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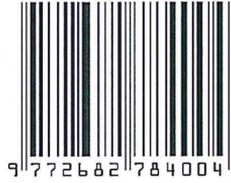
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## THE INFLUENCE OF CUSTOMER INCIVILITY TOWARDS DEVIANT BEHAVIOUR: A CASE STUDY OF CASUAL RESTAURANT FRONTLINE EMPLOYEES IN THE KLANG VALLEY, MALAYSIA

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### ABSTRACT

*Over the past decade, the combination of organisational, sociocultural, and technological factors has changed the nature of the work, contributing significantly in developing the service sector. As a large number of people are employed in service occupations, incivility that is being received from customers or clients has become increasingly prevalent in our workplace, especially towards frontline employees. Frontline employees are typically required to tolerate the complaints and frustrations of customers along with other possible stressors often allied with service jobs. Customer rudeness and incivility are believed to be some of the current problems that are widely spreading which trigger frontline employees' deviant attitude. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of customer incivility over frontline employees' deviant behaviour in casual dining restaurants.*

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## 1. Introduction

Hospitality and tourism industry is one of the people-oriented businesses in this competitive modern era (Cheng & Yi, 2019). It is a multibillion-dollar industry and a crucial driver of economic growth for many countries (Beladi & Chao, 2019). This industry, which includes the

restaurants sector, is commonly known to experience additional customer incivility than other industries around (Arasli & Namin, 2018). According to Afsar and Shahjehan (2018), low salaries, hostility or negative emotions among employees, exclusivism or exclusive behaviours, verbal abuse or even sexual threats and also multiple direct interactions with the customers are considered as factors leading towards incivility. The employees working in the hospitality and tourism industry were found to have an association with incivility due to their job responsibility (Alola & Olugbade, 2019). In the long run, customer incivility has proven to create devastating effects on people associated with providing services that affect them mentally and psychologically, which creates a spiral effect over personal life (Kim & Qu, 2019).

In addition, casual dining restaurants are considered to fall under the hospitality sector, which offers a comfortable and calm ambiance as well as menu items at a lower to moderate cost (Ivkov & Blesic, 2018). Casual dining restaurant is a full-service, moderate-upscale type of dining and focuses on themes to represent their image, service, and interior decoration. It is slightly a bit expensive than a fast food restaurant (Li & Kim, 2019). Casual dining offers table service to the customers, using non-disposable dishes and flatware. Employees who work in the frontline are always in contact with customers which makes them more prone to receiving incivility (Kim & Qu, 2019).

It is a cause of the increase in the number of casual dining restaurants in Malaysia that consumers are dining out instead of cooking and dining at home either on weekdays or even on the weekends due to the hectic lifestyle in urban cities and wage growth (Nasir & Ghazali, 2019). Casual dining restaurants fall under the full-service category together with the fine dining restaurants (Chahal & Kamil, 2018). According to Byrd and Almanza (2019), "Casual dining can be any number of themes that includes Italian to Thai, and some examples of casual dining restaurants in Malaysia are Secret Recipe, Kenny Rogers Roaster, Nando's, and Absolute Thai Restaurant" (p.12).

Work in casual dining restaurants is very demanding. As part of the casual dining restaurant industry, employees face high levels of stress as they work shifts, for long hours, perform repetitive task, and deal with demanding customers (Boella & Goss, 2019). Employees in a restaurant have repeated interaction with customers compared to other businesses, thus it makes them more susceptible to incivility to keep up with the pace of work which requires the employees to work under pressure, which separates them from even family life (Shin & Hur, 2019). Employees who perceived high-stress levels arose from aspects such as frequent customers contact, and work pressure will be likely influenced employee work performance that creates financial consequences or productivity loss to the organisation (Mitchell & Greenbaum, 2019). Gabriel and Butts, (2018) had shown that customer incivility is dominantly associated with the service sector. According to Mansour and Mohanna (2018), "Studies have also established that employees' emotional work in the service industry is quite stressful and may lead employee to burnout despite this work being effective for the required tasks" (p.4). Researches had shown that job stress negatively affects over quality of service leading to emotional exhaustion and cynicism (Wu & Li, 2018). Customer incivility can be regarded as a social stressor that can be impactful for draining emotional and cognitive employee resources which have substantial financial implication over the development of the restaurant industry (Sommovigo & Setti, 2019). A study conducted by Johnson and Hall, (2018) stated that the number of suicide cases among service sectors employees is increasing and steps must be taken to protect their lives. Restaurant employees are reported to perform deviant act which financially destroy the company's future growth (Nugroho & Oktavio, 2019). Limited number of studies have focused on restaurant employees' moral health

and development (Jin & Kim, 2020). Hence, the objective of this study was to determine the influence of customer incivility over frontline employee performance towards deviant behaviour among casual dining restaurants.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Deviant behaviour**

Malik and Sattar (2019) appraised workplace behaviours and suggested deviance as a behaviour which is extremely harmful to the working environment and leads employees towards aggression in the workplace, interpersonal conflict, disruption, and case of robbery which brings financial damage to the organisation. According to Dora and Azim (2017), "Employee deviance is defined as employee voluntary behaviour that extremely violates major organisational norms and while doing threatens the well-being of an organisation, and also to the people who are related with the organisation" (p.12). Workplace deviance attitudes are not only aimed at organisational norms but also intend to harm employee social norms in the workplace (Di Stefano & Scrima, 2019). A workplace deviant behavior is also considered to be a behavior in which a person takes unfair advantage of the organization and negatively impacts the shared norms and expectations of the organization as well as the fundamental social values of the organization. (Singh, 2019). Moreover, deviant behaviour also endangers the norms of the employees, obstructing organisational goals and harms the mental state of other devoted employees (Ford & Agosta, 2018). In an organisation, workers both accept the norms and work for achieving common organisational goals but deviant attitude damages the proper work environment and financially destroys the organisation (Ramzy & Bedawy, 2018). According to Cohen and Ehrlich (2019), "whether the behaviour of an employee is interpreted, tolerated or accepted depends on the organisational culture; as such, employees will commit deviant acts at work depending on the work environment they are in regardless of their characteristics" (p.12).

### **2.2 Customer incivility**

Customer incivility is a type of behaviour executed by a person in a patron or purchaser role, with uncertain motive to harm an employee, in violation of social norms of mutual recognition and courtesy (Vraimaki & Koloniari, 2019). Sometimes dealing with very impolite, disrespectful humans can be a daily incidence at work, especially in the service oriented industry (Opengart & Ding, 2019). According to Alessandri and Longis (2020), "Daily hassles are more significant predictive of detrimental health outcomes, deviant task performance, and absenteeism than much less frequent, however more severe in terms of life stressors" (p.6). The number of service related jobs has increased tremendously in recent years, putting more people in a positions where customer incivility may take place (Groth & Wu, 2019). Customer incivility directed at the hospitality industry can lead to the depletion of psychological resources, which might be viewed as a principal cause of exhaustion for workers (Cheng & Yi, 2018). According to Holmqvist and Vaerenbergh (2019), "Restaurant frontline employees have frequent contact with customers compared with other industries, which makes them more prone to receiving incivility, leading to loss of productivity, reduced voluntary efforts, retaliation towards the instigator, and financial loss" (p.2). Furthermore, research has demonstrated that service employees experience incivility from customers more often than from their coworkers in a much more severe manner (Kowalski & Toth, 2018).

### **2.3 Front line employee**

In service delivery business, frontline employees play an essential role in networking with customers and symbolise themselves on behalf of the organisation (Hall & Williams, 2017). The frontline service personnel are in a unique vital position for contributing in the direction of hassle solving and also to communicate trends in customer support desires and the impact of business enterprise guidelines on service delivery (Zhao & Yan, 2018). Providing admirable customer service is a vital technique to gain a modest advantage over a competitor for more repeat business in the future (Hoe & Mansori, 2018). Frontline employees' wrong moves are considered as bad for the company that might lead to serious future consequences (Tamborrino, 2019). Pang and Lu, (2018) highlighted that precisely in the service sector, employee motivation is an essential consideration in ensuring the service quality and businesses need to raise their employees' motivation for continuous development of their business facilities provided for their customers. Although the importance of the boundary-spanning roles of frontline employees is recognised in the knowledge creation process, limited number of researches had explored how these roles contribute towards organisational development (Bayighomog & Arasli, 2019). Companies can take the initiative to train employees' way and technique to handle customers with rough nature (Noe & Kodwani, 2018).

### **2.4 Casual dining restaurants**

According to Espinosa and Ortinau (2018), "A casual restaurant is commonly known as a place where a person sits and orders his or her meal through a menu card and gets served on in the table. The prices are considered to be moderated or a bit over moderate prices depending on the place and types of food being ordered" (p.4). Casual dining is a type of restaurant that fills in this vast gap between fast food and fine dining restaurants that varies from menus to services (Dixon & Miscuraca, 2018). Casual dining is graded to be higher in quality than food served at fast food joint or restaurants, along with the atmosphere which is more relaxing and more comfortable therefore this is what differentiates it from other kinds of restaurants (Longart & Wickens, 2018).

According to Gibson and Parkman (2018), "In casual dining, the menu would be focused on the setting of the restaurant, could vary a lot according to its location and style, could be focused on a particular ethnicity, e.g. Mexican, Italian, Chinese, Thai, etc, then come all these different types of a restaurant inside the casual dining industry: traditional, casual dining, cafeteria, café/diner, pub/gastro, pub/brewhouse, buffet/smorgasbord, bistro, teppanyaki grill, and Mongolian barbecue" (p.22). Over the years, the category of casual dining has expanded considering buffet service to be a casual dining restaurant as well, where customers would pay for their meal at the beginning and then sit down and eat; the difference is that they will be serving themselves through a vast selection of dishes that are displayed in the restaurant which are ready to eat (Saad & Abukhalifeh, 2020).

## **3. Method**

This was a quantitative study. 120 questionnaires were personally distributed to the frontline employees of the casual restaurants in the Klang Valley. Out of 120 distributed questionnaires, only 107 were used in an analysis using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25. A non-probability of purposive sampling technique was used as the researcher wanted to focus on particular characteristics of a population that are of interest and best to answer the research questions specifically. The researcher had successfully accepted 107

questionnaires. Adopted questionnaire was used to collect data. Then, the data were analysed with the help of Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25.

#### **4. Results and Discussion**

The results pointed out that there was a significant positive relationship between customer incivility and deviant behaviour with the p-value of less than 0.01 correlation coefficient ( $r=.272$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Customer incivility has a significant impact over employees' overall performance that causes difficulties for the organisation's future, which comes along with financial difficulties.

In order to control the employees' deviant behaviour, managers and restaurant operators should highlight their service training. An employee should be frequently trained to handle the different circumstances, which makes them better in terms of handling incivility. Training should be made compulsory for all employees working in the frontline. To make sure different restaurants are abiding by the rules half-yearly inspection must be arranged by concerned authority.

How to interact with the service staff properly can also be educated through awareness campaigns or fun activities. Remesovschi and Beliuța, (2019) had highlighted the importance of customer education which had shown significant decrease over incivility. Restaurants can provide a simple orientation through their promotional materials, confirmation e-mails, videos, and other media. Such alignments can expose customers to a realistic preview of the service, and what actions of customer might violate general politeness towards employees. While such activity might not completely remove uncivil behaviours, but they will likely to reduce them and improve the relationship between service providers and recipients.

#### **5. Conclusion**

The present study verifies that customer incivility is responsible for deviant behaviour among frontline employees working in casual dining restaurants in the Klang Valley. Moreover, despite of the increasing interest in incivility, customer incivility received less attention. Customer incivility significantly influences employees' negative attitude towards the organisation and in the long run, diverts employees from achieving organisational goal with significant loss. This study will have a huge contribution towards the growing restaurants industry which is a part of hospitality and tourism sector of Malaysia.

Also, generalisation is a limitation. This is because of the lack of probability sampling used. This study employed purposive sampling, which is a type of no-probability sampling. Researches that used convenience sampling cannot be used to generalise the population. Thus, in future, it is recommended to apply probability sampling for generalisation in the context of Malaysian food and beverage services. Different population can also be considered by future researches. Adding up a moderating variable might show some different results or give the study a different look.

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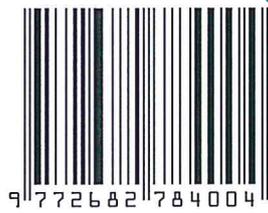
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