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Influence of meaningfulness of work and leadership characteristics on customer-directed counterproductive work behavior resulting from customer mistreatment

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the impact of customer mistreatment on counterproductive work behavior (CWB) and the moderating role of supervisor responses (self-sacrificial and self-serving leadership) to clarify why customer-directed CWB occurs and how it can be reduced. A sample of 392 customer-facing employees in the USA completed measures assessing the meaningfulness of work and self-sacrificial and self-serving leadership experiences. The meaningfulness of work moderated the relationship between customer mistreatment and employee anger, and a three-way interaction was found between employee anger and self-sacrificial and self-serving leadership on customer-directed CWB. Implications for managing customer mistreatment and fostering meaningful work to promote employee well-being are discussed.

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Anger; counterproductive work behavior; customer mistreatment; self-sacrificial leadership; self-serving leadership

Customer mistreatment of service employees is a pervasive problem in service-based organizations, with an estimated 23% of workers experiencing such mistreatment at some point (ILO, 2022). Customer mistreatment of employees, defined as low-quality treatment (e.g. disrespectful behaviors, verbal abuse, discourteous language, and unfair demands) from their customers (Y. Liu et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2011), often provokes employees to engage in customer-directed counterproductive work behavior (CWB) because of negative emotions provoked by social norm violations (Skarlicki et al., 2008), and stress caused by depleted resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Examples of counterproductive work behaviors include refusal of service, snubbing customers (Skarlicki et al., 2008), rushing through customer requests (Harris & Ogbonna, 2002), and contaminating customer food (Hunter & Penney, 2014; Simon et al., 2015).

The relationship between customer mistreatment and customer-directed CWB has been validated due to their similarity in targets (Lavelle et al., 2023), and frontline employees have been observed as the most common targets (Skarlicki et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2011). Employees who engage in CWB against customers risk reprimand or termination, damaging the customer-organization relationship (Bitner et al., 1990; Wang et al., 2011) and the organization's reputation (Sypniewska, 2020), and possibly face lawsuits from customers (Carpenter et al., 2021). To protect employees and organizations from financial losses and societal damage (Carpenter et al., 2021), it is imperative to identify ways to mitigate customer mistreatment and customer-directed CWB.

Research suggests that individual and situational factors influence CWBs. The moral lens suggests that the customers who engage in deviant behavior should be subject to punitive measures (e.g.,

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customer-directed CWB; van Jaarsveld et al., 2010; Walker et al., 2014), while the stress lens emphasizes that when experiencing stress, individuals may exhibit neglectful responses such as reduced in- and extra-role performance (Shao & Skarlicki, 2014; Sliter & Jones, 2016). All these customer-directed CWBs could easily lead to incivility spirals and escalation (Yue et al., 2015). As the responses are diverse, understanding why customer-directed CWB occurs and when it can be diminished is paramount for informing effective interventions.

We adopt the cognitive appraisal theory (CAT; Lazarus, 2001) to explain why and when employees willingly cope with customer mistreatment and refrain from related customer-directed CWB. Customer mistreatment is a significant source of stress, and the emotional changes employees are subject to after experiencing such mistreatment can ultimately lead to CWB (Huilian et al., 2022). This transition can be further examined by analyzing employee emotional state changes. Particularly, customer mistreatment triggers employee's negative emotions, such as anger (Y. Liu et al., 2017), which have been associated with customer-directed CWB. Anger is one of the few negative emotions that have been extensively studied, as it can impact employees' cognition, emotions, and actions (Fitness, 2000). Moreover, angry individuals are more likely to exhibit negative workplace behaviors and stressors (Wilkowski & Robinson, 2010). Therefore, this study proposes that anger can help explain how customer mistreatment triggers customer-directed CWB.

Furthermore, retrospective and cognitive judgments of work experience and knowledge can further influence responses to a given work (Allan et al., 2019; Mikolon et al., 2021). We suggest that employees' perception of adverse work experiences and responses can be influenced by their perception of the meaning of work (Allan et al., 2019; Mainemelis, 2010). The COVID-19 pandemic has posed considerable challenges for organizations and their employees (de Jong et al., 2020) prompting them to question the meaningfulness of their work. Meaningful work is a vital source of motivation and well-being, particularly for those engaged in "dirty jobs" with a social stigma, such as customer service (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, p. 416). We conceptualize meaningful work as the extent to which workers find value in a stigmatized occupation during employee-customer interactions (Mikolon et al., 2021). Employees who find meaning in their work tend to have a more positive experience and a targeted approach to serving customers by reframing, recalibrating, or refocusing (Deery et al., 2019). Customer service employees who find their work meaningful will prioritize customer satisfaction, their sense of fulfillment, and the positive feedback they receive (Shen et al., 2022). This can be achieved by connecting with peers to build mutual recognition and respect (Laaser & Bolton, 2022), and reframing the tension and conflict arising from customer mistreatment to confer pride and honor (Deery et al., 2019). This will build their psychological resources, leading to positive emotional experiences and decreased anger (De Clercq et al., 2019). Managers can use this knowledge to select and retain employees motivated to find meaning in their work. These employees are likely to perform better and stay with the organization longer. Furthermore, they can craft strategies to ensure employees' job satisfaction and well-being during this difficult economic period and transition after the global pandemic (Schnell & Hoffmann, 2020).

Research and meta-analyses have also shown that leadership is a major part of the organizational system that can influence employee behavior and organizational productivity (Zhao & Sheng, 2019). Employees tend to place great importance on their relationship with their leaders and will make decisions based on the costs and benefits of their interactions to maintain a balanced contribution (Huilian et al., 2022). When employees feel that their interests are being taken care of, they are more likely to respond constructively and remain motivated. These findings suggest that leadership behaviors such as self-sacrificial leadership- focused on helping colleagues without expecting something in return can reduce employee stress and improve relationships between employees and management, leading to more productive and positive customer service (Conger & Kanungo, 1987). In contrast, when faced with a leader who prioritizes their interests over that of their employees, it can create a sense of injustice. Employees may feel that their efforts are not being rewarded fairly and may even feel the need to retaliate to regain a sense of balance in when interacting with their leader (Sarwar et al., 2023). Whether the leader's conflicting behavior (self-sacrificial or self-serving) would influence

employee emotions and behavior has not been explored in customer service contexts. Jie et al. (2019) experimental study revealed an inverse relationship between the level of concern one has for one's own interests and one's concern for others. In other words, when someone prioritizes their self-interest, they often neglect and harm the interests of others, which diminishes the positive effects of self-sacrifice . Indeed, self-serving leadership harms employee outcomes and can have long-lasting consequences for the organization (Haynes et al., 2015; Schyns & Schilling, 2013). Williams (2014) emphasizes that "regardless of whether the direct and immediate impact of leaders' behaviors on others is positive, negative, or neutral, leaders who regularly prioritize their own needs and goals ultimately will have a negative long-term net impact on their organization" (p. 1366).

In doing this, our study contributes to research in two ways. First, understanding why employees stay despite customer mistreatment is key to motivating service employees. The ability to effectively connect and reconcile one's desired impact and the social good with one's role helps create and maintain fulfilling work (Jennifer Louise Petriglieri, 2011). Although current research on meaningfullness acknowledges the role of rationalization , further investigation is required to comprehend the justifications service employees construct to make their work fulfilling (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Additionally, recognizing the influence of customer mistreatment and coming to terms with it requires rationalization to continue with the job (Nielsen & Colbert, 2022). Therefore, this study focused on these interactions to understand how meaningful experiences can be developed for front-line service employees.

Second, as shown in the proposed model in Figure 1, we propose a three-way interaction between employee anger self-sacrificial and self-serving leadership behavior on CWB. Specifically, employees become angry when mistreated (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007), which leads to their desire to retaliate. This desire to retaliate is exacerbated by self-serving leadership, which focuses more on the leader's advancement (Camps et al., 2012), increasing employee stress. This driving force encourages deviant acts, such as customer-directed CWB, thereby reducing the impact of self-sacrificing leadership. To our knowledge, this study is the first to examine the important factors in question. The results of this study could be beneficial to managers in creating a positive leadership environment. This, in turn, could encourage a, culture of respect and professionalism, which is essential for the success of an organization.

Literature review

Anger, aggression, and CWB

CWB is a destructive behavior that occurs within organizations and causes harm to individuals (Spector & Fox, 2005). It includes actively undermining the organization's goals (Robinson & Bennett, 1995), sabotaging (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997), and aggression toward colleagues (Zhu & Zhang, 2021). This behavior harms the organization and creates a toxic work environment that negatively affects employee well-being and increases turnover rates (Zhu & Zhang, 2021).

Studies from the perpetrator's perspective typically categorize behaviors based on their target, individual or organization (Lee, 2020). For instance, Lee (2020) suggested that CWB involves actions against an organization's interests. Similarly Spector and Fox (2005), defined CWB as any action intended to cause harm to others or organizations. These actions are linked to aggression. Aggression is usually categorized into three types: hostile/reactive, instrumental/proactive, and relational (Brugman et al., 2015; Fontaine, 2007). Hostile/reactive aggression is caused by an outburst of negative emotions such as anger; its primary purpose is to cause harm. Instrumental/proactive aggression is an act of calculated planning and aims to attain a desired outcome, even if harm must be inflicted to do so. Relational aggression refers to acts that aim to inflict harm to the friendships of others, such as threats or exclusion (Crick et al., 2006).

Extensive research has been conducted to explore how cognitive processes predict CWB. Martinko et al. (2002) revealed that cognitive appraisals of CWB, such as individuals' perception

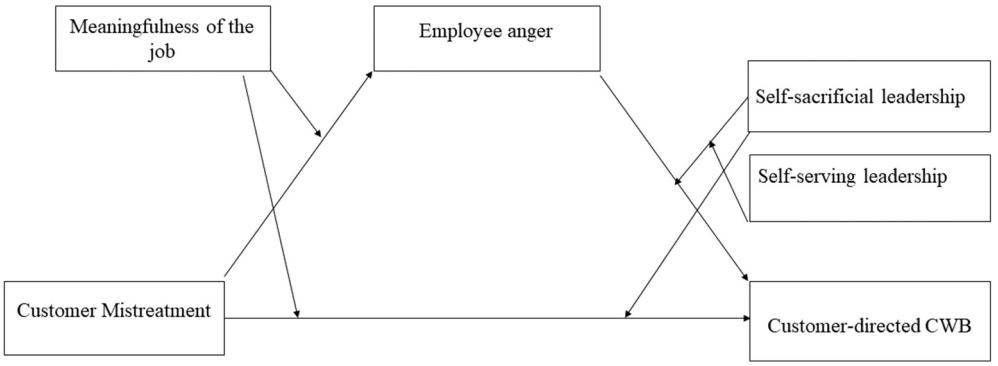

Figure 1. Proposed model.

of situational urgency and injustice of the situation, significantly increased the likelihood of CWB occurrence. Individual's effectiveness and control of future occurrences of injustice also contributed to CWB (Spector, 2010). Moreover, intense emotions and stress are related to CWB (Fox & Spector, 2015). CWB emerges as a behavioral response to negative emotions provoked by challenging job conditions and a sense of injustice (Hershcovis & Barling, 2010). This is because cognitive processes guide emotional responses, which play a major role in interpreting employee behaviors (Metcalfe & Mischel, 1999). Epstein (2003) stated that emotions constitute the essential precursor to any behavior stemming from implicit motives. Furthermore, Vasilopoulos et al. (2019) suggested that when a person experiences strong emotions such as anger, they are likely to act on impulses instead of considering alternate options. Indeed, anger is the most commonly associated emotion when examining aggressive behaviors, as individuals with aggressive tendencies tend to interpret social situations as hostile and react impulsively (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). Similarly, trait anger – a phenomenon characterized by an individual's tendency to experience anger – can be a precursor to reactive aggression and interpersonal deviance in the workplace (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Berkowitz, 1990). Hershcovis and Barling (2010) conducted a meta-analysis and found that, on average, there is a correlation of 0.28 between trait anger and organizational CWB and a stronger correlation of 0.37 between trait anger and personal CWB. This may be attributed to trait anger having a closer relationship with personal CWB. O'Brien and Allen (2007) explored the link between trait anger and CWB by including self and coworker assessments. Their findings suggest that the trait anger-CWB relationship is more robust when considering coworkers' evaluations (O'Brien & Allen et al., 2007). Therefore, the observed connection cannot be attributed to any potential bias caused by participants reporting on both their trait anger and CWB.

The mistreatment of employees by customers can be considered a violation of commonly accepted social and moral standards (Harris & Reynolds, 2003) and can contribute to customers exhibiting troublesome behaviors toward employees (Groth et al., 2019). This perception of injustice can trigger feelings of anger in employees (Rupp & Spencer, 2006) and interests and sense of belonging (Cropanzano et al., 2003). Therefore, a customer's mistreatment can potentially create a harmful cycle where negative interactions between customers and employees escalate due to the employees feeling the need to retaliate against unfair treatment

The literature accurately describes various aspects of customer-directed CWB, such as the perpetrator's perspective, the cognitive processes associated with CWB, and the emotions victims may experience (e.g., Lee, 2020). Prior studies suggest customer mistreatment may provoke CWB by triggering perceptions of injustice and depleting employee resources, leading to anger (Cropanzano et al., 2003). Additionally, studies have indicated that supervisor responses might have an impact on the occurrence of such behavior (Groth & Grandey, 2012). An improved understanding of which type of leadership is more effective in preventing CWB in the face of customer mistreatment is needed. See the proposed model in Figure 1.

Leadership styles and CWB

As globalization and global business have become more competitive, companies have been confronted with uncertainty and need help to control their environments. Thus, leaders must demonstrate self-sacrificial behavior to remain competitive (e.g. Citigroup CEO Vikram Pandit's remuneration of $1 during the financial crisis; voluntary pay cuts by executives from China Eastern Airlines and other companies during crises; Eric Dash, 2010). These actions play a significant role in encouraging employees and successfully guiding them through difficult situations. Research has shown that leaders willing to sacrifice for their team tend to have staff who engage in positive behaviors that benefit the organization, such as work engagement, cooperation, the expression of opinions, and creativity among their team (Choi & Mai-Dalton, 1999; De Cremer et al., 2006; Ruggieri et al., 2023).

Self-sacrificial leadership is a unique and distinct concept that cannot be fully equated to other forms of leadership. Unlike other approaches or styles of leadership, self-sacrificial leadership is not a specific way of leading. First, its definition and implications vary depending on the perspective from which it is studied. As a trait, self-sacrificing leadership refers to an individual's readiness to take risks and face potential losses, being highly accountable for the affairs of the organization, and prioritizing the satisfaction of employees (De Cremer & Van Knippenberg, 2004; Mulder & Nelissen, 2010). From a behavioral standpoint, self-sacrificing leadership involves taking voluntary actions that involve personal risks and possibly temporarily or permanently sacrificing personal interests for the overall benefit of the organization (H. Zhang & Ye, 2016). Depending on the specific context in which these behaviors occur, self-sacrificing leadership can be further classified as radical or incremental (Choi & Mai-Dalton, 1998).

Second, self-sacrificing leadership is often associated with charismatic-transformational leadership, and servant leadership. However, the motivations driving these behaviors may differ (Eva et al., 2019; van Dierendonck et al., 2014). While self-sacrificing leadership encompasses both attitude (such as love and altruism) and behavior (such as taking the initiative and showing empathy), transformational leadership is focused on meeting organizational goals and creating a trusting atmosphere (Shi & Zhou, 2023). In comparison, servant leadership prioritizes human development, shared interests, and power-sharing (van Dierendonck et al., 2014). This approach is rooted in social exchange theory, which suggests that individuals reciprocate behaviors in response to support and assistance from others. While self-sacrificing and servant leadership involve altruism and are focused on the well-being of subordinates, they differ in how they are enacted (Haynes et al., 2015). Self-sacrificing leadership requires the leader to make personal sacrifices to strengthen organizational legitimacy and trust. Yet, servant leadership aims to achieve positive outcomes without sacrificing personal interests. Furthermore, charismatic leadership is based on the theory of attribution, where individuals attribute certain psychological and personality traits to a leader based on their behavior and consequences (Conger & Kanungo, 1987; Hu & Dutta, 2022). Charismatic leaders use their charm and appeal to inspire admiration, imitation, and strong emotional connections with their followers (Conger & Kanungo, 1987). Unlike self-sacrificing leadership, the motivations behind charismatic leadership can be either altruistic or egoistic, depending on whether the leader prioritizes the collective good (socialized leadership) or their gain (personalized leadership) (Hu & Dutta, 2022).

Finally, self-sacrificial leadership stands in stark contrast to self-serving leadership behaviors. The latter refers to any actions where leaders use their power primarily for their benefit (Williams, 2014). Research has shown that leaders often exhibit self-serving biases, which can harm their followers (Akhtar et al., 2022; Krasikova et al., 2013; Williams, 2014; Wu et al., 2021). To understand this behavior, Krasikova et al. (2013) argue that understanding a leader's goals is crucial in analyzing destructive leadership, particularly when leaders struggle to achieve those goals. For instance, Williams (2014) proposed a framework that links self-serving behavior to power. According to this framework, high-power individuals exhibit self-serving behavior as they feel a sense of entitlement and are less vulnerable to potential

consequences. Furthermore, Williams (2014) argues that the more power a leader has, the more they may feel the need to exert control and dominance over their followers, leading to self-serving behaviors. This was emphasized by other researchers (e.g., Akhtar et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2021), who have found that self-serving leaders often prioritize their personal goals over others, take credit for their followers' achievements, and use pressure to complete tasks.

As previously stated, self-serving leadership is characterized by leaders prioritizing their interests above those of their followers (Rus et al., 2010). These leaders are often described as manipulative and exploitative, often using their position and power to advance their goals rather than benefiting the team or organization (Rus et al., 2012). Using the dispositional approach, research has proposed several models (i.e., the Dark Triad/Bright Triad feature, the "Motivation-Volition" model of a ranter, the perceived recasts-antisocial ties model, the environment-focused model, the situational forces model, and the point-of-vanishing model, Zappalà et al., 2022) that embrace both individual and situational differences.

Psychopathy along with Machiavellianism and narcissism, which are part of the Dark Triad of personalities, are prevalent in the corporate world (Baas et al., 2016; Barelds et al., 2018; Brooks et al., 2020; Preston & Anestis, 2018) and the common traits associated with self-serving leadership (Barelds et al., 2018; Mao et al., 2023). The Dark Triad of personality traits such as being manipulative, callous, egocentric, and lacking empathy have been linked to the exploitative strategies and their short-term orientation of self-serving leaders (Barelds et al., 2018). For instance, Barelds et al. (2018) found a connection between leader psychopathy and their desire to satisfy their interests, even if it negatively affects their employees. They proposed that successful psychopaths can rise to positions of prominence due to their effective communication, strategic thinking, impression management, and charisma (Baas et al., 2016; Barelds et al., 2018; Brooks et al., 2020; Preston & Anestis, 2018). Their egocentric and manipulative tendencies may make it easier for them to exploit others for personal gain without feelings of guilt or remorse (Brooks et al., 2020). These individuals are known for making risky or unethical decisions, engaging in counterproductive work behavior, committing white-collar crimes (Javaid et al., 2020) and participating in corporate misconduct (L. Liu et al., 2022). Similarly, narcissistic leaders tend to be arrogant and take credit for others' accomplishments, while Machiavellian leaders use deceptive tactics to get what they want (Davis, 2023).

The closest related concept to self-serving leadership is abusive supervision, which refers to supervisors' hostility toward their subordinates (Tepper, 2007). However, self-serving leadership goes beyond this by actively seeking personal gain, even if it means harming or exploiting others. Self-serving leaders may use strategic bullying – putting their followers in vulnerable positions to manipulate them and achieve their goals (Jie et al., 2019). Therefore, self-serving leadership is a distinct concept that involves leaders using their position and power for their benefit, often at the expense of others. Organizations and individuals need to recognize this type of leadership behavior and address it to promote a healthy and effective work environment.

In conclusion, how leaders behave significantly impacts the ethical atmosphere within an organization and influences employee behavior (Aboramadan & Dahleez, 2020). Employees tend to mimic the behaviors they witness. If they see self-serving leaders fostering an environment where self-interest is rewarded instead of punished, they are more likely to adopt similar attitudes (Peng et al., 2019). When their leaders' interests conflict with those of the employee it creates a sense of unease and can result in negative emotions, such as anger (S. Zhang et al., 2022). Sometimes, employees may seek revenge to address perceived unfairness (Aquino & Thau, 2009; Skarlicki & Folger, 1997). However, due to the power imbalance between leaders and employees, direct retaliation may not be possible, leading individuals to vent their frustrations elsewhere (e.g., toward customers). As the organization is responsible for its leaders' actions (Pirola-Merlo et al., 2002), employees may view their leaders' self-serving behaviors as a reflection of the organization's values, which can impact their commitment and lead to customer-directed CWB.

Hypotheses development

Meaningfulness of work

Finding meaning in work can be a helpful antidote to employee anger because employees experiencing greater meaningfulness in their jobs may respond and appraise customer mistreatment differently. In this study, we conceptualize frontline customer service positions as "dirty work." Employees in such positions may be more inclined to feel devalued or unable to find meaning in their work because they perceive the job as disagreeable, tedious, or thankless (Nielsen & Colbert, 2022). Therefore, this cognitive appraisal could profoundly affect their job experience, leading to differences in emotional and behavioral experiences when faced with customer mistreatment.

Hughes conceptualized "dirty work" as tasks and occupations perceived as unappealing, loathsome, or derogatory (Chapoulie, 1987). Hughes highlighted how such occupations are seen to be repellent and, so, the people who hold them may also be viewed as dirty workers (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014).

Numerous studies (e.g., G. Zhang et al., 2023) have investigated the impact of perceived dirty work on employees, revealing negative consequences on their physical, psychological, and behavioral well-being. For instance, Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) found that job crafting could help employees develop meaning in their careers. Hackman and Oldham (1975) posit that a good job should give staff autonomy over when, and what is completed and how the desired outcome is achieved. Consequently, employees can resort to various techniques to combat the downsides of work and make it more satisfactory (e.g., G. Zhang et al., 2023). A study of English abattoir workers (Ackroyd & Crowdy, 1990) found that workers sought status by performing strong and masculine roles. Similarly, studies focused on the mortuary (Thompson, 1991) and butchery (Meara, 1974) industries found that employees valued high loyalty and satisfaction levels (Slutskaya et al., 2016). Similarly, Stacey (2005) discovered that home care workers feel in charge of their work and gain fulfillment, as they have a say in how and when to perform their duties. Simpson et al. (2014) also indicated that granting autonomy may produce more positive results. Additionally, colleagues could provide emotional support and a defense against unfavorable public judgment (Frable et al., 1998).

Using different skills and engaging in different tasks can help employees find meaning in their jobs (Hodson, 1991). Employees can reframe their tasks by paying attention to the pleasurable aspects of their work rather than the strains. Studies have shown that employees with "dirtier" occupations rationalize and minimize the bad aspects of work while emphasizing the good ones (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014), thus justifying their negative job experiences (Deery et al., 2019; G. Zhang et al., 2023). Additionally, self-sacrifice can play an integral role in (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014) strengthening the internal justification of their work.

According to the CAT (Lazarus, 1991), individuals interpret every situation based on possible personal meanings, which depend on idiosyncratic factors. In terms of dirty work, such as frontline customer service, when employees face customer mistreatment, negative evaluations ensue, leading to anger. We argue that employees with more meaningful work experiences are better at appraising events such as customer mistreatment. This psychological resource helps diminish anger, as the employees can think objectively and rationally about the situation (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014). By appreciating their jobs and their importance, these employees are more likely to be tolerant and understanding when mistreated (Deery et al., 2019; G. Zhang et al., 2023). This, in turn, will lead to an easier adjustment in the delivery of service, whereby employees can use problem-solving techniques to diffuse customer frustration (Bryant et al., 2014).

Meanwhile, those with less meaningful work experiences cannot cognitively reevaluate customer mistreatment (Nielsen & Colbert, 2022), and their appraisal results in anger. In this case, customer mistreatment may be interpreted as an insult or a challenge to one's worth and self-esteem. As the employees find their jobs less meaningful, this will decrease their sense of self-worth and add to the appraisal of the mistreatment as a threat. Studies (e.g., Xiongtao et al., 2021) have found that if people do not enjoy or find meaning in their job, they are likely to experience a great deal of anger toward the situation, thus creating an environment of distress. When faced

with customer mistreatment, these employees will have difficulty exercising the patience and understanding required to cope with delayed gratification (Jie et al., 2019; Joy & Witt, 1992) because they lack a strong sense of purpose. A lack of purpose and meaning has been strongly associated with undesirable consequences such as compromised loyalty and decreased job satisfaction (Aguinis & Glavas, 2019; Han et al., 2021), further exacerbating anger. Thus, we hypothesized the following:

Hypothesis 1: Meaningfulness of work negatively moderates the relationship between customer mistreatment and employee anger, such that frontline service employees who find their jobs more meaningful will experience less anger than those who find their jobs less meaningful.

Three-way interaction between employee anger, self-sacrificial leadership, and self-serving leadership on employee customer-directed CWB

Angry employees will determine their responses depending on the fairness of the leader's behavior, the leader's power to reward or punish, and the motive underlying the leader's behavior (Zhang et al., 2024). From this perspective, self-sacrificial leaders can buffer the adverse effects of employee anger on customer-directed CWB. These employees will perceive their leader's self-sacrificial behaviors as a sign that they are valued and accepted, which would boost their psychological resources (Conger & Kanungo, 1987). These employees will focus on customer needs and are less likely to retaliate.

However, self-serving behaviors may undermine this protective effect. Self-serving leadership behaviors could be interpreted as a sign of disrespect and betrayal from the leader. The leader's lack of sympathy or exploitative behavior will threaten the employees' interests (Gao et al., 2022), harming their psychological safety (Mao et al., 2023) consequently, they will experience intense anger. These employees will express CWB toward their customers or others to address their negative emotions.

When self-sacrificial leadership behavior is low and self-serving leadership behavior is low, employees are more likely to be dissatisfied with their jobs and may lack motivation. In such an environment, leadership may need to effectively communicate expectations to employees, leading to feelings of ambiguity and a lack of direction. Additionally, leaders who are unwilling to make sacrifices for their employees can break their trust (Aboramadan & Dahleez, 2020), further hindering motivation. Employees may feel unsupported and unappreciated when customers mistreat them, leading to feelings of helplessness, intense anger, and customer-directed CWB. By contrast, when self-sacrificial leadership behavior is high and self-serving leadership behavior is high, employees are more likely to experience dissatisfaction with the amount of work they are asked to complete, confusion about their roles and responsibilities, and decreased motivation in the workplace (Yean et al., 2022). This is because when both types of leadership are high, employees may need more clarity about how the organization divides and delegates tasks, leading to competition and resentment (Yean et al., 2022). Thus, employees may feel overwhelmed when angry and engage in customer-directed CWB.

When self-sacrificial leadership behavior is low and self-serving leadership behavior is high, employees are more likely to experience anger at perceived unfairness. However, they may have no recourse to express it (Rupp & Spencer, 2006) and may resort to CWB. By contrast, when self-sacrificial leadership behavior is high and self-serving leadership behavior is low, employees feel supported and respected, which helps limit their anger and reduces the occurrence of CWB. Leaders who are sensitive to the emotions of their employees and make it a priority to address their needs are impactful. They acknowledge and consider their employees' feelings while providing them with the necessary tools, independence, and encouragement to excel. This type of leadership creates a positive work culture that motivates employees to perform their best and meet customers'

expectations. As a result, employees are more likely to express their negative emotions healthily and productively.

Accordingly, we hypothesized the following:

Hypothesis 2. Employee anger, self-sacrificial leadership, and self-serving leadership behavior have a three-way interaction effect on customer-directed CWB, such that the effect of employee anger on customer-directed CWB will increase when self-sacrificial leadership decreases and self-serving leadership increases.

Conditional indirect effect

The negative effects of customer mistreatment on employee anger can be moderated by meaningful work. Additionally, self-sacrificial leadership can moderate the effects of employee anger by providing employees with supportive responses that minimize their anger and subsequent customer-directed CWB. However, when the same employee encounters self-serving leaders, they may be encouraged to express their suppressed anger, reducing the buffering effect of self-sacrificial leadership, and thus establishing a damaging cycle that diminishes customer service.

Employees respond to mistreatment experiences based on their cognitive appraisal of the situation (Lazarus, 2001). Specifically, self-sacrificial and self-serving leadership behavior can influence employees' appraisal of the situations, which, in turn, can affect their attitudes and behavior. Similarly, meaningfulness of work can moderate the effect of customer mistreatment because employees may be less likely to engage in CWB if they feel that their work is meaningful. Thus, we hypothesized the following:

Hypothesis 3: The conditional indirect effect of customer mistreatment on customer-directed CWB mediated by employee anger is moderated by the interaction between self-sacrificial leadership and self-serving leadership behavior when the meaningfulness of work is considered.

Method

Participants and procedure

Through a cross-sectional design, this study investigated the correlation between customer mistreatment and customer-directed CWB instances. The study participants ($N = 400$) ere were customer-facing employees living in the United States, recruited through Prolific Academic. (http://www.prolific.ac); the platform was chosen given its advantages linked to online participant recruitment (Palan & Schitter, 2018) and high-quality data collection (Kappes et al., 2018; Peer et al., 2017). Each participant was assured of anonymity and confidentiality and informed of the study's purpose and content. After completing the questionnaire, the participants were paid £5.01/hour for their participation.

We collected data from 394 participants (response rate: 98.5%). Owing to website rules, two participants had to be eliminated for not adding their Prolific ID. Fifty per cent of the participants were female, with an average age of 30.98 years (SD = 9.46) and earning an average of USD 4090.41 per month (SD = 9765.39). Further, 50.5% were undergraduates (SD = 1.05). Most participants reported experiencing mistreatment once a day (98.5%).

Measures

All the measures were adopted from validated scales and rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Customer mistreatment

We adapted Hershcovis and Bhatnagar's (2017) 5-item customer mistreatment measure. The participants were asked, "During the last six months while working in this hotel, have you been in a situation where any of your customers … " and they rated the following sample items, "Made insulting or disrespectful remarks about you" and "Accused you of incompetence." These items have been used to test customer mistreatment during face-to-face hotel interactions.

Employee anger

We asked participants to rate their physiological responses to assess employee anger. These physiological responses were developed by Gross and Levenson (1997) and are effective in capturing individuals' emotions (Li et al., 2021). Sample items include "I am breathing rapidly," "I feel flushed," and "I was clenching my jaw."

Customer-directed CWB

Participants rated 10 items adapted from the Hunter and Penney (2014) scale. We removed three items, "Increased your tip without customer permission," "Contaminated a customer's food," and "Confronted a customer about a tip," as these factors are unique to the hotel industry and cannot be applied to other settings. Sample items include "Made a customer wait longer than necessary," "Raised your voice to a customer," and "Made fun of a customer to someone else."

Meaningfulness of work

Participants rated the four-item scale developed by Idaszak and Drasgow (1987). A sample item is "Many people are affected by the job I do."

Self-sacrificial leadership

Participants rated the five-item scale developed by Conger and Kanungo (1987). Sample items include "My supervisor is willing to stand up for my interest, even when it is at the expense of his/her interest," and "I can always count on my supervisor to help me in times of trouble, even if it is at his or her cost."

Self-serving leadership

The participants rated the four-item scale developed by Camps et al. (2012). Sample items include "My supervisor is selfish and thinks he/she is very important," and "My supervisor does not show consideration for his/her followers, only for him/herself."

Control variables

We controlled for age, gender, monthly income, academic qualifications, marital status, and prevalence of mistreatment, as they have been shown to influence employee behavior (Moon & Hur, 2018).

Results

Confirmatory factor analysis and common method bias

To ensure that the variables used in our study were distinct and accurately represented the constructs they were intended to measure, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). We compared the fit of five different CFA models: a model with a single factor, a model with four factors, two different models

Table 1. Confirmatory factor analysis and common method bias test results.

Factors	Factor descriptions	*df*	X^2	X^2/df	*CFI*	*TLI*	*SRMR*	*RMSEA (90% CI)*
7	Customer mistreatment, employee anger, counterproductive work behavior, meaningfulness of work, self-sacrificial leadership, self-serving leadership and CMV	442	874.25	1.97	.93	.93	.06	.05
6	Customer mistreatment, employee anger, counterproductive work behavior, meaningfulness of work, self-sacrificial leadership, and self-serving leadership	[d]443	908.43	2.05	.93	.92	.05	.05
5	Customer mistreatment, employee anger, counterproductive work behavior, meaningfulness of work, and [a]leadership	449	1549.06	3.45	.84	.82	.08	.07
5	[b]Negative experiences, counterproductive work behavior, meaningfulness of work, self-sacrificial leadership, and self-serving leadership	449	1439.65	3.20	.85	.84	.08	.07
4	Customer mistreatment, employee anger, counterproductive work behavior, and [a]boundaries	454	2021.21	4.45	.77	.75	.11	.09
1	All factors combined	464	4898.12	10.55	.36	.32	.21	.15

N = 392. CFI=comparative fit index; TLI =Tucker – Lewis' index; SRMR=Standardised Root-Mean-Squared Residual; RMSEA=Root-Mean-Squared Error of Approximation; CI=Confidence Interval. [a]Self-sacrificial and self-serving leadership.

with five factors, and finally, a model with six factors. The results, as shown in Table 1, revealed that the six-factor model had the best fit ($\chi 2 = 908.43$, $df = 443$, $p < .05$; $CFI = .93$, TLI = .92, RMSEA = .05) among all the models, providing evidence for its discriminant validity. All the items also had significant factor loadings above .50, indicating good convergent validity.

The data were collected and reported by the same participants simultaneously. To reduce the potential effects of common method variance (CMV), we controlled for it (Podsakoff et al., 2003). We incorporated CMV as a latent variable into the existing six-factor model and allowed all the measurement items to load on it. This improved the index values of CFI, TLI, and RMSEA by a small amount (less than 0.02; see Table 1) and accounted for only 24.62% of the variance, indicating that CMV was not a significant issue in our study.

Hypotheses testing

The means, standard deviations, intercorrelations, and Cronbach's alphas (in parentheses) are shown in Table 2. Customer mistreatment was positively correlated with employee anger ($r = .459$, $p < .01$),

Table 2. Mean, standard deviation, correlation, and Cronbach alpha values of the study variables.

	M	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Age	32.37	10.33	1										
2. Gender	1.56	.52	−.013	1									
3. Monthly income	1.79	1.89	.094	−.012	1								
4. Education	2.63	1.03	−.055	.009	.034	1							
5. Marital status	1.67	.82	.231**	.035	.066	.054	1						
6. Employee anger	1.96	.91	−.099	.099	.032	−.032	−.096	**(.83)**					
7. Meaningfulness of work	2.66	.98	−.100*	−.080	.036	.046	−.105*	−.011	**(.86)**				
8. Self-sacrificing leadership	3.03	1.00	.011	.016	−.046	.005	.179**	−.062	−.190**	**(.89)**			
9. Self-serving leadership	2.09	1.04	.006	−.127*	−.056	−.065	−.131**	.103*	.113*	−.502**	**(.88)**		
10. Customer-directed CWB	1.56	.55	−.063	−.053	−.034	−.105*	−.099	.262**	.059	−.072	.282**	**(.86)**	
11. Customer mistreatment	2.08	.96	−.054	.004	.023	−.061	−.065	.459**	−.057	−.149**	.200**	.505**	**(.92)**

N = 392. Cronbach's alphas appear in parentheses along the diagonal.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

and a significant result was noted between customer-directed CWB and this relationship ($r = .505$, $p < .01$). Age was correlated with meaningfulness of work ($r = -.100$, $p < .05$), and gender was correlated with self-serving leadership ($r = -.127$, $p < .05$). Education was correlated with CWB ($r = -.105$, $p < .05$). Marital status was correlated with meaningfulness of work ($r = -.105$, $p < .05$), self-sacrificial leadership ($r = .179$, $p < .01$), and self-serving leadership ($r = -.131$, $p < .05$). Therefore, we included these control variables in subsequent tests.

To test Hypothesis 1, we used Model 1 of Process Macro (simple moderation). The findings of the simple moderation test presented in Table 3 suggest that employee meaningfulness of work (CMMxMOW) moderates the relationship between customer mistreatment and employee anger (Model 2, $\beta = -.12$, $p < .01$). The simple slopes test (see Table 5) revealed that this effect was lowest at low levels of meaningfulness of work (−1 SD, $\beta = 0.28$ ($t = 4.42$, $p < .001$), moderate at mean levels (0 SD, $\beta = 0.41$ ($t = 9.81$, $p < .001$), and highest at high levels (+1 SD, $\beta = 0.55$ ($t = 9.19$, $p < .001$). Figure 2 illustrates these interactions. These findings support our first hypothesis.

Table 3. Results of the three-way interaction effect between employee anger, self-sacrificial leadership, and self-serving leadership on customer-directed CWB.

					95% CI	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	LL CI	UL CI
Age	−.003 (.003)	−.002 (.003)	−.001(.003)	−.001 (.003)	.516	1.324
Gender	−.053 (.053)	−.041 (.051)	−.027 (.050)	−.027 (.049)	−.006	.004
Income (USD)	−.006 (.015)	−.004 (.014)	−.006 (.014)	−.006 (.014)	−.124	.070
Education	−.055 (.027)*	−.042 (.025)	−.042 (.025)	−.045 (.025)	−.033	.021
Marital status	−.053 (.035)	−.028 (.034)	−.010 (.033)	−.014 (.033)	−.094	.003
Employee anger (ANG)		.141 (.029)***	.141 (.028)***	.174 (.032)***	−.079	.051
Self-sacrificing leadership (SAC)		.054 (.031)	.060 (.030)*	.061 (.030)*	.111	.236
Self-serving leadership (SER)		.155 (.030)***	.181 (.030)***	.180 (.030)***	.002	.119
ANGxSAC			.088 (.032)**	.091 (.032)**	.121	.239
ANGxSER			.118 (.032)***	.145 (.034)***	.027	.154
SERxSAC			.065 (.024)*	.067 (.024)**	.077	.213
ANGxSERxSAC				.058 (.026)*	.020	.114
R^2	.025	.153***	.199***	.184*		
ΔR^2	.025	.128***	.046***	.010*		

$N = 392$.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

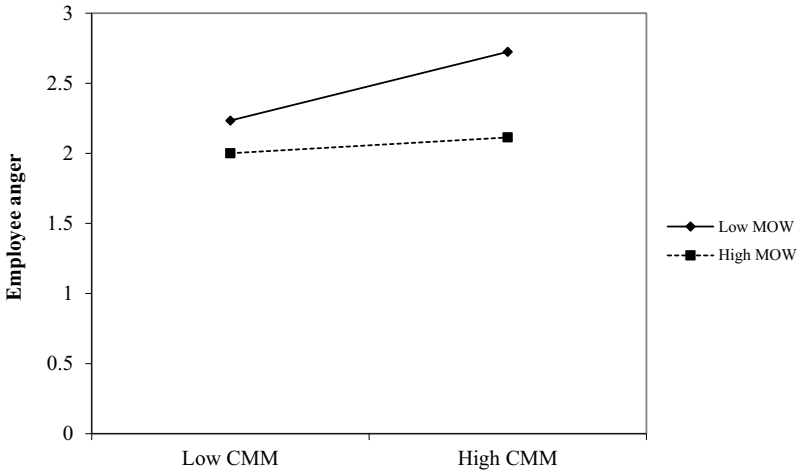

Figure 2. Graphical representation of the moderating effect of meaningfulness of work (MOW) on the relationship between customer mistreatment (CMM) and employee anger.

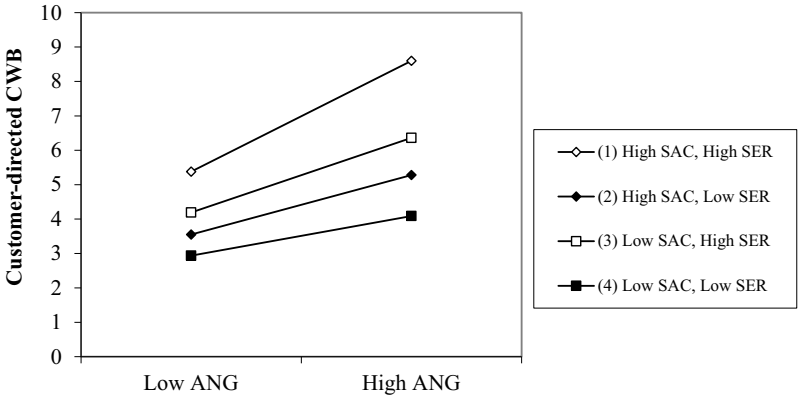

Figure 3. Graphical representation of the three-way interaction between employee anger (ANG), self-sacrificing leadership (SAC), and self-serving leadership (SER) in customer-directed counterproductive work behavior (CWB).

To test Hypothesis 2, we used Model 3 of Process Macro to examine whether there was a three-way interaction between employee anger and self-sacrificial and self-serving leadership on customer-directed CWB (ANG, SACxSER). As shown in Table 3, the three-way interaction (ANG, SACxSER) significantly moderated the relationship between employee anger and customer-directed CWB (Model 2, β =.058, $p < .05$). As shown in Table 5, the simple slopes test revealed that at low values of self-sacrificial leadership (i.e. −1 SD for SAC), the effect of employee anger on customer-directed CWB increased exponentially as self-serving leadership increased (β = .01, p = .90; β = .08, p = .06; β = .17, $p < .001$). At mean values of self-sacrificial leadership (i.e. −0 SD of SAC), the effect increased as self-serving leadership increased (β = .02, p = .63; β = .17, $p < .001$; β = .33, $\beta < .001$). At high values of self-sacrificial leadership (i.e. +1 SD of SAC), the effect increased as self-serving leadership increased (β = .05, p = .31; β = .26, $p < .001$; β = .48, $p < .001$). These interactions were only significant at high and mean levels of self-serving leadership. Interestingly, Figure 3 depicts that low anger is associated with more CWB than high anger for low SAC. This was not in line with our prediction that the lowest frequency of customer-directed CWB would have been in the Low Anger, High SAC, and Low SER groups. However, the findings support Hypothesis 2.

To test Hypothesis 3, we used Model 44 of Process Macro (Hayes, 2013). The results in Table 3 reveal that the conditional indirect effect of customer mistreatment (X) on customer-directed CWB (Y), mediated by employee anger (M), was significantly moderated by the interaction between self-sacrificial leadership (V) and self-serving leadership behavior (Q). Further, the meaningfulness of work (W) had a significant main effect on the conditional indirect effect of customer mistreatment on customer-directed CWB. The results in Table 4 show that the conditional indirect effect of customer mistreatment on customer-directed CWB was mediated by employee anger (Model 2, β = .260, $p < .001$). This relationship was moderated by the three-way interaction between self-sacrificial leadership and self-serving leadership behavior (Model 2, β =.059, $p < .05$) even when the meaningfulness of work was considered. The results of the simple slopes test (Table 6) showed that at the lowest level of meaningfulness of work (−1SD), the effect was significant when self-sacrificial leadership was high and at mean levels of self-serving leadership (β= .02, $p < .05$), and when self-sacrificial leadership and self-serving leadership were high (β= .176, $p < .01$). At the mean level of meaningfulness of work (0 SD), the effect was significant when self-sacrificial leadership was low and at high levels of self-serving leadership (β = .075, $p < .05$); when self-sacrificial leadership was high and self-serving leadership was average (β =.064, $p < .05$); and when self-sacrificial leadership and self-serving leadership were high (β = .143, $p < .01$). At the highest level of meaningfulness of work (+1 SD), the effect was significant at mean levels of self-sacrificial leadership and at high levels of self-serving leadership (β = .058, $p < .05$); when self-sacrificial leadership was high and self-serving leadership was average (β = .049, p

Table 4. Results of the conditional indirect effect.

	Outcome: Anger			Outcome: Customer-directed CWB		
		95% CI			95% CI	
	Model 1	LL CI	UL CI	Model 2	LL CI	UL CI
Age	−.005 (.004)	−.013	.002	−.000 (.002)	−.005	.004
Gender	.174 (.078)	.0212	.328	−.009 (.044)	−.097	.078
Income	.216 (.022)**	−.0217	.064	−.009 (.012)	−.034	.014
Education	−.007 (.039)	−.085	.070	−.039 (.022)	−.083	.005
Marital status	−.065 (.051)	−.167	.036	−.020 (.030)	−.079	.038
Employee anger (ANG)				.054 (.031)	−.007	.116
Customer Mistreatment (CMM)	.423 (.043)***	.338	.507	.260 (.027)***	.206	.314
Meaningfulness of Work (MOW)	−.007 (.043)	−.091	.077	.044 (.024)	−.004	.093
CMM*MOW	−.100 (.047)*	−.194	−.006	.007 (.027)	−.046	.060
Self-sacrificing leadership (SAC)				.078 (.027)**	.023	.132
Self-serving leadership (SER)				.147 (.027)***	.093	.202
ANGxSAC				.096 (.031)**	.034	.158
ANGxSER				.119 (.031) **	.057	.180
SERxSAC				.069 (.022)**	.026	.112
CMMxSAC				−.029 (.029)	−.086	.028
ANGxSERxSAC				.059 (.024)**	.0118	.1064
R^2	.488***			.602***		
ΔR^2	.238***			. 363***		

$N = 392$.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

Table 5. Results of the simple slopes tests of the relationship between meaningfulness of work, self-sacrificial leadership, and self-serving leadership with employee anger and customer-directed CWB.

		Employee Anger			*Customer-Directed CWB*		
Moderation conditions		*β* (95% CI)	SE	*t*			
Two-way interactions							
Meaningfulness of work	Low (−1 SD)	0.521 (0.40, 0.64)	0.06	8.51***			
	Mean (0)	0.423 (0.33, 0.50)	0.04	9.85***			
	High (+1 SD)	0.324 (0.19, 0.45)	0.06	4.92***			
Three-way interactions							
Self-serving	**Self-sacrificing**				**β (95% CI)**	**SE**	**t**
Low	Low (−1SD)				−.008 (−.14, .12)	0.069	−.124
	Mean (0)				.021 (−.06, .10)	0.044	.482
	High (+1SD)				.051 (−.15, .12)	0.050	1.023
Mean	Low (−1SD)				.082 (−.00, .16)	0.043	1.872
	Mean (0)				.173 (.11, .23)	0.032	5.422***
	High (+1SD)				.264 (.02, .22)	0.047	5.612***
High	Low (−1SD)				.173 (.09, .25)	0.040	4.252 ***
	Mean (0)				.325 (.22, .42)	0.051	6.282 ***
	High (+1SD)				.478 (.31, .65)	0.086	5.520 ***

$N = 392$.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

< .05); and when self-sacrificial leadership and self-serving leadership were high ($\beta = .109$, $p < .05$). These findings support our third hypothesis.

Supplementary analyses

Self-sacrificial and self-serving leadership as moderators

As mentioned in the main results section, the findings showed a significant three-way interaction between employee anger, self-sacrificial leadership, and self-serving leadership, indicating that these

Table 6. Results of the conditional indirect effect of the moderators.

Meaningfulness of work	Self-sacrificial	Self-serving	Effect	Boot SE	95% CI (LL CI)	95% CI (UL CI)
Low	Low	Low	−.054	.032	−.129	−.001
Low	Low	Mean	−.022	.024	−.075	.027
Low	Low	High	.010	.030	−.050	.067
Low	Mean	Low	−.036	.022	−.086	.002
Low	Mean	Mean	.028	.021	−.005	.079
Low	Mean	High	.093	.038	.023	.172
Low	High	Low	−.018	.028	−.067	.039
Low	High	Mean	.078*	.034	.021	.154
Low	High	High	.176**	.963	.059	.317
Mean	Low	Low	−.044	.025	−.102	.000
Mean	Low	Mean	−.018	.019	−.059	.021
Mean	Low	High	.008	.024	−.040	.057
Mean	Mean	Low	−.029	.018	−.067	.002
Mean	Mean	Mean	.023	.017	−.004	.062
Mean	Low	High	.075*	.031	.015	.138
Mean	High	Low	−.015	.022	−.055	.031
Mean	High	Mean	.064*	.027	.016	.123
Mean	High	High	.143*	.051	.046	.244
High	Low	Low	−.034	.020	−.082	.000
High	Low	Mean	−.013	.015	−.045	.015
High	Low	High	.006	.019	−.030	.045
High	Mean	Low	−.022	.014	−.053	.001
High	Mean	Mean	.017	.014	−.004	.051
High	Mean	High	.058*	.026	.012	.116
High	High	Low	−.011	.017	−.046	.022
High	High	Mean	.049*	.022	.014	.104
High	High	High	.109*	.043	.033	.196

leadership styles may influence the relationship between anger and CWB. Given that the simple slopes test revealed different patterns of results at different levels of self-sacrificial and self-serving leadership, further examination of the moderation effects was deemed necessary. Therefore, we further explore the two-way interactions between employee anger, self-sacrificial leadership, and self-serving leadership to provide a deeper understanding of their complex interplay in the workplace.

When employees feel supported by self-sacrificial leaders, they are likelier to trust their leader and take their advice, increasing job satisfaction and creating a more productive and collaborative work atmosphere (Whitehouse, 2018). This type of leadership can inspire a strong sense of loyalty among employees and encourage better communication between the two sides (Su et al., 2022). Employees will be less likely to feel the need to lash out as they may feel their concerns are being heard and their leader is sympathetic to their situation. Likewise, it shows that employees are valued, which can motivate them to work harder, increasing both customer loyalty and employee engagement (De Cremer et al., 2006). Self-sacrificial leadership can also help employees understand their emotions and feelings, allowing them to gain better control over them and make more proactive decisions (L. Liu et al., 2022; S. Liu et al., 2022). Overall, self-sacrificial leadership can be beneficial in managing employee anger and curbing customer-directed CWB since it supports employees and provides them with better workplace guidance. In contrast, non-sacrificial leadership can give employees the impression that they are not appreciated or valued (van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2005). This disconnection can make employees feel more angry (De Cremer et al., 2006), leading them to act out in counter-productive ways to express anger and increase customer-directed CWB. Thus, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 4: Self-sacrificial leadership moderates the relationship between employee anger and customer-directed counterproductive work behavior such that self-serving leadership will weaken the relationship compared to non-self-serving relationships.

In exploring the effect of self-serving leadership behavior, G. Zhang et al. (2023) demonstrated that self-serving leadership reduced team psychological safety and induced team knowledge hiding, ultimately affecting team creativity. Decoster et al. (2021) revealed that the relationship between self-serving leadership and employees' desire for retaliation and supervisor-directed deviance is stronger when the ethical climate is high rather than low. Furthermore, Mao et al. (2023) proposed that psychological entitlement and moral identity can moderate the effect of self-serving leadership on employee innovative behavior. Therefore, in line with the CAT (Lazarus, 2001), we propose that high self-serving leadership behavior in secondary appraisal will further deplete the angry employee's coping resources, leading to more anger. The employees may resort to customer-directed CWB as a dysfunctional coping mechanism (Decoster et al., 2021; Fischer et. al, 2017). On the other hand, the employees who receive support from less self-serving leaders will experience less anger (Mao et al., 2023), which would decrease the desire to engage in customer-directed CWB. Thus, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 5: Self-serving leadership will positively moderate the relationship between employee anger and customer-directed counterproductive work behavior such that self-serving leadership will strengthen the relationship compared to non-self-serving leadership.

Results

The findings from the hierarchical linear regression presented in Table 3 suggest that the moderating effect of self-sacrificial leadership (ANGxSAC) on customer-directed CWB was positive and significant (Model 3, $\beta = .08$, $p < .01$). As shown in Table 8, simple slopes test suggest that this moderating effect was weakest at low levels (−1 SD, $\beta = .14$ ($t = 3.53$, $p < .01$), moderate at mean levels (0 SD, $\beta = .15$ ($t = 5.24$, $p < .001$) and strongest at high levels of self-sacrificial leadership (+1 SD, $\beta = 0.17$ ($t = 4.00$, $p < .01$). Figure 4 illustrates that the combination of high employee anger and low self-sacrificial leadership results in a greater likelihood of customer-directed CWB compared to the combination of high employee anger and high self-sacrificial leadership. In addition, the combination of low employee anger and high self-sacrificial leadership results in higher levels of customer-directed CWB than the combination of high employee anger and high self-sacrificial leadership behavior. These findings do not align with our initial expectations, as it was hypothesized that self-sacrificial leadership would

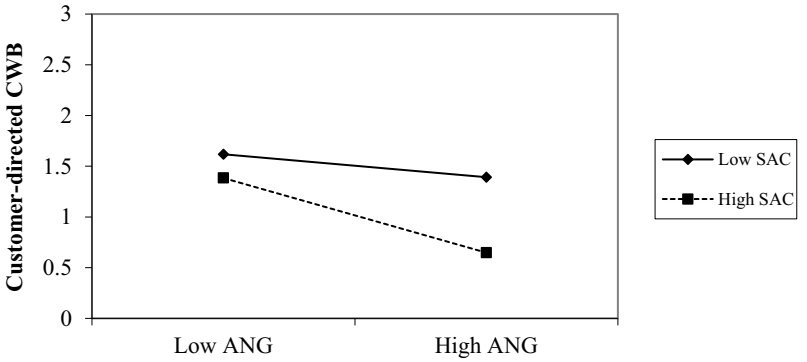

Figure 4. Graphical representation of the moderating effect of self-sacrificial leadership (SAC) on the relationship between employee anger (ANG) and customer-directed CWB.

Table 7. Results for simple slopes of the relationship between self-sacrificial and self-serving leadership on customer-directed CWB.

		Customer-Directed CWB		
Moderation conditions		*β* (95% CI)	SE	*t*
Self-sacrificial leadership	Low (−1 SD)	0.14 (0.06, 0.21)	0.03	3.53**
	Mean (0)	0.15 (0.09, 0.21)	0.02	5.26***
	High (+1 SD)	0.17 (0.08, 0.25)	0.04	4.00**
Self-serving leadership	Low (−1 SD)	0.06 (−0.02, 0.14)	0.04	1.47
	Mean (0)	0.13 (0.08, 0.19)	0.02	4.72*
	High (+1 SD)	0.21 (0.13, 0.29)	0.03	5.34**

Notes: $N = 392$.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

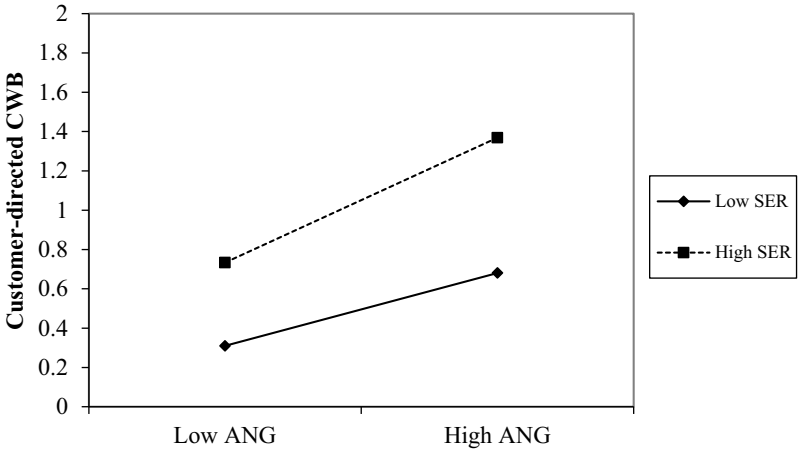

Figure 5. Graphical representation of the moderating effect of self-serving leadership (SER) on the relationship between employee anger (ANG) and customer-directed CWB.

buffer the negative effects of anger on CWB at all levels of anger. Therefore, the findings did not support our fourth hypothesis.

The findings of the hierarchical linear regression presented in Table 3 suggest that self-serving leadership (ANGxSER) has a positive and significant moderating impact on the relationship between employee anger and customer-directed CWB (Model 3, β =.11, $p < .01$). As shown in Table 7, simple slopes test revealed that this effect was lowest at low levels (−1 SD, β =.06 ($t = 1.47$, p=.47), moderate at mean levels (0 SD, $\beta = 0.13$ ($t = 4.72$, $p < .05$) and at highest at high levels of self-serving leadership (+1 SD, β=.21 ($t = 5.34$, $p < .01$). Figure 5 illustrates these interactions. These findings support our fifth hypothesis.

Discussion

The findings indicate that employees' level of meaningfulness of work moderates the impact of customer mistreatment on employees' anger. In particular, the strongest relationship is observed at lower levels of meaningfulness, while it weakens at higher levels. Additionally, there is a three-way interaction between employee anger, self-sacrificial leadership, and self-serving leadership on customer-directed counterproductive work behaviors (CWB). As self-sacrificial and self-serving leadership behaviors increase, the link between employee anger and customer-directed CWB strengthens. This suggests that the impact of customer mistreatment on CWB intensifies as self-sacrificial and self-serving leadership behaviors increase. Furthermore, the study confirms that the three-way interaction

effect of self-sacrificial and self-serving leadership on the relationship between customer mistreatment and customer-directed CWB still holds even when considering the meaningfulness of work.

Theoretical implications

This study adds to current literature (e.g. Hughes, 1959; Nielsen & Colbert, 2022) by presenting a framework on how employees in frontline customer service positions respond to customer mistreatment. By considering the influence of the meaningfulness of work on employees' feelings of anger, this study makes an important theoretical contribution by filling a gap in the literature on how meaning in work can positively influence employees' emotional reactions to challenging customer interactions (Xiongtao et al., 2021). These results align with studies examining job characteristics, which show that the sense of purpose in one's work is a fundamental job attribute that positively impacts employee engagement and productivity (Hackman & Oldham, 1975). This also aligns with previous findings that the meaningfulness of work serves as a buffer against negative job outcomes (Han et al., 2021; Shen et al., 2022; Xiongtao et al., 2021). These findings indicate that employee meaningfulness of work may help reduce the psychological consequences of mistreatment, such as anger, resentment, and frustration in a service-oriented job context. This contributes to our understanding and appreciation of the meaningful work phenomenon, and paves the way for further research. Additionally, the findings contribute to the wider discourse around how to help employees engaged in "dirty" work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, 2014). Consequently, helping employees find meaning in their daily customer service interactions could offer them more of a buffer against customer mistreatment in the future.

The results provide important insights into the relationship between employee anger, self-sacrificial and self-serving leadership, and customer-directed CWB. The findings suggest a three-way interaction between these variables, implying that the relationship between employee anger and customer-directed CWB strengthens with high self-sacrificial and self-serving leadership. This result highlights the importance of considering not just one leadership style but a combination of different leadership behaviors when attempting to understand and predict employee behavior. When leaders display self-sacrificial behavior, it reduces the impact of employee anger on customer-directed CWB. This is because self-sacrificial leadership may positively influence employees' emotions (Raza Zaidi & Siddiqui, 2021) and motivate them to channel their anger into productive actions. However, when leaders exhibit self-serving behavior, the intensifying effect is present, but employee anger is more likely to lead to CWB (Decoster et al., 2014; Sarwar et al., 2023).

The impact of employee anger and self-sacrificial leadership behavior on customer-directed CWB may differ depending on individuals. The combination of low anger and high self-sacrificial leadership may make employees feel more entitled (Mao et al., 2023), resulting in a higher likelihood of customer-directed CWB. On the other hand, when employees have high levels of anger and are led by a self-sacrificial leader, it may lead to a decrease in customer-directed CWB. This is because employees who are highly angry may be more aware of their behavior and try to control it (Kashif et al., 2023), while a self-sacrificial leader can validate their grievances and provide support, reducing the likelihood of customer-directed CWB (De Cremer & Van Knippenberg, 2004; Raza Zaidi & Siddiqui, 2021). However, high anger and low self-sacrificial leadership may increase customer-directed CWB. This is because employees feel unsupported and their anger is not acknowledged, exacerbating their negative emotions, and leading to lower levels of customer-directed CWB. Conversely, when employees have high levels of anger and are led by a self-sacrificial leader, it can lead to better outcomes.

This trend can also be examined in the three interactions between employee anger, self-sacrificial leadership and self-serving leadership on customer-directed CWB. The study examined the relationship between employee anger, self-sacrificial leadership, self-serving leadership, and customer-directed CWB. The results show that when employees experience low levels of self-

sacrificial and self-serving leadership, combined with low levels of anger, there is a decrease in customer-directed CWB. However, when employees face low self-sacrificial and high self-serving leadership coupled with high levels of anger, there is an increase in customer-directed CWB. These findings were unexpected as it was predicted that the lowest occurrence of customer-directed CWB would be when employees experienced low anger, high self-sacrificing leadership, and low self-serving behavior. The findings suggest that when faced with low self-sacrificial and self-serving leadership levels, employees may feel less attached to their organization, decreasing positive behaviors such as providing quality service (Aryee et al., 2019). Similarly, when faced with conflicting messages from low self-sacrificing and high self-serving leadership, employees may experience heightened levels of anger and engage in customer-related CWB to release their negative emotions (Maner & Mead, 2010). While self-sacrificial leadership may generally be seen as beneficial, it could lead to negative outcomes if employees interpret it as unfair or feel exploited (Sachdeva et al., 2015). This could explain why the lowest occurrence of customer-directed CWB happened when employees faced low self-sacrificial and self-serving leadership levels.

This study's findings are consistent with the CAT (Lazarus, 2001), highlighting the role of individuals' perception and evaluation of situations and events in shaping their emotions and behaviors. Furthermore, the study's findings also suggest the importance of considering a combination of factors in understanding employees' emotions in predicting customer-directed CWB. The interaction between leadership behaviors, anger, and CWB highlights the complexity of human behavior. It is not enough to look at one factor in isolation; instead, a holistic approach that considers multiple variables is necessary for a deeper understanding. The insights gained from this study can be valuable for organizations in understanding and managing employee behavior toward customers, ultimately leading to better customer service and satisfaction.

Practical implications

The outcomes of this research have significant practical implications for companies. The results suggest the need to address and effectively manage customer mistreatment in the workplace to mitigate employee anger and prevent the emergence of CWB. Hammer et al. (2011) presented important findings on how organizations can improve their strategies to ensure employee well-being and stress management. Employees who are given the ability to have some level of control over their work environment and select from reasonable work options that consider both business needs and personal circumstances can expect to see positive outcomes such as improved job satisfaction, motivation, and performance. Additionally, this can lead to a greater sense of psychological safety within the workplace (American Psychological Association [APA], 2023).

Second, the results highlight the importance of promoting self-sacrificial and discouraging self-serving leadership behavior. Furthermore, managers should strive to be self-sacrificial role models when they encounter customers mistreating employees (Yang et al., 2021). Leaders should be mindful of how their behaviors may influence employee reactions and behavior. Leaders who display self-sacrificial behaviors alone may be seen as altruistic and inspiring; however, when combined with self-serving behaviors, they may be perceived as manipulative and hypocritical. Therefore, leaders must be self-aware and conscious of how employees perceive their behaviors. This study also highlights the potential negative impact of self-serving leadership on employee behavior. Leaders primarily motivated by their interests may contribute to a climate of perceived injustice and violation of trust, which can lead to CWB. These findings suggest that organizations may benefit from training and development programs for leaders to help them understand and manage the complexities of leadership behavior. This could include teaching leaders about the consequences of displaying both self-sacrificial and self-serving behaviors, and how to effectively balance their own needs with those of their employees and the organization.

Additionally, organizations should evaluate policies that might promote self-serving leadership and CWBs to identify potential areas of improvement (Decoster et al., 2021). Implementing an ethical code of conduct to define acceptable behavior and provide structure and accountability for misconduct is important. Further, implementing measures to ensure that all individuals in the organization are recognized and rewarded fairly for their contributions will improve teamwork and morale (G. Zhang et al., 2023). Regular team reviews throughout the organization can help assess team performance and identify areas for improvement (Blaine & Crocker, 1993).

Lastly, organizations should create a meaningful work environment for their employees to reduce the likelihood of CWB. The findings of this study suggest that through meaningful work and healthy leadership behaviors, organizations can help reduce employees' job stress and maintain customer service and satisfaction. Moreover, organizations should allocate more resources to create a healthy work environment that balances self-sacrificial and self-serving leadership and benefits the organization (De Cremer et al., 2006). By taking these steps, organizations can help employees feel supported, trusted, and secure in their work. Organizations should also emphasize meaningful work by creating an environment in which employees are encouraged to grow and tackle challenging tasks (Nielsen & Colbert, 2022). Organizations can take a multi-faceted approach to foster a culture of employee well-being. This may include providing managers with training on mental health (Allen et al., 2022) and how to create a supportive workplace. Employers can also give employees more options for when, where, and how they work, as well as reevaluating their health insurance policies. Actively seeking and implementing employee feedback can also contribute to creating a healthier and more inclusive work environment. Lastly, addressing any issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion is essential in supporting the well-being of all employees (Richard et al., 2021). Implementing these actions can foster employee meaningfulness, ultimately boosting organizational performance and job satisfaction and reducing turnover.

Limitations and future directions

Despite revealing some important findings, this study had some limitations. The study was limited in its temporal scope, as it only examined participants' present feelings; it could not detect underlying patterns, such as changes in the meaningfulness of work or any long-term effects of customer mistreatment on employee performance.

Further, the participants were customer service employees in the US. While the need for further research on customer mistreatment in the US has been underscored (Consumers Union, 2018, 2022; Gavin et al., 2011; Gilliland et al., 2015), which the current study addresses, the results offer a limited perspective on the general population. Further, the study relied entirely on self-reports from the same source. Such studies are especially prone to the effects of response bias. To address this issue, we conducted confirmatory factor analyses (Podsakoff et al., 2012) to test the items' discriminant validity and the model's factorial structure. The results indicated that the six-factor model fit significantly better than the other models. Additionally, all standardized factor loadings of the items were greater than .50, indicating acceptable convergent validity. Furthermore, the test for Common Method Bias showed that the index values only explained 24.62% of the variance, suggesting that CMV was not a major issue for our study.

Future studies could consider supplementing the self-report measures used in this study with interviews, surveys, and observational data. The scoping review of reviews by Zappalà et al. (2022) identified some key trends that require further investigation. The first is the issue of the nomothetic vs. idiographic perspective in the study of CWB. The level of analysis has been a matter of debate, and the trend toward extending the two constructs beyond an individual level of analysis is welcomed. In this respect, future research may likely benefit not only from multisource data (multiple-rated CWB), which helps to control for potential biases in evaluation (Williams & Anderson, 1991), but also by longitudinally assessing how CWB affect different levels of individual and organizational outcomes. Moreover, the construct may need to be extended to a job-centric perspective other than the

traditional person□based approaches. This approach will allow investigating if counterproductive work can be framed somewhat in terms of a mismatch between job demands and employees' evaluations of their abilities (Sonnentag et al., 2013) or whether it is a function of a complex combination of person-job, person-organization and situational factors (O'Boyle et al., 2012).

Our study may suggest curvilinear relationships between employee anger and self-sacrificial and self-serving leadership behavior. Our findings show that the two leadership behaviors can have positive and negative effects, and too much of either style can be unproductive. This suggests that there is a point at which having too much of a leadership style leads to either diminishing or beneficial returns or no beneficial return (i.e., the relation of the behaviors with positive organizational outcomes is curvilinear). Future studies could examine the inflection points of these behaviors, thereby finding a balance in the leadership strategies to maximize organizational success. While we used hierarchical linear regression to analyze the data and explore three-way interactions, we understand that this approach may not fully capture the complexity of curvilinear relationships. Therefore, future research directions could use advanced statistical techniques, such as polynomial regression or response surface methodology, to examine curvilinear relationships. Another approach could be to collect data at multiple time points and use dynamic models to examine non-linear relationships over time. Le et al. (2011) state that identifying curvilinear relationships between certain traits and job performance challenges traditional assumptions and provides useful information for employers and employees. Their study utilized self-reported personality trait data and supervisor ratings of job performance (Le et al., 2011). Using statistical analysis, they found that there is indeed a curvilinear relationship between certain personality traits and job performance (Le et al., 2011).

Additionally, research can compare perceptions of work and leadership between countries and societies with different cultural values and study various industries to examine the prevalence and nature of customer mistreatment in different sectors to confirm the generalizability of our findings (Evans et al., 2018). Furthermore, we believe that the self-sacrificial and self-serving leadership styles can have positive and negative effects in that too much of either style can be unproductive. Therefore, researchers should investigate the point beyond which having too much of either leadership style can lead to diminishing or no beneficial returns.

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Ethics statement

All procedures performed in the study were conducted according to the ethical standards of the national research committee and in compliance with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all the study participants.

Data availability

The datasets generated and analyzed for the current study are available at DOI: https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/YBJMD

Open Scholarship

This article has earned the Center for Open Science badges for Open Data and Open Materials through Open Practices Disclosure. The data and materials are openly accessible at https://osf.io/ybjmd

Submission declaration

This article is not under consideration for publication elsewhere, and all authors have approved its publication. If accepted, the manuscript will not be published elsewhere in the same form, in English or any other language, including electronically, without written consent from the copyright holder.

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