

From Customer Incivility to Turnover Intention Through Perceived Overqualification and Career Commitment under Coworker Support

Xiaolin Zhou*, Dexin Zhao

School of Business and Tourism, Sichuan Agricultural University, Chengdu 611830, China

**Corresponding author:* Xiaolin Zhou, zhou_xiaolin163@163.com

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Abstract: Frontline employees often experience customer incivility, which may increase their intention to leave service organizations. Drawing on conservation of resources theory, this study examines how customer incivility affects turnover intention through perceived overqualification and career commitment, and whether coworker support moderates these relationships. Survey data were collected from 483 hotel employees in China and analyzed using reliability tests, correlation analysis, mediation, and moderated mediation procedures. The results show that customer incivility is positively related to turnover intention. Career commitment significantly mediates this relationship, and perceived overqualification and career commitment form a significant serial mediation path. However, the single mediation effect of perceived overqualification is not significant. Coworker support weakens the positive effects of customer incivility and perceived overqualification on turnover intention and strengthens the protective effect of career commitment.

Keywords: Customer incivility; Turnover intention; Perceived overqualification; Career commitment; Coworker support

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1. Introduction

In service organizations, frontline employees frequently face customer incivility, such as rude comments, impatient attitudes, unreasonable demands, and disrespectful treatment. Although these behaviors are usually low in intensity, they create continuous psychological pressure because employees are expected to remain polite and professional. Customer incivility has been recognized as a workplace stressor that harms employee well-being and increases turnover intention^[1]. Understanding how such daily mistreatment pushes employees to consider leaving is therefore important for service management.

Prior studies have mainly explained the effects of customer incivility through emotional exhaustion, job stress, and service sabotage. Less attention has been paid to employees' self-evaluation and career-related responses. This study argues that customer incivility may increase perceived overqualification, as employees may feel that their education, skills, and experience are wasted in work that requires them to tolerate disrespect. Perceived overqualification is associated with unfavorable job attitudes and turnover-related outcomes^[2].

Customer incivility may also weaken career commitment by reducing employees' confidence in the value and future of their service career ^[3]. In addition, coworker support may function as a social resource that helps employees cope with customer incivility and reduces their intention to leave ^[4]. Accordingly, this study examines the mediating roles of perceived overqualification and career commitment and the moderating role of coworker support.

2. Theoretical foundations and research hypotheses

2.1. Customer incivility and turnover intention

Customer incivility refers to rude, disrespectful, or impatient customer behaviors that violate norms of interpersonal respect. From the perspective of conservation of resources theory, employees strive to protect valuable psychological and work-related resources. Customer incivility depletes emotional resources and threatens employees' dignity at work. When such resource loss becomes repeated, employees may evaluate their job as emotionally costly and develop stronger turnover intention. Empirical research has also shown that customer incivility is related to emotional exhaustion and intention to leave ^[5]. Therefore:

H1. Customer incivility is positively associated with turnover intention.

2.2. Mediating role of perceived overqualification

Perceived overqualification refers to employees' belief that their education, skills, knowledge, or experience exceed current job requirements. When employees repeatedly face uncivil customers, they may become more aware of the mismatch between their qualifications and their work situation. They may feel that their abilities are not properly valued, especially when their work requires them to endure disrespectful treatment. This sense of mismatch can increase dissatisfaction and strengthen turnover intention ^[6,7]. Thus:

H2. Perceived overqualification mediates the association between customer incivility and turnover intention.

2.3. Mediating role of career commitment

Career commitment reflects employees' psychological attachment to their chosen career and their willingness to continue developing in that career ^[8]. Customer incivility may weaken career commitment because repeated negative customer interactions make employees question the value, dignity, and future prospects of service work. Once employees become less committed to their career, they are more likely to consider leaving their current job or even the service field. Accordingly:

H3. Career commitment mediates the association between customer incivility and turnover intention.

2.4. Serial mediating mechanism

Perceived overqualification and career commitment may further form a serial mediating mechanism. Customer incivility may first make employees feel that their abilities are wasted in a job where they must tolerate disrespect. This stronger perception of overqualification may then reduce employees' identification with their career path, because employees who perceive poor person-job fit are less likely to maintain strong career commitment. Lower career commitment subsequently increases turnover intention. Therefore:

H4. Perceived overqualification and career commitment serially mediate the effect of customer incivility on turnover intention.

2.5. Moderating role of coworker support

Coworker support provides emotional comfort, practical help, and interpersonal understanding. According to the buffering view of social support, supportive interpersonal relationships can reduce the harmful influence of work stressors^[9]. In this study, coworker support is expected to weaken the positive effects of customer incivility and perceived overqualification on turnover intention. It may also strengthen the protective role of career commitment because supportive colleagues can make committed employees more willing to remain in the organization. Therefore:

H5. Coworker support moderates the association between customer incivility and turnover intention.

H6. Coworker support moderates the association between perceived overqualification and turnover intention.

H7. Coworker support moderates the association between career commitment and turnover intention.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants and data collection

A cross-sectional survey was conducted through the Credamo online data collection platform in China. Participants were screened to ensure that they worked in hotels and frequently interacted with customers. Three attention-check items were embedded in the questionnaire. A total of 500 responses were collected. After removing inattentive responses, unusually short completion times, and failed attention checks, 483 valid questionnaires remained. The final sample included 209 males and 274 females. Regarding education, 33 participants had a high school diploma or below, 137 held a college degree, 302 held a bachelor's degree, and 11 held a master's degree or above. Monthly income was mainly between RMB 3,001 and RMB 6,000 (55.5%), while 36.0% earned more than RMB 6,000.

3.2. Measurements

Gender, age, education, hospitality tenure, and monthly income were controlled. Turnover intention was measured with four items developed by Mobley *et al.*^[10]. Customer incivility was measured with the ten-item Incivility From Customers Scale^[1]. Perceived overqualification was measured with nine items developed by Maynard *et al.*^[6]. Career commitment was measured with the eight-item scale developed by Blau^[8]. Coworker support was measured using items adapted from Tews *et al.*^[11]. All variables were measured on five-point Likert scales.

4. Results

4.1. Reliability and validity

Reliability and convergent validity were evaluated before hypothesis testing. Factor loadings above 0.50 were considered acceptable. Among 38 initial items, 36 met this criterion. Two perceived overqualification items were removed because they either reflected job requirements rather than overqualification or overlapped with other items. Composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha values exceeded 0.70. Overall, the measurement model showed adequate reliability and validity.

4.2. Descriptive statistics and correlations

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations. Customer incivility was positively related to turnover intention and perceived overqualification. Perceived overqualification was positively related to

turnover intention. Customer incivility and perceived overqualification were both negatively related to career commitment, while career commitment was strongly and negatively related to turnover intention. These results provided preliminary support for the proposed relationships.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations of the measured variables.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
Customer incivility	1				
Perceived overqualification	0.369**	1			
Career commitment	-0.341**	-0.383**	1		
Coworker support	-0.203**	-0.066	0.406**	1	
Turnover intention	0.350**	0.379**	-0.793**	-0.387**	1
Mean	2.485	3.254	3.679	3.992	2.305
SD	0.609	0.667	0.835	0.584	1.059

Note. ** $P < 0.01$

4.3. Mediation and moderated mediation tests

Mediation was tested using PROCESS Model 6 with 5,000 bootstrap samples and 95% confidence intervals^[12]. After controlling for demographics, customer incivility positively predicted turnover intention ($\beta = 0.125$, $P < 0.05$), supporting H1. Although customer incivility predicted perceived overqualification ($\beta = 0.375$, $P < 0.001$), which subsequently predicted turnover intention ($\beta = 0.109$, $P < 0.05$), the indirect effect was nonsignificant ($\beta = 0.041$, $SE = 0.022$, 95% CI [-0.002, 0.085]); thus, H2 was not supported. In contrast, the indirect effect through career commitment was significant ($\beta = 0.259$, $SE = 0.057$, 95% CI [0.149, 0.371]), supporting H3. The serial indirect effect through perceived overqualification and career commitment was also significant ($\beta = 0.104$, $SE = 0.024$, 95% CI [0.060, 0.154]), supporting H4.

Moderation was tested using PROCESS Model 89. Coworker support weakened the positive effects of customer incivility ($\beta = -0.181$, $P < 0.05$) and perceived overqualification ($\beta = -0.167$, $P < 0.05$) on turnover intention. Both effects were significant at low coworker support ($\beta = 0.243$ and 0.244 , respectively, P s < 0.01) but nonsignificant at high support ($\beta = 0.033$ and 0.049 , respectively, P s > 0.05), supporting H5 and H6. Finally, coworker support moderated the relationship between career commitment and turnover intention ($\beta = -0.149$, $P < 0.05$), with a stronger negative effect at high ($\beta = -0.941$, $P < 0.001$) than low coworker support ($\beta = -0.768$, $P < 0.001$), supporting H7.

5. Discussion

This study examined how customer incivility influences hotel employees' turnover intention. The results show that customer incivility directly increases turnover intention, confirming that repeated disrespect from customers is not a trivial service event but a meaningful work stressor. The mediation results further indicate that career commitment is a key mechanism. Employees exposed to customer incivility are more likely to question the value and future of their service career, and this weakened career attachment increases their intention to leave.

The results also reveal a more nuanced role of perceived overqualification. Although the single indirect effect of perceived overqualification was not significant, the serial path through perceived overqualification and career commitment was significant. This suggests that feeling overqualified may not directly push employees

to leave unless it further reduces their identification with the service career. Coworker support also played an important protective role. High support buffered the negative effects of customer incivility and perceived overqualification, and it strengthened the retention value of career commitment.

6. Theoretical and practical implications

Theoretically, this study extends research on customer incivility by moving beyond emotional exhaustion and job stress to examine self-evaluation and career-related mechanisms. It shows that perceived overqualification and career commitment jointly explain why customer incivility leads to turnover intention. The nonsignificant single mediation of perceived overqualification also indicates that overqualification should be understood in relation to employees' broader career identity rather than as an isolated job attitude. In addition, the study clarifies the boundary role of coworker support by demonstrating both buffering and strengthening effects.

Practically, service organizations should not treat customer incivility as an unavoidable part of frontline work. Hotels can reduce its impact by establishing clear customer behavior standards, providing employees with response scripts, and empowering supervisors to intervene in uncivil encounters. Managers should also pay attention to employees who feel overqualified, because they may need more meaningful tasks, skill-use opportunities, and career development feedback. Finally, organizations should strengthen coworker support through team-based work design, peer mentoring, and informal debriefing after difficult customer interactions.

7. Limitations and future research

Several limitations should be noted. First, the study used cross-sectional self-report data, which limits causal inference. Future research could use longitudinal or multi-source designs. Second, the sample was limited to hotel employees in China; future studies could compare different service industries and cultural contexts. Third, this study focused on coworker support, but other resources such as supervisor support, organizational justice, and customer orientation may also shape employees' reactions to incivility. Finally, future research could distinguish verbal, behavioral, and relational forms of customer incivility to examine whether different forms produce different psychological pathways.

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Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author contributions

Xiaolin Zhou collected and organized the data and wrote the paper. Dexin Zhao conceived the idea of the study and contributed to translation.

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