THE MODERATING ROLE OF SUPPORT SEEKING VERSUS PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CUSTOMER AGGRESSION AND JOB OUTCOMES

Ruhama Goussinsky*

ABSTRACT. Customer aggression constitutes a major source of stress for service providers; however, empirical research regarding the moderating role of coping strategies in the customer aggression–job outcomes relationship is sparse. Two samples of service workers were recruited from northern Israel and data were collected using self-reported questionnaires. Study 1 investigated the moderating impact of support seeking and behavioral disengagement on this relationship. Results show that under conditions of excessively-aggressive behavior, more support seeking was associated with higher levels of emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions. Study 2 indicates that supervisor support moderated the customer aggression–work engagement relationship, such that the detrimental effect of customer aggression on work engagement was observed only among service workers with low levels of supervisor support.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of the service sector in many countries has made the study of the “dark” side of service jobs, namely, interactions with verbally abusive customers, increasingly important within the area of occupational stress research. Existing research has consistently shown that being a target of frequent hostility from the very people employees are supposed to “serve with a smile” is a major source of stress for service workers, leading to high rates of emotional exhaustion (e.g., Dormann & Zapf, 2004; Evers, Tomic, &

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Brouwers, 2001), job dissatisfaction (Karatepe, 2011; Lim & Yuen, 1998), turnover intentions (Harris & Reynolds, 2003; Karatepe, Yorganci, & Haktanir, 2009), retaliation behaviors (Skarlicki, van Jaarsveld, & Walker, 2008), and withdrawal behaviors (Grandey, Dickter, & Sin., 2004). In fact, customer aggression, which refers to "verbal communications of anger that violate social norms" (Grandey et al., 2004, p. 398) was found to be a strong predictor of burnout, above and beyond other predictors, such as task-related stressors (Dormann & Zapf, 2004) and aggression from coworkers or supervisors (Grandey, Kern, & Frone, 2007).

For some service workers, verbal aggression from customers, including insults, swearing and yelling, is not a rare experience. For example, it was found that the majority of call center employees reported between 7 and 10 encounters with aggressive customers per day (Grandey, et al., 2004) and 74% of flight attendants and railway employees experienced verbal abuse from passengers at least once a month (Boyd, 2002). Frequent interactions with abusive customers are also reported by social workers (Ringstad, 2005) and by frontline employees in the hospitality industry (Harris & Reynolds, 2003; Reynolds & Harris, 2006).

While the vast majority of studies in this field have focused on the consequences associated with customer misbehavior, only a few studies have investigated how employees cope with this particular job stressor (Bailey & McCollough, 2000; Ben-Zur & Yagil, 2005; Reynolds & Harris, 2006; Van Dierendonck & Mevissen, 2002) and little is known about the moderating effects of coping strategies on the relationship between customer verbal aggression and job outcomes. It has long been established that while effective coping can reduce and buffer the negative impact of stressors, failure to cope effectively with workplace stressors can lead to negative physical and psychosocial outcomes (e.g., Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen, & DeLongis, 1986). Therefore, Study 1 was designed to examine the moderating effects of support seeking and avoidance, two commonly used strategies adopted during and after interaction with abusive customers (Bailey & McCollough, 2000; Yagil, 2008) on the customer aggression - emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions relationships.

In addition, given that support seeking has been found to be the most common strategy for dealing with customer misbehavior (Bailey
& McCollough, 2000), it is likely that the perception that social support is available when required, is one job resource that might be of special importance for service providers seeking to cope with problems related to customer aggression and their own burnout (Karatepe, 2011). Studies on service workers have demonstrated that social support can reduce the negative effects of some job stressors, such as performance monitoring (Holman, Chissick, & Totterdell, 2002) or the demand to display organizationally-desired emotions toward customers (Yagil, Luria, & Gal, 2008); however, there is limited empirical evidence demonstrating the moderating role of perceived support on the relationship between customer aggression and employee outcomes (Karatepe, 2011). Therefore, the aim of Study 2 was to investigate whether perceived support from supervisor and coworkers would buffer the effects of customer aggression on work engagement.

In sum, despite reports of the grave consequences to service providers and organizations, customer verbal aggression remains a relatively underdeveloped field of enquiry (Fisk et al., 2010). The present study seeks to extend research in this domain, by considering the moderating effects of two commonly used coping behaviors and social support on the relationship between customer aggression and turnover intentions, emotional exhaustion and work engagement. Emotional exhaustion refers to feelings of being emotionally drained and depleted of one’s resources, and it is considered the key component of job burnout (Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998). Work engagement refers to a positive work-related state of mind, characterized by feelings of dedication to work, vigor, and immersion in work activities (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006). Both job outcomes are likely to affect service quality as perceived by consumers. Research has shown that emotional exhaustion has a negative effect, both on the service provider’s job performance and on customer satisfaction (Yagil, 2006), while work engagement was found to be a predictor of service climate, which in turn affects customers’ perceptions of employee performance and customer loyalty (Salanova, Agut, & Peiro, 2005). Thus, from a practical perspective, a greater understanding of the manner in which coping responses and the perception of social support affect these job outcomes, could contribute to intervention efforts and organizational practices intended to provide the best possible service to customers.
Coping with Customer Aggression

The concept of coping refers to the cognitive or behavioral efforts exerted to control or reduce demands created in stressful situations (Folkman, 1984). Coping with occupational stressors is similarly defined and reflects the effort, either cognitive or behavioral, to reduce demands that are greater than the individual’s resources (Dewe, 2000). According to an early classification introduced by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), a distinction can be drawn between coping with the actual stressor and coping with its psychological and emotional outcomes: strategies focusing on the individual’s efforts to reach a solution, such as seeking instrumental assistance or planning courses of action, are known as problem-focused coping strategies, whereas strategies that aim to reduce the resultant negative emotions and discomfort, such as mental or behavioral disengagement from the stressor, denial, venting, or seeking emotional support, are known as emotion-focused coping strategies.

Several studies have shown that in response to customer misbehavior, service providers are more likely to use emotion-focused coping strategies. Ben-Zur and Yagil (2005), for instance, found that disengagement and denial were commonly used strategies. In a study that utilized in-depth interviews, Reynolds and Harris (2006) revealed that employees in the hospitality industry adopted a wide range of tactics intended to cope with incidences of deviant customer behavior, most of which were aimed at reducing the emotional distress associated with or caused by customer misbehavior. These tactics included drug use, ignoring difficult customers, attempts to feign emotion, psychological distancing, efforts to disengage and isolate themselves from both customers and other employees, or, in contrast, talking with their colleagues about the incident. Emotion-focused strategies were also identified in a study by Bailey and McCollough (2000), which was based on both qualitative and quantitative data. Findings demonstrated that while seeking emotional support from other employees was the most common strategy, avoidance/behavioral disengagement strategies (e.g., leaving the location where the service is provided, performing other tasks instead of providing service, slowing down or taking a break) were also frequently reported strategies for coping with difficult customers.
The present research focuses on the moderating effects of two coping behaviors: behavioral disengagement and seeking emotional support. The aim of disengagement or avoidance coping is to escape the threat or its related emotions and involves distancing oneself from the stressful situation (Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003). Emotional support-seeking behavior refers to an individual's efforts to reach out for comfort and understanding and, with respect to the present study, includes talking about the difficult customer, sharing experiences, and venting emotions with coworkers (Yagil, 2008). Both disengagement and seeking emotional support are considered emotion-focused coping strategies that aim to reduce the emotional distress associated with a stressful situation (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010).

The Moderating Impact of Coping

Emotion-focused coping is typically considered less constructive than problem-focused coping, because the emphasis is on dealing with the affect rather than trying to solve the problem. The literature on coping outcomes has generally showed that instead of alleviating the negative outcomes of work stressors, emotion-focused coping strategies predict poorer emotional and psychological outcomes across an array of stressors (Austenfeld & Stanton 2004, Day & Livingstone, 2001; Littleton, Horsley, & Nelson, 2007; Penley, Tomaka, & Wiebe, 2002). However, previous studies provide mixed results regarding the moderating effect of emotion-focused coping strategies: while some studies have shown that these strategies exacerbated the work stressor’s negative effect on strain outcomes (Day & Livingstone, 2001; Van Dierendonck & Mevissen 2002; Zhao & Yamaguchi, 2008), others have found that emotion-focused coping operates as a stress-buffering resource. For example, a recent study demonstrated that emotion-focused coping was harmful for family satisfaction, but it also buffered against job dissatisfaction in a high family-to-work conflict (Rantanen, Mauno, Kinnunen, & Rantanen, 2011). Seeking social support has been found to buffer the negative impact of work events (Patterson, 2003) or family conflict (Su, Lee, & Vang, 2005) on symptoms of distress. Several other studies found that emotion-focused strategies did not act as a moderator in the relationship between stressors and job outcomes (e.g., Wickramasinghe, 2010).
With regard to customer service roles, there is evidence that avoidance coping may not be beneficial for dealing with the stressful aspects of service work (Acker, 2010; Anderson, 2000, Chou, LaMontagne, & Hepworth, 1999; Pienaar & Willemse, 2008), including customer aggression (Ben-Zur & Yagil, 2005; Van Dierendonck & Mevissen, 2002). There is less clarity, however, regarding the role of support seeking in helping employees cope with the stress generated by customer abuse. Yagil (2008) argued that this strategy may provide a more effective source for employees coping with customer misbehaviors, because sharing experiences with coworkers should reinforce the recognition that it is a common problem and thus it can help relieve stress. No empirical study, however, has examined whether support seeking reduces the negative effects of customer aggression. Study 1 seeks to explore the potential moderating effect of support seeking and behavioral disengagement on the customer aggression – emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions relationships. Given the mixed results concerning the moderating effect of emotion-focused coping strategies reported in previous research, no specific hypotheses will be formulated.

METHOD

Sample and Procedure

The sample consisted of 516 participants (69% women; 31% men) employed in various service roles: 34.3% had clerical or administrative jobs involving contact with the public; 29.1% were customer service representatives in call center organizations, 14.5% worked as salespeople, 6.0% were social workers or nurses, 3.5% were waiters, 3.1% were technicians providing customer service, and 2.1% provided services in an educational framework. Participants were recruited by teams of undergraduate students, and the criteria for recruitment and inclusion were that employees provided service and interacted with customers as part of their routine job, and had at least one year of experience in a service job. A cover letter requested candidates’ voluntary participation in a survey study on emotion-related work requirements, and included a guarantee that all responses would be confidential and used solely for research purposes. To minimize concerns about confidentiality, participants sealed their survey in envelopes provided by the students, and the
completed questionnaires were returned to the author. Of the 525 completed surveys, 9 were omitted from the study since they did not meet the criteria. This resulted in 516 surveys for analysis. Details of age and experience in service jobs were obtained in categorical classes: 36.2% of the participants were between 20 and 25 years of age, 25.2% were between 26 and 35, 15.9% were between 36 and 40, 11.2% were between 41 and 50, and 11.4% were over 50 years old. With regard to tenure in service jobs, 30.2% had 1–2 years’ experience, 29.5% had 2–4 years’ experience, 11% had 4–7 years’ experience, 8.9% had worked 7–5 years, and 20.3% had more than 15 years’ experience in service jobs. The majority (64.9%) of the respondents worked full-time.

Measurement

- Customer Aggression: A three-item measure modified by Grandey et al. (2007) to assess verbal abuse from customers was employed with a response scale in which 1= almost never; 2 = once in a few months; 3 = once or twice a month; 4 = once or twice a week; 5 = once or twice a day; 6 = several times per day. Reliability of the scale was \( \alpha = .88 \).

- Strategies for Coping with Aggressive Customers: The present study used a nine item scale developed by Bailey and McCollough (2000). The response scale ranged from 1 (never) to 5 (usually). Factor analysis confirmed that seeking emotional support (e.g., “I talk with other employees about the customer to pour out my heart”) and behavioral disengagement (e.g., “I try to occupy myself with other tasks so that I will not have to deal with customers”, and “I take a break to cool down”) are distinct structures and separate coping strategies. The scales reliability were \( \alpha = .74 \) for seeking support and \( \alpha = .70 \) for behavioral disengagement.

- Emotional Exhaustion: A six-item scale developed by Wharton (1993) was used to measure emotional exhaustion (sample item: “I feel emotionally drained from my work”). The response scale ranged from 1 (never) to 6 (every day). The internal reliability of the scale was \( \alpha = .91 \).

- Turnover Intentions: Intention to quit was measured with three items derived from the Turnover Subscale of the Michigan
Organizational Assessment Questionnaire (Campana, Fishman, Jenkins, & Klesh, 1983; e.g., "I often think about quitting" and "I will probably look for a new job next year"). A 5-point scale was used, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Reliability was $\alpha = .87$

- **Control variables.** Gender, tenure and work status (full/part-time) were included as control variables for their potentially spurious effect.

### RESULTS

Means, standard deviations, and correlations for study variables are presented in Table 1. As expected, customer aggression was positively correlated with emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions. Behavioral disengagement and support seeking also correlated positively with the two dependent variables.

To test the moderating effects of behavioral disengagement and support seeking on the relationships between customer aggression and emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions, hierarchical moderated regression analyses were conducted, with emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions as dependent variables.

#### TABLE 1

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Notes: *p<0.05; **p<0.01. Gender: 1=male; 2= female. Work status: full-time = 1, part-time= 2; BD = Behavioral disengagement.
Hierarchical regression analysis assesses whether a block of independent variables makes a unique contribution to the explanation of the dependent variable (Cohen & Cohen, 1983). This procedure allows the impact of main-effect variables on the criterion variable to be tested prior to the interaction. A moderating effect is indicated if the interaction term accounts for significant amounts of variance in the dependent variable beyond that accounted for by other variables in the model (Aiken & West, 1991). In the first step, the control variables (gender, tenure and work status) were entered.

Frequency of customer aggression was entered in the second step. The third step included the moderating variables (support seeking and behavioral disengagement) and in the final step, the interaction terms between customer aggression and coping behaviors were entered (See Table 2 for results).

As shown in Table 2, frequency of customer aggression explained 17% of the variance in emotional exhaustion and 5% of the variance in turnover intentions. Behavioral disengagement was positively related to emotional exhaustion ($\beta = .19, p<0.001$) and turnover intentions ($\beta = .15, p<0.001$), but did not act as a moderator between

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Notes: *$p<0.05$; **$p<0.01$ ***$p<0.001$. Gender: 1 = male, 2 = female. Work status: full-time=1, part-time=2.
customer aggression and the dependent variables. Support seeking was positively related only to emotional exhaustion ($\beta = .10$, $p<0.05$), but the interaction term of customer aggression and support seeking showed a significant effect on both turnover intentions ($\beta = .53$, $p<0.01$) and emotional exhaustion ($\beta = .43$, $p<0.05$). To identify the form of the moderations, the regression models were plotted using values one standard deviation above and below the mean of support seeking (Aiken & West, 1991).

As can be seen in Figure 1, the positive relationship between customer aggression and emotional exhaustion was stronger for individuals who tended to seek emotional support than for those who did not. Results of the regression analysis for each of the subgroups (while taking into account the control variables), showed that for the

**FIGURE 1**
Moderating Effect of Support Seeking on the Relationship between Frequency of Customer Aggression and Emotional Exhaustion
high support seeking group, customer aggression had a significant and positive effect on turnover intentions (β = .36, p < 0.001) and emotional exhaustion (β = .52, p < 0.001). For the low support seeking group, the relationship between customer aggression and turnover intentions was not significant (β = .10, p = .28) and the relationship between customer aggression and emotional exhaustion was still positive, but weaker (β = .28, p < 0.01).

**DISCUSSION**

This study investigated the moderating effects of two coping behaviors, namely, support seeking and behavioral disengagement on the relationship between customer verbal aggression and work outcomes. Results showed that behavioral disengagement was positively related to emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions and support seeking moderated the relationships such that individuals who were more likely to engage in support seeking in response to customer misbehavior, tended to report higher levels of emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions the more they were exposed to customer aggression. While the present results seem to confirm previous findings of a positive significant relationship between emotion-focused coping strategies and negative work outcomes (i.e., Acker, 2010), a question can be raised regarding the direction of causality since emotion-focused coping which is oriented toward managing the emotions that accompany the perception of stress, may be also a result – and not solely an antecedent – of a reduced sense of well-being (Ben-Zur, 2009). Given that seeking support is a commonly used strategy for coping with customer aggression (Bailey & McCollough, 2000; Yagil, 2008), the role of social support in attenuating the negative effects of customer aggression needs to be further investigated. Day and Livingstone (2001) suggested that seeking social support is a positive coping strategy, but it is the perception of support that is important, not the actual use of it, and thus it is the perception that support is available when required that needs to be assessed, rather than the actual support-seeking behavior. Study 2 was designed to explore the moderating effects of perceived support from coworkers and supervisors on the relationships between customer aggression and work engagement.
STUDY 2

Social Support as a Resource

According to COR theory (Conservation of Resources theory; Hobfoll, 2001), resources can be anything (conditions, objects, energies and personal characteristics) the person values, and therefore strives to protect and sustain. Social support has long been recognized as an important social resource and a key environmental factor that could buffer the effects of adverse job conditions on psychological health outcomes (e.g., Johnson & Hall, 1988; Karasek & Theorell, 1990). Perceived support, the belief that help is available if needed, is thought to protect against stress, by decreasing the extent to which situations are perceived as threatening and by increasing the use of effective coping strategies, which in turn decrease distress (e.g., Holahan, Moos, Holahan, & Brennan, 1995). Indeed, studies have shown that perceived social support buffered individuals from the negative impact of work stressors such as intense performance monitoring (Holman, et al., 2002) and organizational injustice (Rousseau, Salek, Aube, & Morin, 2009). A review of cross-sectional and longitudinal studies that measure supervisory or coworker support showed that, while there is substantial variation in the magnitude of effects, the majority of studies consistently produced positive evidence of the role of social support in offsetting the effects of stress (Haly, 2009).

In customer service roles, where employees are expected to display positive emotions and treat customers with friendliness, social support is considered an important resource, because it creates a positive work environment, in which it is easier for employees to feel and express positive emotions, and thus it reduces the need for emotional regulation and the accompanying strain (Abraham, 1998; Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Yagil et al., 2008). Deery, Iverson and Walsh (2002) in a study observing call-center employees, found that where team leaders were perceived as willing to listen to the work-related problems of their staff and showed an ability to assist and support them, the level of emotional exhaustion amongst team members was significantly lower. With regard to customer aggression, it is plausible that employees who benefit from social recognition may be less sensitive to mistreatment from customers, because if social support is available and sufficient, it may serve as a substitute for unsatisfactory experience with customers (Brotheridge
& Lee, 2002). Sliter, Sliter and Jex. (2012) suggested that when a customer is rude and uncivil, successful interactions (e.g., civil interactions and support) with coworkers can help the individual regain lost resources. Furthermore, social support, particularly from the supervisor, is likely to empower the workers, and such empowerment can be an effective means to reduce the negative impact of customer aggression (Ben-Zur & Yagil, 2005).

The purpose of this study is to explore the moderating role of social support on the relationship between customer aggression and work engagement, which refers to a positive, affective, motivational state of fulfillment (Schaufeli et al., 2006). Research has largely shown that job stressors have a negative impact on work engagement, while job resources, including perceived social support, may buffer this relationship (Bakker, Hakanen, Demerouti, & Xanthopoulou, 2007; Hakanen, Bakker, & Demerouti, 2005).

There is limited research that assesses the relationship between customer misbehavior and work engagement. One relevant study on flight attendants showed that work engagement was negatively related to emotionally charged interactions with drunk, demanding and aggressive passengers (Heuven, Bakker, Schaufeli, & Huisman, 2006). The study also found that self-efficacy, which was regarded as a personal resource that enables employees to deal with job demands, moderated the relationship between emotionally charged interactions and work engagement. Based on the idea that social support provides resources that may help service providers cope with the stress that results from strained service interactions, it is assumed that perceived support will reduce the negative impact of customer aggression on work engagement.

Hypothesis 1: Perceived social support will moderate the relationship between customer verbal aggression and work engagement. More specifically, the negative relationship between customer aggression and work engagement will be significantly weaker in the presence of a high level of social support.

METHOD

Sample and Procedure

The sample consisted of 422 service providers, 71.5% women and 28.5% men, who were gathered from a variety of service
organizations in northern Israel. Organizations included welfare institutes, hospitals, banks, supermarkets, leisure and entertainment organizations, and call center organizations. Age and tenure were obtained in categorical classes: 37.5% of the participants were between 20 and 25 years of age, 34.8% were between 26 and 35 years of age, 17.2% were between 36 and 50, and 10.5% were over 50. All participants had at least one year of experience in service jobs: 51.2% had 1 to 3 years’ experience, 24.6% had 4 to 8 years’ experience, 9.2% had 8 to 15 years’ experience and 14.9% had more than 15 years of work experience. Half of the respondents (50.2%) worked full time and 27.6% were supervisors or managers. Participants were recruited by undergraduate students in the human service department of a large college in northern Israel. The students were instructed by the author to solicit the participation only of employees who provided service and interacted with customers as part of their routine job and had at least 1 year of experience in service jobs. Participation was voluntary and participants received a letter emphasizing the importance of participating as well as its voluntary and anonymous character. The questionnaires were completed in the presence of the student who administered it. To minimize concerns about confidentiality of responses, participants sealed their survey into envelopes that were provided to them by the students and the completed questionnaires were returned to the author.

Measurement

- Customer aggression. Frequency of customer aggression was measured by two items. Following Grandey et al. (2004), respondents were asked to “think about the last time a customer was upset, became very angry and verbally attacked you”. Then they were asked to estimate the frequency of such incidents (5 = very often, several times a day; 4 = often, a few times a week; 3 = a few times a month; 2 = rarely, a few times a year; 1 = never or almost never). A second item separately measured the frequency with which the respondent was the target of rude and inconsiderate treatment by customers. The response scale for the second item ranged from 1 (never) to 5 (very often). Reliability was $\alpha = .65$.

- Social support. Support from supervisors and support from colleagues were measured using the social support scales
developed by Caplan, Cobb, French, Van Harrison and Pinneau (1975). This measure includes subscales that assess the degree to which emotional support (e.g., "willing to listen to personal problems") and instrumental support (e.g. "can be relied on when things get tough on the job") from coworkers and supervisors are available. The response scale ranged from 1 (not at all) to 5 (completely). Reliability was $\alpha = .81$ for perceived coworkers support and $\alpha = .83$ for perceived supervisor support.

- **Work engagement.** Work engagement was assessed with the shortened version of Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), developed by Schaufeli et al. (2006; a sample item:"I am enthusiastic about my job"). Respondents indicated the extent to which they agreed with each statement on a 5-point response scale, ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). Reliability was $\alpha = .82$.

- **Control variables.** Gender, tenure, and work status were included as control variables.

**RESULTS**

Means, standard deviations, and correlations of Study 2 variables are presented in Table 3. As can be seen in the Table, work engagement correlated negatively with frequency of customer aggression and positively with perceived support. To examine the moderating effect of perceived support on the relationship between frequency of customer aggression and work engagement, hierarchical moderated multiple regression analyses were conducted. Control variables were included as control variables.

**TABLE 3**

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<td>.30**</td>
<td>.35**</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Work engagement</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>-.32**</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>.15**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p<0.05 ; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001. Gender: 1 = male, 2 = female; Work status: full-time = 1, part-time = 2.
variables (gender, tenure and work status) were entered in the first step, followed by the predictor in the second step, and the moderators in the third step. In the final step, the cross-product terms (customer aggression X coworkers’ support; customer aggression X supervisor support) were entered.

The results, presented in Table 4, show that frequency of aggression had a significant impact on work engagement and only supervisor support directly predicted work engagement. The interaction term of customer aggression and supervisor support showed a significant effect ($\beta = .47$, $p<0.01$). To explore the source of the interaction, supervisor support was divided to “high” (1 SD above the mean) and “low” (1 SD below the mean). Results of the regression analysis for each of the subgroups (while taking into account the control variables), showed that in the presence of a low level of supervisor support, customer aggression was significantly related to work engagement ($\beta = -.47$, $p<0.001$), while in the presence of a high level of supervisor support, this relationship was not significant ($\beta = -.06$, $p = 0.52$). From Figure 2 it can be seen that

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 4</th>
<th>Results of Moderated Regression Analyses (Study 2)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Work engagement</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\beta$</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Step 1</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.02</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tenure</td>
<td>.31***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Work status</td>
<td>-.21***</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Step 2</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of customer aggression (A)</td>
<td>-.28***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 3</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coworkers support (B)</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor support (C)</td>
<td>.36***</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Step 4</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>A X B</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AXC</td>
<td>.47**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total $R^2$</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Note: *$p<0.05$; **$p<0.01$; ***$p<0.001$.
Gender: 1 = male, 2 = female.
Work status: full-time = 1, part-time = 2.
customer aggression was negatively related to work engagement only when perceived supervisor support was low. Overall, the results partially support Hypothesis 1, since coworkers’ support did not act as a moderator between customer aggression and work engagement.

Previous studies have shown that customer aggression is likely to trigger emotion-focused coping such as avoidance, denial and support seeking (Bailey & McCollough, 2000; Ben-Zur & Yagil, 2005). The purpose of Study 1 was to extend previous research, by examining the moderating effects of two coping strategies commonly used in response to customer misbehavior, (i.e., support seeking and behavioral disengagement) on the relationships between customer aggression and job-related outcomes. Results demonstrate that the two coping strategies were associated with higher levels of emotional

![Figure 2](image_url)

**FIGURE 2**

Moderating Effect of Supervisor Support on the Relationship between Frequency of Customer Aggression and Work Engagement
exhaustion and that individuals who tended to seek frequent emotional support reported higher levels of emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions, the more they had to interact with aggressive customers. Although these results run contrary to the suggestion that seeking support might be an effective way of coping with customer misbehaviors (Yagil, 2008), they do support previous findings which indicated that instead of alleviating the negative outcomes of work stressors, emotion-focused coping strategies are typically associated with high strain (Day & Livingstone, 2001; Zhao & Yamaguchi, 2008).

The purpose of Study 2 was to examine the role of social support in reducing the negative effects of customer aggression. Results show that only supervisor support directly predicted work engagement and significantly moderated the relationship between customer aggression and work engagement; specifically, the detrimental effects of customer aggression on work engagement was observed only among service workers with low levels of supervisor support. Several other reported studies with human service workers have also indentified the importance of supervisor support for the maintenance of positive work outcomes. For example, Brough and Pears (2004) demonstrated that the source of workplace support produced a substantial difference in the prediction of positive work attitudes; social support received from colleagues had no significant influence on either psychological outcome, whereas social support received from supervisors significantly predicted improved satisfaction outcomes. Smith and Gardner (2007) found that only supervisor support was related to less work-to-life conflict, and greater affective organizational commitment.

It is possible that, for dealing with difficult customers, support from supervisors may be more important than support from coworkers as it may enhance employee's self-confidence when facing aggressive customers. It has been widely argued that “the customer is always right” policy encourages customers to behave freely, while at the same time preventing service providers from drawing a line to protect themselves against customer misbehavior; in fact, workers are expected to endure such behavior and “serve with a smile” (Grandey et al., 2007; Yagil, 2008). When social support from the supervisor is available, employees may feel more confident in setting limits to customer behavior. Indeed, research has emphasized the important contribution of supportive supervision to
the employee's sense of empowerment (e.g., Dimitriadis & Maroudas, 2007). Ben-Zur and Yagil, (2005) suggested that empowered workers have the tools to defend themselves during interactions with aggressive customers by being assertive. Such assertiveness may act to protect them from the depletion of emotional resources. It was found that service employees who are better able to deal with the emotional demands of their jobs, are more likely to maintain higher levels of work engagement (Heuven et al., 2006). In addition, a supportive supervisor who finds the time to provide employees with information and the instrumental assistance needed to solve customer problems, equips the employee with tools, information and training needed to handle difficulties in service. Prepared and knowledgeable employees are more likely to meet the needs of the customer, thus reducing the likelihood that the customer will be uncivil (Sliter et al., 2012).

This research has some methodological limitations. One limitation concerns reliance on self-report measures, which may increase the potential for common method variance. Several factors minimize the possible influence of an artificial inflection. First, various response scales were used in both studies to minimize response biases and ensure consistency (Podsakoff, Mackenzie, Lee, & Podsackoff, 2003); and second, unlike linear relationships, interaction effects are less likely to be explained by common method variance.

Another concern is that results derived from cross-sectional designs are incapable of confirming causality. For instance, emotional exhaustion may negatively affect the quality of service, which may frustrate customers and make them angry and aggressive. Thus, customer aggression may be also a result – and not solely an antecedent – of poor job attitudes and a reduced sense of well-being. Furthermore, the positive relationships between both coping behaviors and negative work outcomes do not necessarily imply that emotion-focused strategies lead to negative work outcomes. A second interpretation lies in the reverse direction: individuals suffering from emotional exhaustion are likely to experience negative emotional states, which in turn can lead to emotion-focused coping efforts (Ben-Zur, 2009). Research has shown that emotionally exhausted service employees reported higher levels of withdrawal behavior such as work absence, which is suggested to be a form of avoidance and mood control (Grandey et al., 2004). Studying these variables in
longitudinal fashion could shed greater light on the contributions of coping strategies to work outcomes and the moderating effect that individual coping may have in these relations.

The present study focused on only two coping behaviors suggested to be commonly used by service workers. Future research may consider examining the moderating role of other coping strategies on the relationship between customer aggression and work outcomes. Also, given that the pervasiveness of coping behaviors in response to customer aggression may differ across service work environments (Reynolds & Harris, 2006), it might be beneficial for future studies to first identify coping responses likely to be common within a specific work environment or service sector. For example, behavioral disengagement may be less of an option for call center employees, since call center work often involves the intensive use of equipment, (e.g., display screen equipment and telephone headsets), that keeps employees “tied to their desks” (Sprigg, Stride, Wall, Holman, & Smith, 2007). Clearly, more studies are needed in order to identify personal and organizational resources that may reduce the negative effects of customer aggression. It would be also interesting to understand whether customer aggression interacts with social support to predict coping behaviors; specifically, do employees with supportive supervisors employ more effective coping skills in response to frequent interactions with aggressive customers than do employees who perceive their supervisor support as low?

The results have several practical implications. First, it is important for managers in service organizations to recognize that customer aggression has the potential to reduce employees’ work engagement and harm individuals’ well-being, which ultimately leads to poor service delivery. A recent study (Rafaeli, Erez, Ravid, Derfler-Rozin, Efrat, & Rozilio, 2012) showed that the effects of even minor aggression from customers can strongly affect the immediate cognitive performance of customer service employees and reduce their task performance. While managers have almost no control over customer behavior, they do have control over their own behavior and the extent to which they are willing to help employees solve work-related problems and provide them with emotional support and practical advice. The present results suggest that supervisor behavior can play a significant role in mitigating the negative impact of customer misbehavior on work engagement. Therefore, it is
recommended that top management of service organizations provide clear instructions to ensure that the immediate supervisors of frontline employees are willing to provide their employees with guidance and emotional support when needed.

Second, to lessen the need for workers to employ emotion-focused coping strategies, organizations can initiate training programs focusing on how to deal with customer misbehaviors. In these programs, employees might be taught optimal ways of thinking and behaving when confronted with abusive customers, e.g., interpreting verbal aggression in a detached manner (Dormann & Zapf, 2004), so that the intensity of negative emotions experienced is reduced. Consequently, the extent to which emotion-focused coping strategies are employed may be reduced. Training programs could also encourage employees to openly discuss their experiences, to share tips on how to deal with rude customers, or how to set limits on unacceptable behavior. Pienaar and Willemse (2008) suggested that, especially for new service employees, some assertiveness training could be helpful in maintaining their general health, while remaining sensitive to customers’ needs. If employees are provided with skills and knowledge for dealing with dysfunctional customer behaviors and tools with which to defend themselves when they are being mistreated, they might view these customers in a less threatening way. Such training may have an important role in enhancing the confidence of employees in their service delivery-related skills. It was found that employees who believe in their ability to successfully handle aggressive customers were less likely to engage in emotion-focused coping strategies and were less affected by frequent interactions with aggressive customers (Goussinsky, 2012). Training employees to use problem-solving coping skills may help protect them from the depletion of emotional resources, an outcome that would be particularly beneficial for frontline service workers who are routinely confronted with aggressive behaviors of customers.

REFERENCES


GOUSSINSKY


