experiences. Performance-based self-esteem reflects an individual's sensitivity to negative work experiences, and employees with this type of self-esteem seek to avoid failure in performing their job and tend to pay special attention to negative performance-related information (Crocker et al., 2004; Ho & Astakhova, 2020). Thus, drawing on contingent self-esteem literature (Amarnani et al., 2019; Crocker et al., 2004), we identify performance-based self-esteem (i.e., the importance of performance to self-esteem or IPSE; Ferris et al., 2015) as a potential boundary condition that may affect the degree to which bystander employees reflect on themselves after witnessing their colleagues' experience of customer incivility.

Our research contributes to the current literature in at least four ways. First, although research has shown the consequences of observed incivility from organizational insiders on bystander employees, exploring the effects of observed incivility from organizational outsiders provides additional knowledge on the third-party effects of workplace incivility. Second, although incivility is an undesirable experience with deleterious impacts on employees, the vicarious learning perspective (Bandura, 1977) offers a novel explanation of how incivility could lead to positive effects. This perspective provides service organizations with a new practical insight: encouraging employees to view observed incivility as learning opportunities for reflecting on and improving service behaviors. Third, we seek to advance the knowledge of the vicarious learning mechanism by exploring the boundary condition under which learning from negative experiences may be enhanced or diminished. By identifying IPSE as a cross-level moderator, we contribute to a comprehensive understanding of how individual differences help explain who is more likely to learn from colleagues' daily customer incivility experiences. Finally, by adopting a within-person approach, we address the call for more research on the short-term effect of observed workplace incivility (Schilpzand et al., 2016) and advance the literature by showing how others' daily negative workplace experiences influence bystander employees' daily vicarious learning process. We adopt experience sampling methodology (ESM) to test our model, with advantages in minimizing memory bias and improving ecological validity (Hektner et al., 2007). The hypothesized model is depicted in Figure 1.

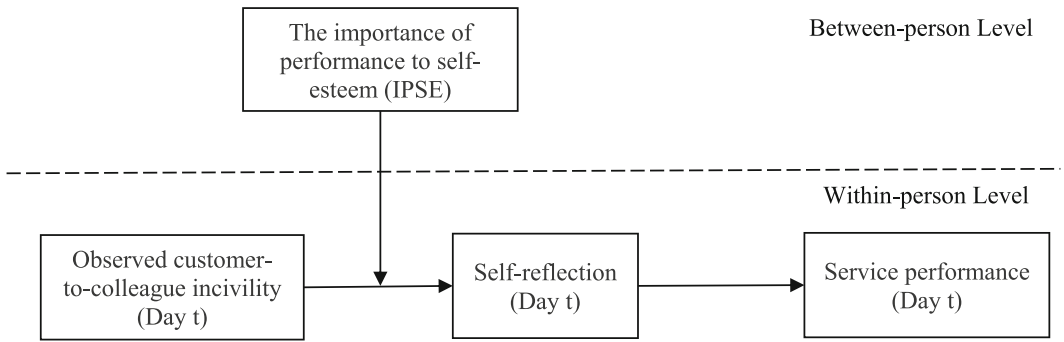


FIGURE 1 Hypothesized model of the current research.

THEORY GROUNDING AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Vicarious learning from others' experience

Learning from the experiences of others is a vicarious learning process, which is emphasized by social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). Vicarious learning occurs when people observe the behavior of others and its consequences (Bandura, 1977; Gioia & Manz, 1985). Observed positive consequences increase the likelihood that the observer acts in similar behaviors, and observed negative consequences decrease the likelihood that the observer acts in similar behaviors (Manz & Sims, 1981). Vicarious learning is a crucial process for acquiring, developing, and changing behaviors in organizations (Gioia & Manz, 1985). Indeed, past organizational research has confirmed the vital role of vicarious learning, especially from the negative experiences of others. For example, Bledow et al. (2017) experimentally compared the effectiveness of stories about management successes and management failures for managerial learning and found that failure stories resulted in better learning outcomes. Also, Diwas et al. (2013) found that cardiothoracic surgeons learn more from others' failed experiences than from their successful ones. Similar findings were found in the area of workplace mistreatment. For example, receiving negative gossip from supervisors and coworkers facilitates employee receivers' vicarious learning, as gossip stories convey negative information about colleagues such as poor work performance and inappropriate behaviors (Bai et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2022).

Daily customer-to-colleague incivility and bystander employees' daily self-reflection

Social learning theory emphasizes the important role of self-reflection in the vicarious learning process (Bai et al., 2020; Bandura, 1991; Myers, 2021). Recent theoretical and empirical research suggests that workplace incivility has a certain learning value, as it conveys information to employees about their jobs (Matthews et al., 2022; Miner et al., 2018). Although self-reflection typically arises from personal experiences (Ayduk & Kross, 2010; Kross & Ayduk, 2008), relevant others' experiences could trigger observers' self-reflection when these experiences are relevant to one's own work goals (Knipfer et al., 2013). These "relevant others" are people who complete the same or similar tasks (Ellis et al., 2010), like colleagues of service employees who

perform similar roles and share similar service goals, such as following customer service rules, solving customers' problems, and fulfilling customers' requests (Wang et al., 2013). Moreover, previous research (Bledow et al., 2017; Diwas et al., 2013) indicates that individuals are more likely to learn from others' negative experiences. Bai et al.'s (2020) study provides preliminary evidence supporting the idea that colleagues' negative experiences can prompt bystander employees to engage in self-reflection. They argued that negative gossip concerning the failure of others at work has learning value and found that hearing negative gossip about colleagues from supervisors facilitates employees' self-reflection. Therefore, bystander employees can extract important meanings from colleagues' specific experiences of customer incivility, enabling them to reflect on their own service behaviors during workdays. For instance, observed customer incivility could be attributed to colleagues' lack of knowledge or customers' acts of instrumental rudeness to gain some benefits from the organization like free or lower prices (Sliter & Jones, 2016).

Due to the shared service goals among service employees (Wang et al., 2013), witnessing customer incivility provides immediate feedback for bystander employees to reflect on their service behaviors. This is particularly applicable in demanding professions such as medical practitioners, where errors can cause dire consequences. In these situations, observed incivility might serve as a proximal and instant reminder for employees to pay attention to certain areas of potential errors or sudden jolts to increase the salience of error aversion. Through self-reflection, bystander nurses may be alert to behaviors that trigger customer incivility and become aware of how to promptly deal with difficult customers to avert any negative consequences.

Given that colleagues' experiences differ in their encounters with customer incivility on a daily basis (Hur et al., 2022; Shin et al., 2024; Tremmel & Sonnentag, 2018), the frequency of customer incivility observed by bystander employees can vary throughout a working day. In our current study, we focus on the short-term effect, specifically exploring the impact of daily fluctuating customer-to-colleague incivility on bystander employees' subsequent self-reflection. Bystander employees are more likely to engage in self-reflection on days when they observe higher levels of customer incivility, as these instances provide more opportunities for learning vicariously from their colleagues' experiences. Based on social learning theory and past empirical evidence, therefore, we posit that observed daily customer incivility will influence bystander employees' daily self-reflection:

Hypothesis 1. Observed daily customer-to-colleague incivility is positively related to bystander employees' daily self-reflection.

Bystander employees' daily self-reflection and daily service performance

Self-reflection is central to self-regulation (Grant et al., 2002; Silvia & Phillips, 2011), which includes evaluating past efforts, experiences, and strategies and attempting to learn from them (Anseel et al., 2009; Son, 2018). Past ESM studies have indicated that self-reflection fluctuates within persons on a daily basis (Gabriel et al., 2021; Newman & Nezelek, 2019). Daily self-reflection enables individuals to continuously monitor and evaluate goal progress and improve performance based on that progress (Grant et al., 2002). After observing their colleagues' specific encounters with customer incivility on a working day, bystander employees may engage in immediate self-reflection. This process allows them to judge the effectiveness of their past

similar behaviors with their customers on that day, determining which behaviors should be adjusted to improve the quality of their subsequent service delivery. Moreover, self-reflection enables people to “reconstruct existing knowledge, recognize areas in need of improvement, and change routine behaviors” (Son, 2018, p. 46), which is helpful in enhancing individuals’ creativity. Previous research supports this argument, with Wang et al. (2019) discovering a positive relationship between self-reflection and employee creativity. Similarly, an investigation into problem-solving pondering (a form of work-related self-reflection; Cropley et al., 2012) has also shown its positive impact on creativity (Vahle-Hinz et al., 2017). So, it is reasonable to expect that daily self-reflection can prompt employees to learn new service skills and use more innovative ways to serve customers, which helps to improve daily work efficiency and achieve service goals. In addition, the continuous process of reflection triggered by colleagues’ experiences of customer incivility also gives individuals more confidence in reaching their goals (Kross et al., 2023), which is beneficial for employees to handle similar incidents in the future.

Recent studies have shown that service performance varies among individuals on a day-to-day basis (Amarnani et al., 2022; Hur et al., 2022; Ren et al., 2022). Based on these findings, we focus on the short-term impact of daily self-reflection on bystander employees’ daily service performance. Upon witnessing customer incivility, engaging in immediate self-reflection becomes a crucial means for employees to improve subsequent service performance. This reflective process leads them to conscientiously recognize the necessity of error avoidance and stimulates prompt adaptations and innovations in service behaviors for subsequent customers during a working day. Thus, we hypothesize that bystander employees’ day-specific self-reflection could influence their daily service performance:

Hypothesis 2. Bystander employees’ daily self-reflection is positively related to their daily service performance.

As already discussed, self-reflection is a process that explains how past experiences relate to future behavior (Bai et al., 2020; Bandura, 1991; Myers, 2021). It follows that if there is any learning from witnessing daily customer incivility, then it is self-reflection that will explain subsequent observers’ behaviors. That is, on a daily basis, self-reflection allows bystander employees to learn from others’ work experiences, identify service behaviors that need to be improved, and consider innovative service approaches that should enhance service performance. Hence, we argue that when observed customer-to-employee incivility triggers observers’ self-reflection, a positive indirect effect will occur between observed incivility and bystander employees’ service performance. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3. Bystander employees’ daily self-reflection mediates the within-person relationship between observed daily customer-to-colleague incivility and their daily service performance.

Moderating role of IPSE

Certain individual characteristics may impact the vicarious learning process of work behaviors (Manz & Sims, 1981). Dhanani and LaPalme (2019) suggest that individual characteristics of third parties are important moderating variables that influence the extent to which third parties respond to vicarious workplace mistreatment. Customer incivility expresses customers’

dissatisfaction with the service (Matthews et al., 2022). Bystander service workers whose self-esteem is based on performance may be more susceptible to information about service failure. Based on contingent self-esteem literature, we identify IPSE as a potential moderator of the relationship between customer-to-colleague incivility and observers' self-reflection. The theories related to contingent self-esteem (Amarnani et al., 2019; Crocker et al., 2004; Filosa & Alessandri, 2023) state that individuals hold self-evaluations in various domains, and not all domain-based self-evaluations play an equally important role in the overall self-esteem of a person. For example, some people's self-esteem depends on appearance, while others' self-esteem depends on performance (Ferris et al., 2015). People with high IPSE derive their self-worth from performing well and being competent at work (Amarnani et al., 2019). After witnessing customers' incivility toward coworkers on a specific working day, higher-IPSE bystander employees are more likely to proactively pay closer attention to this information and become more motivated to avoid similar experiences that might threaten their self-esteem. The perceived service failures of others are more likely to remind them of their past service behaviors, thus triggering them to reflect on their own work. Therefore, these individuals should put more effort into understanding what went wrong with their colleagues' services and develop new understandings of their own service behaviors as compared to those with lower IPSE. Based on these arguments, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 4. IPSE moderates the within-person relationship between observed daily customer-to-colleague incivility and bystander employees' daily self-reflection, such that this positive effect is stronger for service employees with higher levels of IPSE.

Because self-reflection leads to a change in behavior (Anseel et al., 2009; Kross et al., 2023; Pee et al., 2000; Peltier et al., 2005), it follows that IPSE should moderate the indirect effect of observed daily customer-to-colleague incivility on bystander employees' daily service performance through daily self-reflection. To be more specific, on a daily basis, observed customer incivility is more likely to trigger self-reflection and subsequently enhance service performance for employees whose self-esteem is highly contingent on their service performance. Therefore, we posit that:

Hypothesis 5. IPSE moderates the within-person indirect effect of observed daily customer-to-colleague incivility on bystander employees' daily service performance via their daily self-reflection, such that the positive indirect effect is stronger for service employees with higher levels of IPSE.

METHOD

Participants and procedure

In the current study, we employed hospital nurses as participants in our investigation. The selection of a nurse sample was based on several reasons that we consider highly relevant to the current research questions. First, nurses are engaged in a typical service role, interacting with various customers, namely patients, on a daily basis (Thomas et al., 2022). Their responsibilities encompass providing patient care, prioritizing patient needs, and providing emotional

support to patients and their families. Patients play a crucial role in evaluating both the treatment process and the service providers involved (Gountas et al., 2014). Dissatisfied patients retain the option to decline treatment or seek an alternative service provider (Yue et al., 2021). Furthermore, nurses' performance evaluations are significantly influenced by the extent of patient satisfaction with the care they provide (Berry & Bendapudi, 2007). Patients are increasingly considered as "clients" or "customers" by hospital employees (Hudak et al., 2003) and researchers (Lavelle et al., 2021; Mostafa, 2022; Thomas et al., 2022; Yue et al., 2021; Zhan et al., 2023). Following previous customer incivility studies (Mostafa, 2022; Thomas et al., 2022), we consider the relationship between patients and nurses as a special form of customer-employee relationship. Second, incivility is prevalent in healthcare professions, and its increasing occurrence in hospitals significantly impacts the effectiveness and satisfaction of nurses (Guidroz et al., 2010; Nikstaitis & Simko, 2014). Finally, given that service interactions typically occur in public settings (Cheng et al., 2023; Kim & Baker, 2020), nurses have opportunities to witness the daily experiences of their fellow healthcare professionals.

We sent a study invitation (with the study purpose and the data collection procedures) to the authors' social network to recruit nurses for participation in the current study. The inclusion criteria for participation were as follows: (1) working full-time and (2) having the opportunity to observe interactions between colleagues and patients or their family members during workdays. We also asked nurses who agreed to participate to invite other potentially interested coworkers. A total of 128 nurses who met the inclusion criteria were recruited.

We built our baseline and ESM surveys via www.wjx.cn, an online survey platform that researchers use to collect data in China and has been widely utilized in past studies (Liu et al., 2021; Lu et al., 2020; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018). We sent survey links and reminded each participant via a WeChat (a widely used instant messaging application in China) group that we formed for all participating nurses.

Before conducting the surveys, all participants were assured that their participation was voluntary and that their responses would be collected and analyzed confidentially and anonymously. The data collection involved two phases. In phase 1 (baseline survey), participants signed informed consent forms and then completed an online survey for between-person level variables (demographic information, IPSE, and trait self-reflection). To ensure anonymity, participants were asked to provide the last four digits of their 11-digit mobile phone number as an ID code for matching their initial and daily survey responses. In phase 2 (daily survey), 1 week after the baseline survey, participants received daily online surveys twice a day (at 12 pm and 5 pm) for a duration of 2 weeks. Following a prior ESM study on observed workplace incivility (Lin & Loi, 2021), we measured the nurses' observed incivility in the morning. In hospitals, incivility from patients or their family members is more likely to happen in the morning, as nurses usually conduct checkups on all the patients in the morning. The Time 1 survey, which included observed customer-to-colleague incivility, experienced customer incivility, and self-reflection, was completed between 12 pm and 2 pm. The Time 2 survey, which contained service performance, was completed between 5 pm and 7 pm. Because most nurses in our study worked on irregular daily routines (i.e., alternating between day and night shifts), we asked nurses on a day shift to complete the daily survey for that day, while nurses on a night shift were not required to complete the daily survey for that day. We also sent daily surveys on weekends because some nurses also worked on weekends. To ensure a high completion rate, participants were reminded twice within a two-hour window during the midday and afternoon surveys each day in the WeChat group (reminders for the midday survey: 12 pm and 1 pm; reminders for the afternoon survey: 5 pm and 6 pm). Participants received 20 RMB for

completing the baseline survey, 5 RMB for completing each midday survey, and 5 RMB for completing each afternoon survey. In order to further improve the completion rate, following the approach of Gerpott et al. (2022), we provided participants with an additional monetary incentive of 30 RMB if they completed all surveys for 2 weeks.

Among these 128 nurses, nine dropped out of the study during the data collection period for some personal reasons (e.g., taking a vacation or attending training). Of the remaining 119 nurses (93% between-person response rate), we eliminated another 20 nurses who completed less than 3 days of daily surveys (Gabriel et al., 2018; Schilpzand et al., 2018). Based on prior ESM research (Tremmel & Sonnentag, 2018), we performed an attrition analysis by comparing the means of variables collected at the baseline survey between the final sample ($n = 99$) and the removed sample (who filled out the daily surveys for less than 3 days, $n = 20$). There were no significant differences regarding IPSE, $t(117) = 0.37$, $p = 0.71$; trait self-reflection, $t(117) = -1.05$, $p = 0.30$; age, $t(117) = 0.36$, $p = 0.72$; educational level, $t(117) = -0.39$, $p = 0.70$; and organizational tenure, $t(117) = 0.07$, $p = 0.95$. The final sample of 99 nurses (83% between-person response rate) from different departments across different public hospitals provided 624 valid day-level observations. Participants' average age was 32.46 years ($SD = 6.87$). Their average tenure was 10.37 years ($SD = 7.37$). The majority of the sample was female (96%) and college-educated (74%).

Measures

All scales were initially developed in English. Following prior research (Zhang et al., 2022), we used the translation-back translation procedure (Brislin, 1980) to translate all English measures into Mandarin Chinese. Unless otherwise specified, we used a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Consistent with scholars' suggestions (Beal, 2015; Gabriel et al., 2019) and previous ESM research (Tang, Koopman, et al., 2022), we shortened within-person scales to reduce the burden on participants. Based on the method of previous studies (Rosen et al., 2019; Tang, Koopman, et al., 2022), we examined the convergence of shortened scale and full-length scales by calculating the correlation of each scale in a sample of 73 nurses from www.wjx.cn. The results showed high correlations between shortened and full-length scales (all correlations were greater than 0.95), indicating that the use of shortened measures is unlikely to threaten the validity of our results.

IPSE

We used Ferris et al.'s (2010) five-item scale to assess IPSE. An example item is "Doing well at work gives me a sense of self-respect." The Cronbach's α coefficient for this scale was .65. Although the α coefficient for this scale was relatively low, an α coefficient above .6 is acceptable (Tsai et al., 2017; Zhou et al., 2019).

Observed daily customer-to-colleague incivility

We used a seven-item scale from Sliter et al. (2012) to assess observed customer-to-colleague incivility in the morning. We modified the wording of items to suit daily assessments. A sample

item is “This morning, you saw patients or their family members take out anger on your colleagues.” Participants indicated how often they had observed customer-to-colleague incivility using a five-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (more than six times). The within-person Cronbach's α reliability and omega (ω) reliability for this scale were .79 and .79, respectively.

Daily self-reflection

We measured daily self-reflection using four items from the Reflective Learning Continuum subscale developed by Peltier et al. (2006). This scale has been used to measure employees' self-reflection (Bai et al., 2020; Son, 2016). We presented participants with an instruction (i.e., after seeing colleagues' customer experiences today) and then asked them to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the items describing self-reflection. A sample item is “I reflected on my actions to see whether I could improve them.” The within-person Cronbach's α reliability and omega (ω) reliability for this scale were .90 and .90.

Daily service performance

Within a service-related context, in-role service performance often encompasses behaviors typically categorized as extra-role behaviors in other industries (Raub & Liao, 2012; Yoon et al., 2022). These extra-role behaviors encompass displaying kindness, being helpful and responsive to requests, and willingly going above and beyond to exhibit concern and care (Kundro et al., 2022). In healthcare services, nurses are also required to go beyond their job descriptions and engage in extra-role work to meet the needs of patients (Qiu et al., 2020). Due to the distinctive nature of service performance, previous research has frequently conceptualized it as extra-role behaviors toward customers and assessed service performance using scales specifically designed for extra-role service (Chen et al., 2015; Hur et al., 2022; Van Gelderen et al., 2017; Yoon et al., 2022). Following Yoon et al.'s (2022) study, we assessed daily service performance using the extra-role customer service scale developed by Bettencourt and Brown (1997). The scale has been used to measure nurses' performance (Lavelle et al., 2021). One sample item is “This afternoon, I helped patients with problems beyond what is expected or required.” The within-person Cronbach's α reliability and omega (ω) reliability for this scale were .80 and .80, respectively.

Control variables

At the within-person level, we controlled for employees' own daily experiences of customer incivility because employees' own daily experiences could elicit self-reflection (Ayduk & Kross, 2010; Knipfer et al., 2013). We used the same seven-item scale from Sliter et al. (2012) to measure daily experiences of customer incivility. The within-person Cronbach's α reliability and omega (ω) reliability for this scale were .83 and .83, respectively. At the between-person level, we measured trait self-reflection as a control variable to rule out its potential influence on our hypothesized relationships in our model, as employees with high trait self-reflection are more likely to engage in daily self-reflection. We measured trait self-reflection using the 12-item scale developed by Grant et al. (2002). One sample item is “I frequently take time to reflect on

my thoughts.” The Cronbach’s α coefficient for this scale was .94 in the current study. We also controlled for the effects of age, organizational tenure, and educational level, as prior studies have suggested that such demographic characteristics could have an impact on the focal relationships in our model (Bai et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2018; Chow et al., 2015; Haga et al., 2009; Wang et al., 2022). The results were consistent with our predictions with and without control variables.

Analytical strategy

Because the current data had a nested structure (i.e., daily surveys nested within each participant). We used multilevel modeling to examine our hypotheses with Mplus 8.3 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017). There were missing values in the current nested data due to 12 nurses not filling out the afternoon survey on some workdays. Consistent with previous ESM research (Rosen et al., 2021; Tang, Iliès, et al., 2022), we employed full information maximum likelihood (FIML) estimation to handle missing data in our multilevel analysis, as it offers a robust approach that yields unbiased parameter estimates and accurate standard errors (Enders, 2010; Newman, 2014). Following Enders and Tofghi’s (2007) recommendations, we group-mean centered our within-person predictor, and grand-mean centered our between-person moderator. To test the (conditional) indirect effect at the within-person level, we used Monte Carlo simulation with 20,000 replications to construct the 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval using the open-source software R (Bauer et al., 2006; Selig & Preacher, 2008).

RESULTS

Preliminary analysis

Table 1 reports the means, intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC1), standard deviations, and correlations among study variables at the within- and between-person levels. Observed customer-to-colleague incivility was positively correlated with self-reflection at the within-person level ($r = 0.14$, $p < .01$). Self-reflection was positively correlated with service performance at the within-person level ($r = 0.40$, $p < .01$). These results provided preliminary support for the study hypotheses. ICC1 of observed customer-to-colleague incivility, experienced customer incivility, self-reflection, and service performance were 0.54, 0.59, 0.48, and 0.49, respectively. The results showed the proportion of variance at the within-person level for the day-level variables was 0.46, 0.41, 0.52, and 0.51, respectively. These results indicated that substantial variances were explained by within-individual fluctuations and corroborated the necessity to use multilevel modeling in current data.

Multilevel confirmatory factor analyses (MCFAs)

We ran a series of MCFAs to test the distinctiveness of our measures. Our hypothesized six-factor model consists of two between-person level variables (i.e., IPSE and trait self-reflection) and four within-person level variables (i.e., observed customer-to-colleague incivility, experienced customer incivility, self-reflection, and service performance). As shown in Table 2, the

TABLE 1 Means, ICC1s, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables.

Variables	M	ICC1	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Within-person level												
1 Observed customer-to-colleague incivility	1.63	0.54	0.55	1								
2 Experienced customer incivility	1.42	0.59	0.56	0.75**	1							
3 Self-reflection	3.51	0.48	0.84	0.14**	0.05	1						
4 Service performance	3.52	0.49	0.78	0.02	-0.02	0.40**	1					
Between-person level												
5 Age	32.46		6.87	0.03	-0.12	0.14	0.07	1				
6 Education level	3.80		0.53	-0.02	-0.10	0.10	-0.06	0.21*	1			
7 Tenure	10.37		7.37	0.00	-0.13	0.13	0.05	0.93**	0.10	1		
8 Trait self-reflection	3.65		0.59	0.15	-0.06	0.48**	0.42**	0.08	0.12	0.06	1	
9 IPSE	4.03		0.48	-0.30**	-0.28**	0.08	0.06	0.07	0.04	0.05	-0.04	1

Note: Level 1, $n = 612$ – 624 . Level 2, $n = 99$.

Abbreviations: ICC, intraclass correlation coefficient; IPSE, importance of performance to self-esteem.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

TABLE 2 Multilevel confirmatory factor analyses and model comparisons.

Model	Descriptions	χ^2	df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR [within]	SRMR [between]
The hypothesized six-factor model	IPSE, trait self-reflection, observed customer-to-colleague incivility, experienced customer incivility, self-reflection and service performance	917.39	321	0.94	0.93	0.06	0.05	0.09
Alternative Five-factor model	Observed customer-to-colleague incivility and experienced customer incivility loaded on one factor	1210.40	324	0.90	0.89	0.07	0.06	0.09
Alternative four-factor model	Observed customer-to-colleague incivility and experienced customer incivility loaded on one factor and self-reflection and service performance loaded on one factor	1927.18	326	0.83	0.81	0.09	0.09	0.09
Alternative three-factor model	Observed customer-to-colleague incivility, experienced customer incivility, self-reflection and service performance loaded on one factor	3919.42	327	0.61	0.56	0.13	0.18	0.09
Alternative two-factor model	IPSE and trait self-reflection loaded on one factor and observed customer-to-colleague incivility, experienced customer incivility, self-reflection and service performance loaded on one factor	3940.13	328	0.61	0.56	0.13	0.18	0.09

Note: Level 1, $n = 624$. Level 2, $n = 99$.

Abbreviations: CFI, comparative fit index; RMSEA, root mean squared error of approximation; SRMR, standardized root mean squared residual; TLI, Tucker–Lewis index.

six-factor model fit the data well ($\chi^2 = 917.39$, $df = 321$, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.94, Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) = 0.93, root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.06, standardized root mean squared residual [SRMR_(within-person)] = 0.05, SRMR_(between-person) = 0.09). Furthermore, our hypothesized six-factor model was better than alternative models: (1) a five-factor model, in which items for observed customer-to-colleague incivility and experienced customer incivility were loaded on a single factor ($\Delta\chi^2 [3] = 293.01$, $p < .01$, CFI = 0.90, TLI = 0.89, RMSEA = 0.07, SRMR_{Within} = 0.06, SRMR_{Between} = 0.09), (2) a four-factor model, in which items for observed customer-to-colleague incivility and experienced customer incivility were loaded on one factor and items for self-reflection and service performance were loaded on one factor ($\Delta\chi^2 [5] = 1009.79$, $p < .01$, CFI = 0.83, TLI = 0.81, RMSEA = 0.09, SRMR_{Within} = 0.09, SRMR_{Between} = 0.09), (3) a three-factor model, in which items for four within-person variables were loaded on one factor ($\Delta\chi^2 [6] = 3002.03$, $p < .01$, CFI = 0.61, TLI = 0.56, RMSEA = 0.13, SRMR_{Within} = 0.18, SRMR_{Between} = 0.09), and (4) a two-factor model, in which items for four within-person variables were loaded on one factor and items for two between-person variables were loaded on one factor ($\Delta\chi^2 [7] = 3022.74$, $p < .01$, CFI = 0.61, TLI = 0.56, RMSEA = 0.13, SRMR_{Within} = 0.18, SRMR_{Between} = 0.09). Taken together, these results provided support for the discriminant validity of our focal variables.

Hypotheses testing

Table 3 presents the results of the multilevel models. Hypothesis 1 posited that observed daily customer-to-colleague incivility would be positively related to bystander employees' daily self-reflection. Supporting Hypothesis 1, observed daily customer-to-colleague incivility was positively associated with daily self-reflection ($\gamma = .25$, $p < .05$). Hypothesis 2 proposed that bystander employees' daily self-reflection would be positively associated with their daily service performance. In line with Hypothesis 2, daily self-reflection was positively associated with daily service performance ($\gamma = .16$, $p < .001$). The indirect effect of observed daily customer-to-colleague incivility on daily service performance via daily self-reflection was significant (indirect effect = 0.04, 95% CI [0.003, 0.083]). Hypothesis 3 was therefore supported.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that the IPSE would strengthen the within-person relationship between observed daily customer-to-colleague incivility and bystander employees' daily self-reflection. As shown in Table 3, IPSE moderated the within-person relationship between observed daily customer-to-colleague incivility and daily self-reflection ($\gamma = .41$, $p < .05$). Following Preacher et al.'s (2006) approach, we calculated and plotted the simple slopes at conditional values of IPSE (i.e., 1 SD above and below the mean) to clarify the nature of the interaction effect. A simple slope test (Figure 2) showed that the positive relationship between observed daily customer-to-colleague incivility and daily self-reflection of bystander employees was stronger for employees with higher IPSE ($\gamma = .44$, $p < .01$) compared to those with lower IPSE ($\gamma = .05$, $p = .68$). The difference between the two simple slopes was significant (estimate = 0.39, $p < .05$). Thus, Hypothesis 4 was supported.

Hypothesis 5 concerned IPSE would moderate the within-person indirect effect of observed daily customer-to-colleague incivility on bystander employees' daily service performance through their daily self-reflection, such that the positive indirect effect is stronger for employees with higher IPSE compared to those with lower IPSE. Table 3 demonstrates that the indirect effect of daily customer-to-colleague incivility on daily service performance via daily self-reflection was significantly stronger for employees with higher IPSE (indirect effect = 0.07, 95%

TABLE 3 Multilevel analysis for mediation, moderation, and conditional indirect effect.

	Self-reflection		Service performance	
	γ	SE	γ	SE
<u>Within-person level</u>				
Observed customer-to-colleague incivility	.25*	0.12	-.07	0.08
Experienced customer incivility	.13	0.15	.04	0.09
Self-reflection	-	-	.16***	0.05
<u>Between-person level</u>				
Age	.02	0.03	.01	0.02
Organizational tenure	.00	0.02	-.01	0.02
Educational level	.01	0.14	-.14	0.14
Trait self-reflection	.49***	0.09	.45***	0.09
IPSE	.13	0.13	-	-
<u>Cross-level interaction</u>				
IPSE \times observed customer-to-colleague incivility	.41*	0.17	-	-
<u>Mediation & Moderated Mediation</u>				
Indirect effect	0.04			
95% CI	[0.003, 0.083]			
Indirect effect (high)	0.07			
95% CI	[0.021, 0.134]			
Indirect effect (low)	0.01			
95% CI	[-0.037, 0.049]			
Indirect effect (difference)	0.06			
95% CI	[0.012, 0.131]			

Note: Level 1, $n = 624$. Level 2, $n = 99$.

Abbreviation: IPSE, importance of performance to self-esteem.

* $p < .05$.*** $p < .001$.

CI [0.021, 0.134]) than those with lower IPSE (indirect effect = 0.01, 95% CI [-0.037, 0.049]). The difference between the two conditional indirect effects was significant (estimate = 0.06, 95% CI [0.012, 0.131]). As such, Hypothesis 5 was supported.

DISCUSSION

In this work, based on social learning theory, we developed and tested a multilevel moderated mediation model depicting how and when observed customer-to-colleague incivility is positively related to service performance. Results from an experience sampling study showed that observed daily customer-to-colleague incivility was indirectly and positively related to bystander employees' daily service performance via their daily self-reflection. Moreover, IPSE significantly moderated the within-person relation between observed daily customer-to-colleague incivility and bystander employees' daily self-reflection, as well as the indirect within-person relation

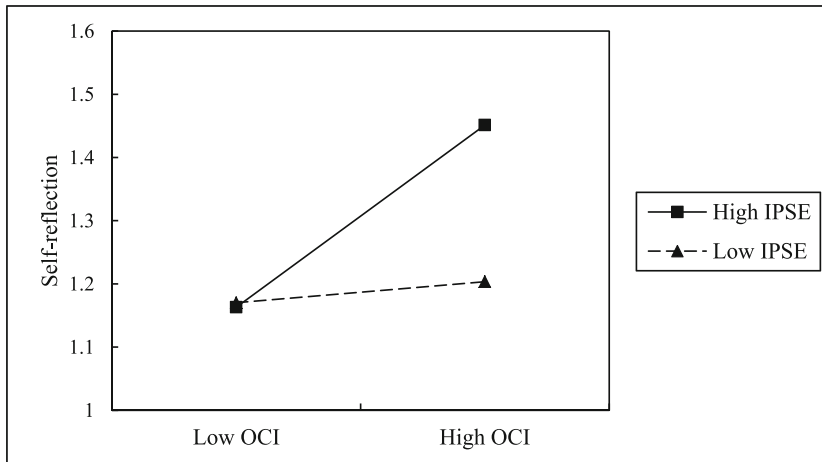


FIGURE 2 The moderating effect of IPSE on the relationship between observed customer-to-colleague incivility and self-reflection. IPSE, importance of performance to self-esteem; OCI, observed customer-to-colleague incivility.

between observed daily customer-to-colleague incivility and bystander employees' daily service performance via their daily self-reflection.

Theoretical implications

The current study makes several critical theoretical contributions to the literature. First, our work enriches research on the third parties' reactions to vicarious incivility experiences in service situations. The existing studies related to vicarious incivility experience have concentrated on the negative effect of observed incivility from organizational insiders on bystander employees (Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2007; Reich & Hershcovis, 2015; Totterdell et al., 2012) and bystander customers (Porath et al., 2010; Porath et al., 2011). Recent studies also explored how bystander customers react to incivility from other customers (Henkel et al., 2017; Hershcovis & Bhatnagar, 2017; Kim & Baker, 2019). However, the effect of observed outsider (i.e., customer or client) incivility on bystander employees received little empirical attention. It is crucial to explore bystander employees' reactions toward observed customer incivility, as uncivil behaviors from customers are hard to avoid (Kamran-Disfani et al., 2023), and service employees experience and observe more mistreatment from customers than from members within organizations (Sommovigo et al., 2019). In addition, customer incivility has a greater negative influence on employees than incivility by organizational insiders (Cho et al., 2016). In the current study, we first empirically tested how bystander employees react to observed customer incivility, which echoes previous research call for more research on the possible positive effect of workplace incivility on bystanders (Miner et al., 2018) and extended research on bystander employees' responses toward observed incivility perpetrated by customers.

Second, by investigating observed customer incivility from a within-person perspective, we respond to calls for more research on the temporal dynamics of workplace incivility (Cole et al., 2016) and deepen the understanding of the short-term effect of customer incivility experience from the third-party perspective. From the victim's perspective, a few ESM studies on

customer incivility have found that the daily experience of customer incivility was related to negative daily outcomes such as diminished daily service performance (Hur et al., 2022; Shin et al., 2024). Drawing on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), we found that observed daily customer-to-colleague had a positive indirect effect on bystander employees' daily service performance via their daily self-reflection. The current finding enriches our knowledge of how daily vicarious incivility experience leads to positive work outcomes. Experiencing prolonged customer incivility over long periods of time and facing daily customer incivility are likely to elicit distinct coping mechanisms (Yue et al., 2017). In the short term, incidents of customer incivility may not necessarily be perceived as stressful and may elicit immediate coping strategies but the accumulation of such incidents can lead to negative consequences (Han et al., 2016; Sliter et al., 2012). This notion might explain why previous research has mainly identified negative consequences of customer incivility on targets and observers. For instance, prior studies have consistently observed that chronic exposure to customer incivility, leading to emotional exhaustion, is associated with negative outcomes (Al-Hawari et al., 2020; Shin & Hur, 2022; van Jaarsveld et al., 2010). Baranik et al. (2022) also found that observed patient mistreatment in the past year was indirectly related to diminished patient care behaviors and increased counterproductive work behaviors via increased emotional exhaustion. Our findings show that daily observed incivility has the potential to activate functional coping mechanisms that allow service providers to improve their behaviors. Thus, our research highlights the importance of considering the short-term effect of observed customer incivility from a within-person perspective.

From the third party's perspective, our finding showed that observed customer incivility elicited bystander employees' adaptive self-reflection. Interestingly, from the victim's perspective, Shin et al. (2024) adopted a within-person approach and found that experienced customer incivility had a negative indirect effect on next-day job performance via after-work rumination, one kind of maladaptive self-reflection, which refers to conscious recurrent thinking about a goal-failing event (Sommovigo et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2013). The self-perspective may explain the differences in these findings. Whether individuals reflect adaptively or maladaptively on negative experiences is influenced by the type of self-perspective (Kross, 2009). A series of studies found that analyzing negative experiences from a self-distanced perspective rather than a self-immersed perspective facilitates adaptive self-reflection (Ayduk & Kross, 2010; Kross et al., 2005; Kross & Ayduk, 2008). A self-distanced perspective helps individuals psychologically stay away from their negative experiences and enables them to reconstruct these experiences without being overwhelmed by bad emotions (Kross et al., 2023). Because bystander employees are usually indirectly exposed to daily customer incivility experiences of coworkers, they are more likely to adopt a self-distanced perspective to analyze their own similar experiences, thus facilitating adaptive reflection. The self-perspective may also explain why there was no significant relationship between experienced customer incivility and self-reflection in our sample. When employees are subjected to customer incivility, they may analyze negative experiences from a self-immersed perspective, which can easily lead to rumination (Kross et al., 2023). Rumination makes employees focus more on goal failure than on the potential learning value of these experiences. Another possible reason is that when employees directly experience customer incivility, their focus may shift toward self-protection and coping strategies rather than improvement-oriented self-reflection.

Third, the current study contributes to the literature on employees' vicarious learning in organizations. Our findings align with empirical evidence suggesting that individuals tend to learn more effectively from others' negative experiences (Bledow et al., 2017; Diwas

et al., 2013). Similarly, Bai et al. (2020) discovered that supervisors' gossip about colleagues stimulated self-reflection among gossip receivers, subsequently enhancing their work performance. However, in contrast to past studies (Bai et al., 2020; Diwas et al., 2013; Zhu et al., 2022) that utilized between-person approaches to examine employees' vicarious learning process, our study adopted a within-person approach. By examining colleagues' day-specific work experiences (i.e., customer incivility), we observed that such experiences can trigger employees' vicarious learning process. These findings provide further support for the notion that vicarious learning is a daily phenomenon in organizational settings (Manz & Sims, 1981). In addition, prior ESM studies on reflection mainly focused on how individuals' reflection on their own work-related experience after work affects important work outcomes (Gabriel et al., 2021; Sonnentag et al., 2021). Our current findings provide evidence that self-reflection arising from others' negative work experiences during working hours helps improve performance, thereby extending self-reflection literature.

Fourth, we add our understanding of IPSE's positive impact in the workplace and advance the literature on contingent self-esteem. Past research regarded IPSE as one kind of individual vulnerability (Ferris, 2014) that can have harmful effects on employees' well-being, such as increased burnout (Ferris, 2014) and work–family conflict (Kuykendall et al., 2020). However, IPSE does not always lead to negative consequences. For example, some other studies have found that IPSE promotes motivational processes that positively impact work performance and well-being (Ferris et al., 2010; Ferris et al., 2015; Kuykendall et al., 2020). Our finding shows that IPSE as a boundary condition positively impacted the self-reflection level of third-party employees after observing colleagues' experiences of customer incivility. We extend the contingent self-esteem literature by showing that IPSE facilitates cognitive processes that positively affect performance in specific situations. In addition, this finding provides new evidence that individual characteristics influence the magnitude of third-party responses to vicarious workplace mistreatment (Dhanani & LaPalme, 2019).

Practical implications

First, while it is important to advocate for eliminating customer incivility, the prevailing motto “customer is always right” creates a power imbalance that makes it challenging to eradicate such behaviors completely (Kamran-Disfani et al., 2023). In such industries where incivility is prevalent, it becomes crucial to reframe uncivil experiences constructively (Marchiondo et al., 2018). Building on our findings, we recommend that managers and organizations consider observed customer incivility as opportunities for growth and learning. Our findings demonstrate that observed daily customer incivility can function as a learning resource for bystander employees to reflect on their service behaviors. Individuals can improve their performance by spending just a small portion of their day reflecting on their work experience (Kross et al., 2023). Service organizations can find ways to help frontline service workers identify valuable information behind observed customer incivility and instruct them on how to utilize this information to improve service performance. For instance, organizations can conduct daily debriefing sessions and encourage employees to review customer incivility incidents with others and discuss how to avoid these incidents in the future at the end of each working day. Recent studies have confirmed that people can benefit from self-reflection interventions (Clauss et al., 2018; Lanaj et al., 2019). Service training programs can develop and implement self-reflection interventions. For example, organizations can create videos that depict customer

incivility for various reasons and instruct trainees to reflect on their service behaviors by watching these videos. However, organizations should also be mindful of the potential counterproductive effects of excessive reflection, such as the risk of triggering fatigue and burnout.

Second, although our research findings have highlighted potential positive outcomes associated with daily observed customer incivility for employees, it is important to recognize that customer incivility, as an adverse interpersonal stressor (Matthews et al., 2022), is consistently linked to negative consequences for service employees. Therefore, it is more practical to prioritize efforts toward reducing the occurrence of customer incivility and minimizing the harm it causes to employees. Past research has found some intervention strategies can assist service workers in experiencing reduced customer mistreatment. For instance, Song et al. (2018) discovered that instructing service workers to reflect on prosocial behaviors and exercise perspective-taking before starting their workday can decrease daily encounters with customer mistreatment. Service organizations can utilize this knowledge to implement relevant interventions. Organizations can also leverage the role of third parties. For example, encouraging employees to proactively support colleagues who are facing uncivil customers. Research has found that bystander customers can help targeted employees in customer incivility incidents (Henkel et al., 2017; Hershcovis & Bhatnagar, 2017). Managers and organizations can explore approaches to effectively encourage customers to intervene in a constructive manner when faced with incidents of incivility.

Third, our moderation results show that after observing customer incivility to colleagues, employees with higher levels of IPSE engage in more self-reflection, which in turn improves their service performance. Organizations can recruit more service employees with higher IPSE besides maximizing the benefits of IPSE among current employees whose IPSE is higher. For instance, organizations can convey to current employees whose IPSE is higher that their worth to the organization is contingent upon higher service performance (Ferris et al., 2010). However, one should be cautious as past research has found that IPSE was positively related to work–family conflict (Kuykendall et al., 2020) and burnout (Ferris, 2014). Therefore, organizations should help employees balance the impact of their IPSE in different contexts (Ferris et al., 2015).

Limitations and future directions

The current study has several limitations that could be addressed in future studies. First, we relied on self-reported data for all variables, raising concerns about common method variance (CMV; Podsakoff et al., 2003). We adopted two strategies to reduce these concerns. First, we measured our study variables at different time points. Second, following previous experience sampling studies (Tang, Ilies, et al., 2022; Woolum et al., 2017), we group-mean centered Level 1 exogenous variable to control for between-person confounds. Besides, CMV is unlikely to explain the moderating effect we found (Siemsen et al., 2010). Nevertheless, future research would benefit by adopting objective or other-reported measures, for example, collecting supervisor ratings of service performance.

Second, although the main study variables are repeatedly measured across multiple workdays, causal inference for our proposed relations is limited, especially since all within-person variables were measured on the same day. The limitation of causal conclusion has been a common problem in previous experience sampling studies (Park et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2022). Feasible ways to help causal interpretation are to adopt dyadic and

event-based designs for future studies (Matthews et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2019). We also invite future research to adopt field or vignette experiments to replicate the current findings. In addition, most nurses in our study worked alternating day and night shifts, making it unfeasible for them to complete the survey on consecutive days. As a result, our sample size at the within-person level ($n = 624$) is relatively small. Building upon previous ESM studies (Feng et al., 2023; Li et al., 2022) and utilizing the approach proposed by Bliese and Wang (2020), we conducted post-hoc power analyses by calculating the cumulative probability of finding significance. The observed power results were 55.5% for the within-person effect of observed customer-to-colleague incivility on self-reflection and 93.8% for the within-person effect of self-reflection on service performance. The observed power value was 53.9% for the indirect effect of observed customer-to-colleague incivility on service performance via self-reflection. The observed power value was 70.2% for the cross-level interaction of observed customer-to-colleague incivility with IPSE on self-reflection. These results suggest a higher likelihood of detecting the moderating effect of IPSE compared to the proposed indirect effect in a follow-up study using the same sample size. Future research should consider conducting a priori power analysis (Lafit et al., 2021) and replicating our study with a larger sample size.

Third, in our study, we viewed the patient–nurse relationship as a unique form of customer–employee relationship. However, it is crucial to recognize that this type of relationship is more complex and dynamic than similar relationships in the tourism and hospitality industry (Thomas et al., 2022). First, hospital customers (patients and their family members) usually have limited knowledge and restricted decision latitude and rely on healthcare workers' guidance. A customer in other service industries has more sovereignty and freedom (Korczynski & Evans, 2013). Second, customer incivility experienced in the healthcare industry may differ from that encountered in other service industries. Due to the high levels of stress, high-stakes environments are particularly susceptible to workplace mistreatment (Thomas et al., 2022). For example, patients and their family members experiencing illness often face heightened negative emotions, which can increase the likelihood of nurses experiencing higher levels of mistreatment. Third, after witnessing incivility, nurses in the healthcare industry and service workers in other service industries may differ in the extent of their reflection. Given the high-stakes nature of hospital environments where healthcare professionals work (Thomas et al., 2022), the potential consequences of making mistakes can be more severe. As a result, compared to service workers in other industries, healthcare workers are more likely to engage in heightened self-reflection after witnessing incivility between customers and colleagues. Taken together, we propose future investigations to assess our model's applicability across diverse industries. For instance, one can investigate the same phenomenon in the restaurant or the hotel contexts.

Fourth, we used a sample of Chinese nurses, which may limit the generalization of our findings to different cultural contexts. Different cultures may influence how employees perceive and respond to workplace incivility (Chen et al., 2019). Employees in Eastern cultures are more likely to accept and tolerate workplace incivility (Loh et al., 2021) and reflect on their role in incidents of customer incivility. Employees in Western societies are more likely to perceive customer incivility as interpersonally unfair and are less likely to reflect on themselves. Thus, future studies could cross-validate the current findings in different cultural contexts.

Finally, the vast majority of our sample was female (96%), a typical demographic characteristic of the nurse groups. However, past studies have found that women reported more experienced incivility (Cortina et al., 2013) and were more likely to engage in self-reflection than men (Csank & Conway, 2004). In addition, previous research indicated that male employees may

react more strongly to workplace incivility than females (Khan et al., 2022). Consequently, when males observe customer incivility, they are more likely to blame the uncivil customer rather than reflect on themselves. So, we invite future research to test the gender difference in our proposed relationship.

We invite future researchers to extend our study in the following directions. First, there might be other potential mediating mechanisms. For instance, negative emotions such as fear and anxiety may explain why bystander employees engage in self-reflection following the observation of their colleagues' encounters with customer incivility. Bystander employees may be worried about similar experiences happening to them in the future (Shao et al., 2018; Skarlicki et al., 2015), prompting them to engage in more self-reflection as a means to avoid errors and shield themselves from comparable mistreatment. While self-reflection is beneficial for improving service performance, it may also be driven by negative emotions, potentially leading to burnout in the long term. We encourage researchers to explore and investigate this mediating mechanism.

Second, there might be additional boundary conditions. Other individual differences, such as customer orientation, may enhance the indirect relation for observed customer-to-colleague incivility → self-reflection → service performance. High customer-orientated employees are likely to have intrinsic motivations to help customers and achieve their personal goals by meeting customers' needs (Yue et al., 2017). After observing customer incivility toward colleagues, these employees are more likely to stand in the customers' shoes and reflect on their shortcomings. Some situational factors may also moderate our proposed indirect relation. For instance, service failure attributions may affect the self-reflection level of bystander employees. If one colleague's service failure causes customer incivility, a bystander employee is more likely to reflect on how to avoid service failure. Therefore, we encourage future studies to explore additional moderating mechanisms.

Finally, while the current study centers around customer incivility, our findings provide a new theoretical perspective to examine the effect of other vicarious workplace mistreatment, such as observed abusive supervision. Past studies, drawing upon theories like deontic justice theory, fairness theory, and emotion-related theory, have explored how observed abusive supervision affects third parties' behavioral reactions by examining their emotions (e.g., anger, contentment, schadenfreude, and empathic emotion; Chen et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2015; Priesemuth & Schminke, 2019; Qiao et al., 2021) as the mediating mechanism. Shifting the focus toward the self-focused cognitive processes of third-party observers (e.g., self-reflection) may offer a novel theoretical mechanism to elucidate the influence of observed abusive supervision on the responses of third parties. So, we encourage researchers to explore the effect of other forms of vicarious workplace mistreatment on third parties' outcomes by investigating their self-focused cognitive processes.

CONCLUSION

Past studies have primarily examined the negative impact of observed incivility experiences from organizational insiders on third-party employees. We depart from the current research focus by investigating how observed customer incivility can positively impact bystander employees. Drawing on social learning theory, our within-person investigation found that observed daily customer-to-colleague incivility was indirectly and positively related to the daily service performance of bystander employees via their daily self-reflection. Additionally, we

found that this indirect relationship is contingent upon IPSE. By identifying a positive cognitive mechanism (i.e., self-reflection), our research deepens our understanding of how third-party employees react to observed customer incivility. From a practical perspective, our findings provide valuable insights into how employees utilize information conveyed by customer incivility toward colleagues to improve their own work.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

All authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT


Data are available on request from the authors. The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

All procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible committee on human experimentation (institutional and national) and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000(5). Informed consent was obtained from all patients (employees) for being included in the study. No animal studies were carried out by the authors for this study.

ORCID

Qingxiang (Derek) Weng  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5426-6029>

Lincoln Jisuvei Sungu  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3746-7996>

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