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The relationship between customer-related social stressors and job outcomes: the mediating role of emotional exhaustion

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Using the health impairment process of the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model as the theoretical framework, this study proposes and tests a research model that investigates the mediating role of emotional exhaustion in the relationship between customer-related social stressors and job outcomes. Job performance, extra-role customer service, and turnover intentions are three job outcomes used in the current study. Respondents were full-time frontline hotel employees in Cameroon. Data were obtained from these employees with a time lag of one month. The results of structural equation modelling (SEM) suggest that emotional exhaustion fully mediates the relationship between customer-related social stressors, as manifested by disproportionate customer expectations (DCE), customer verbal aggression (CVA), disliked customers (DC), and ambiguous customer expectations (ACE), and the aforementioned job outcomes. Specifically, the results suggest that the indicators of customer-related social stressors jointly affect emotional exhaustion that, in turn, leads to negative job outcomes such as poor job performance, reduced extra-role customer service, and increased turnover intentions.

Keywords: Cameroon; customer-related social stressors; emotional exhaustion; frontline hotel employees; job outcomes

JEL classification: M12, M31

1. Introduction

The importance of retention of frontline or customer-contact employees is acquiesced by service managers and researchers. This is not surprising, because frontline employees play a critical role in service delivery and complaint handling processes (cf. Deery, 2008; Ivankovič, Jankovič, & Peršic, 2010; Paliaga & Strunje, 2011). However, problems such as poor employment conditions, insufficient training, low pay, conflicts in the work–family interface, sexual harassment, and the social stigma of work in hospitality appear to be impediments to retention of high performing employees (e.g., Deery, 2008; Poulston, 2008; Yang, Wan, & Fu, 2012).

Customer-instigated aggression results in unpleasant work experiences and causes problems associated with employee performance and retention (cf. Karatepe, Yorganci, & Haktanir, 2009, 2010; Yagil, 2008; Walsh, 2011). According to Dormann and Zapf (2004), DCE, CVA, DC, and ACE are the dimensions representing customer-related social

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stressors. DCE refers to 'situations in which customers tax or challenge the service that they want to receive from the service provider' (Dormann & Zapf, 2004, p. 75). CVA is defined as customers' intentions to harm employees intentionally through words, tone, or manner such as swearing, yelling, and sarcasm (Dormann & Zapf, 2004; Grandey, Dickter, & Sin, 2004; Harris & Reynolds, 2003). DC refers to 'interactions with hostile, humourless, and unpleasant customers and interruptions by customers', while ACE describes '... unclear customer expectations' (Dormann & Zapf, 2004, p. 76). Such dysfunctional customer behaviours lead to emotional exhaustion, which is the initiator of the burnout syndrome (Dormann & Zapf, 2004). Employees who are emotionally exhausted are devoid of energy and feel that their emotional resources are depleted. Under these circumstances, they are incapable of displaying effective performance in the workplace and have intentions to leave the organisation (Karatepe et al., 2009; Lee & Ashforth, 1996).

Grounded in this backdrop, this study proposes and tests a research model that investigates whether emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between customer-related social stressors, as manifested by DCE, CVA, DC, and ACE, and organisationally-valued job outcomes. These job outcomes are job performance, extra-role customer service, and turnover intentions.

This study contributes to the current knowledge base in the following ways. First, 'the customer is always right' philosophy encourages frontline employees to please the customer at any cost (Karatepe et al., 2010). However, employees with unpleasant work experiences arising from customer-related social stressors are unhappy to serve aggressive customers in service encounters. Such employees in turn are likely to deliver poor services and display turnover intentions due to heightened emotional exhaustion. Despite this realisation, empirical research concerning the outcomes of customer-related social stressors is scarce (Karatepe et al., 2009; Walsh, 2011). More importantly, there is a dearth of empirical research regarding the full mediating role of emotional exhaustion in the relationship between customer-related social stressors and the previously-mentioned job outcomes.

Second, a careful examination of the current literature delineates mixed findings pertaining to the relationship between (emotional) exhaustion and performance outcomes (Castanheira & Chambel, 2010; Karatepe, 2011). With this realisation, this study examines whether emotional exhaustion simultaneously mitigates frontline employees' job performance and extra-role customer service.

Third, what is already known about customer-related social stressors or customer-instigated aggression arises from the samples of the Western studies. This is a limitation of extant research. Specifically, the current knowledge base on customer-related social stressors appears to be devoid of empirical studies whose data are based on the samples derived from the sub-Saharan African countries. Therefore, unlike other empirical studies (e.g., Daunt & Harris, 2011; Grandey, Kern, & Frone, 2007; Walsh, 2011), this study tests the above-mentioned relationships via data collected from frontline employees in the hotel industry in Cameroon. Finally, the results of this study will present various implications concerning management of customer-related social stressors and emotional exhaustion and will provide several guidelines for retention of high performing frontline employees.

2. Research model and hypotheses

2.1. Research model

The research model is shown in Figure 1. According to the model, customer-related social stressors are treated as a second-order latent variable. The model proposes that

customer-related social stressors are manifested by frontline employees' perceptions of DCE, CVA, DC, and ACE. DCE refers to customers' service expectations that are evaluated as unjustified and sometimes unfair by frontline employees (Dormann & Zapf, 2004). CVA is associated with verbal abuse such as insults and yelling and hostile behaviours displayed at any time (Karatepe et al., 2010). DC is related to hostile, humourless, and unpleasant customers who do not respect frontline employees' work rhythm (Dormann & Zapf, 2004). Lastly, ACE refers to customers' service expectations that are unclear to frontline employees (Dormann & Zapf, 2004). Specifically, when it is not clear what customers request from frontline employees, meeting their service expectations becomes a difficult task. Such customer-related social stressors heighten frontline employees' emotional exhaustion.

Job performance, extra-role customer service, and turnover intentions are three organisationally valued job outcomes examined in the present study (Babakus, Yavas, & Ashill, 2009; Karatepe et al., 2009; Kim, Tavitiyaman, & Kim, 2009). Job performance is defined as 'the level of productivity of an individual employee, relative to his or her peers, on several job-related behaviours and outcomes' (Babin & Boles, 1998, p. 82), while extra-role customer service refers to 'discretionary behaviours of contact employees in serving customers that extend beyond formal role requirements' (Bettencourt & Brown, 1997, p. 41). Turnover intentions refer to employees' willingness to leave an organisation (Thoresen, Kaplan, Barsky, Warren, & De Chermont, 2003). In short, frontline employees who experience elevated levels of customer-related social stressors have heightened emotional exhaustion. Such employees in turn deliver poor services, display reduced extra-role customer service behaviours, and have increased turnover intentions.

2.2. *Hypotheses*

As depicted in Figure 1, the research model proposes that DCE, CVA, DC, and ACE are the indicators of customer-related social stressors that result in emotional exhaustion. There is empirical evidence that customer aggression leads to emotional exhaustion among service employees. For example, Dormann and Zapf (2004) reported that CVA,

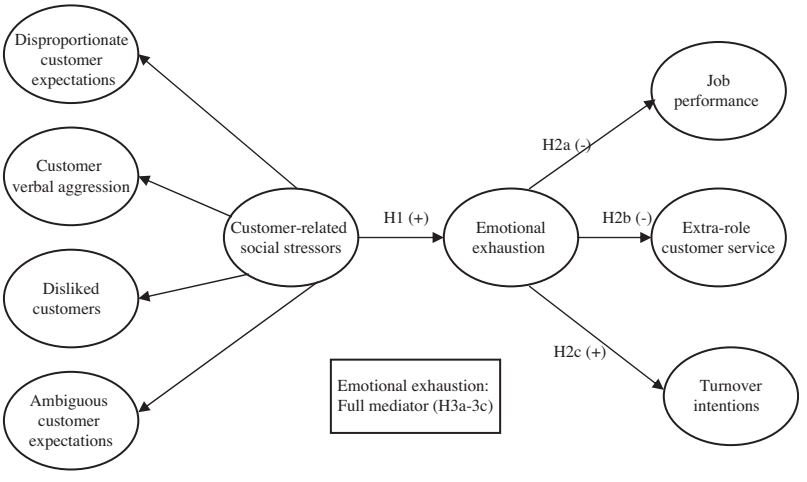

Figure 1. Research model.
Source: Author.

DC, and ACE increased emotional exhaustion among service employees (e.g., flight attendants, travel agency employees) in Germany. In Ben-Zur and Yagil's (2005) study conducted with service employees (e.g., reception clerks, bank tellers) in Israel, customer aggression aggravated emotional exhaustion. Karatepe et al. (2009) showed that CVA exacerbated emotional exhaustion among frontline hotel employees in Northern Cyprus. In a study of frontline bank employees in Northern Cyprus, Karatepe et al. (2010) also found that ACE heightened emotional exhaustion.

It appears that frontline employees who are faced with dysfunctional customer behaviours and have unpleasant work experiences are emotionally exhausted. However, there is a dearth of empirical research concerning the joint effects of customer-related social stressors on emotional exhaustion in the current literature. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed.

Hypothesis 1. *Customer-related social stressors, as manifested by DCE, CVA, DC, and ACE, are positively related to emotional exhaustion.*

The research model also proposes that emotional exhaustion simultaneously impedes job performance and extra-role customer service. An inspection of the current literature presents inconsistent findings concerning the relationship between emotional exhaustion and performance outcomes. For example, Cropanzano, Rupp, and Byrne (2003) reported that emotional exhaustion reduced job performance and organisational citizenship behaviours beneficial to the organisation among employees in various industries (e.g., health care, and manufacturing). On the contrary, Advani, Jagdale, Garg, and Kumar (2005) found a positive relationship between emotional exhaustion and job performance among Indian software professionals. Castanheira and Chambel's (2010) study demonstrated that exhaustion mitigated extra-role performance among Portuguese salespeople. However, their study did not provide empirical support for a significant negative relationship between exhaustion and in-role performance. In a recent study conducted with frontline hotel employees in Iran, it was shown that exhaustion had a detrimental impact on in-role performance (Karatepe, 2011).

An evaluation of the aforementioned studies suggests that the relationship between emotional exhaustion and performance outcomes is not clear-cut. Consistent with this argument, this study investigates whether emotional exhaustion simultaneously results in low levels of job performance and extra-role customer service. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed.

Hypothesis 2(a). *Emotional exhaustion is negatively related to job performance.*

Hypothesis 2(b). *Emotional exhaustion is negatively related to extra-role customer service.*

As shown in the research model, emotional exhaustion exacerbates turnover intentions. Specifically, empirical evidence suggests that employees who are emotionally exhausted have turnover intentions. That is, employees have intentions to leave the organisation as a result of emotional exhaustion (e.g., Cropanzano et al., 2003; Karatepe et al., 2009). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed.

Hypothesis 2(c). *Emotional exhaustion is positively related to turnover intentions.*

The health impairment process of the JD-R model delineates useful guidelines for developing the customer-related social stressors → emotional exhaustion → employee

outcomes relationship (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Specifically, the health impairment process of the JD-R model contends that poorly designed jobs or chronic job demands sap employees' physical and emotional resources that may lead to burnout/emotional exhaustion and consequently negative health and job outcomes (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Llorens, Bakker, Schaufeli, & Salanova, 2006). Simply put, the health impairment process tests the job demands → strain → employee outcomes relationship.

In this study, customer-related social stressors are treated as chronic job demands in frontline service jobs, because frontline employees in hospitality firms experience such stressors on a regular basis (Daunt & Harris, 2011; Harris & Reynolds, 2003; Karatepe et al., 2009). Emotional exhaustion is a form of work-related strain that is triggered by job demands. As demonstrated in the research model, this study contends that customer-related social stressors trigger employees' emotional exhaustion that in turn leads to negative job outcomes such as ineffective job performance, poor extra-role customer service behaviours, and increased turnover intentions. There are also empirical studies that provide support for the job demands → burnout/emotional exhaustion → employee outcomes relationship (e.g., Bakker, Demerouti, de Boer, & Schaufeli, 2003; Llorens et al., 2006). Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed.

Hypothesis 3(a). *Emotional exhaustion fully mediates the relationship between customer-related social stressors, as manifested by DCE, CVA, DC, and ACE, and job performance.*

Hypothesis 3(b). *Emotional exhaustion fully mediates the relationship between customer-related social stressors, as manifested by DCE, CVA, DC, and ACE, and extra-role customer service.*

Hypothesis 3(c). *Emotional exhaustion fully mediates the relationship between customer-related social stressors, as manifested by DCE, CVA, DC, and ACE, and turnover intentions.*

3. Method

3.1. Sample and procedure

The current study used data collected from a sample of full-time frontline hotel employees (e.g., front desk agents, food servers, bartenders, bell attendants) in Cameroon. There are three main reasons for selecting frontline hotel employees. First, frontline employees represent the service firm to customers and other relevant parties and enhance the image of the service firm (Bettencourt & Brown, 2003). Second, frontline employees' attitudes and behaviours influence service delivery and complaint handling processes (Činjarević, Tatić, & Avdić, 2010; Karatepe et al., 2009). Third, frontline employees in hospitality establishments such as hotels, bars, and restaurants have frequent face-to-face or voice-to-voice interactions with customers and experience various customer aggressive behaviours on a regular basis (Daunt & Harris, 2011).

According to the information obtained from the National Tourism Council under the Ministry of Tourism in Cameroon at the time of this study, there were 1 five-star hotel, 3 four-star hotels, and 4 three-star hotels in Yaoundé. In addition, there were 3 four-star hotels and 14 three-star hotels in Douala and 4 three-star hotels in Bamenda. The researcher contacted the management of all hotels through a letter that consisted of information about the purpose of the empirical study and permission for data collection.

Management of 3 three-star hotels and 3 four-star hotels granted permission for data collection. However, they did not allow the researcher to handle the data collection process. Therefore, all self-administered questionnaires that included information about issues of anonymity and confidentiality were submitted to the relevant hotel managers.

Data were gathered from frontline hotel employees with a one-month time lag. This is important for controlling common method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). With this realisation, two different questionnaires were prepared. Specifically, the Time I questionnaire included the DCE, CVA, DC, ACE, and emotional exhaustion measures as well as items about respondents' profile (e.g., age, and gender). The Time II questionnaire consisted of the job performance, extra-role customer service, and turnover intentions measures. The researcher was able to match the Time I questionnaires with the Time II questionnaires via an identification number assigned to each employee in the master list and written on each questionnaire. In addition, each frontline employee who filled out the questionnaire sealed it in an envelope and then put it in a special box. This was deemed necessary for anonymity and confidentiality.

One hundred and fifty-two questionnaires were submitted to frontline employers at Time I. One hundred and forty-one questionnaires were returned for a response rate of 92.8% by the cut-off date for data collection at Time I. One hundred and forty-one Time II questionnaires were then distributed to the same frontline employees. By the cut-off date for data collection at Time II, 136 questionnaires were retrieved, yielding a response rate of 89.5% of the original sample and a response rate of 96.5% of the second sample.

The sample of this study consisted of 79 (58%) male respondents and 57 (42%) female respondents. Twenty-six percent of the respondents ranged in age from 18–27 years and 34% ranged in age from 28–37 years. The rest were older than 37. Five percent of the respondents had primary school education, while 16% had secondary and high school education. Forty-six percent of the respondents had two-year college degrees and 32% had four-year college degrees. The rest had graduate degrees. In terms of organisational tenure, 52% of the respondents had tenures of five years or less. Twenty-nine percent of the respondents had tenures ranging from 6 to 10 years. The rest had been with their hotel for more than 10 years. The sample was balanced in marital status (68 single or divorced respondents and 68 married respondents).

3.2. Measurement

The Time I and Time II questionnaires were prepared using existing scales in the current literature in order to test the relationships in the proposed research model. Specifically, customer-related social stressors were measured through items from Dormann and Zapf (2004). DCE was operationalised via eight items, while CVA included five items. DC and ACE each consisted of four items. Eight items came from Maslach and Jackson (1981) to operationalise emotional exhaustion. Five items adapted from Babin and Boles (1998) were used to measure job performance. A five-item scale taken from Bettencourt and Brown (1997) was used to measure extra-role customer service. Turnover intentions were measured via a three-item scale taken from Singh, Verbeke, and Rhoads (1996). Using these items to measure study variables is congruent with past empirical studies (e.g., Karatepe et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2009).

Responses to items in DCE, CVA, DC, and ACE were rated on five-point scales ranging from 5 (absolutely true) to 1 (not at all true). Responses to items in emotional exhaustion, job performance, extra-role customer service, and turnover intentions were

obtained on five-point scales ranging from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). Higher scores demonstrated higher levels of DCE, CVA, DC, ACE, emotional exhaustion, job performance, extra-role customer service, and turnover intentions.

Douala and Yaoundé are the two-French speaking regions, while Bamenda is the English speaking region in Cameroon. Therefore, all items in the Time I and Time II questionnaires were prepared in English and then translated into French using the back-translation method (Parameswaran & Yaprak, 1987). The Time I and Time II questionnaires were also tested with two different pilot samples of three frontline employees. The results revealed that employees did not have any difficulty understanding items in the questionnaires.

3.3. *Preliminary preparation of data*

This study employed a two-step approach using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and SEM (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). These analyses were employed via LISREL 8.30 (Joreskog & Sorbom, 1996).

In the first step, all measures were subjected to CFA to provide support for convergent and discriminant validity (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988; Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The overall χ^2 measure, GFI (Goodness of Fit Index), CFI (Comparative Fit Index), IFI (Incremental Fit Index), RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation), and SRMR (Standardised Root Mean Square Residual) were used to assess model fit.

Several items were dropped during CFA due to correlation measurement errors and/or low standardised loadings (< 0.50). That is, four items each from the DCE and emotional exhaustion measures, two items from the DC measure, and one item each from the CVA, ACE, and extra-role customer service measures were dropped during CFA. The results demonstrated that the eight-factor measurement model fit the data acceptably based on the following fit statistics ($\chi^2 = 550.97$, $df = 349$; $\chi^2/df = 1.58$; CFI = 0.92; IFI = 0.92; RMSEA = 0.065; SRMR = 0.068). The magnitudes of the loadings ranged from 0.68 to 0.95 and all t-values were significant.

The average variance extracted by each variable was as follows: DCE 0.70; CVA; 0.68; DC 0.81; ACE 0.76; emotional exhaustion 0.67; job performance 0.62; extra-role customer service 0.74; and turnover intentions 0.64. All average variances extracted were larger than 0.50. The average variance extracted by each variable was also larger than the respective shared variance. Reliability for each variable was assessed through the composite reliability (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). The results revealed that composite reliabilities for DCE, CVA, DC, ACE, emotional exhaustion, job performance, extra-role customer service, and turnover intentions were 0.90, 0.90, 0.90, 0.90, 0.89, 0.89, 0.92, and 0.84, respectively. That is, composite reliability for each variable was greater than 0.60. Therefore, the results showed that the measures were reliable and there was evidence of convergent and discriminant validity (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988; Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The means, standard deviations, and correlations of study variables are shown in Table 1.

The second step consisted of the comparison of the hypothesised or fully mediated model with the partially mediated model using the χ^2 difference test. This is consistent with the guidelines provided by James, Mulaik, and Brett (2006). In addition, all hypothesised relationships were assessed based on the results of SEM. Customer-related social stressors (as manifested by DCE, CVA, DC, and ACE) were represented as a second-order latent variable in this study.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations of study variables (n = 136).

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. DCE	1.000							
2. CVA	0.556	1.000						
3. DC	0.613	0.764	1.000					
4. ACE	0.595	0.731	0.669	1.000				
5. EE	0.426	0.650	0.734	0.708	1.000			
6. JP	−0.078	−0.155	−0.152	−0.126	−0.149	1.000		
7. ERCS	−0.030	−0.115	−0.160	−0.090	−0.256	0.558	1.000	
8. TI	0.324	0.484	0.495	0.461	0.504	−0.285	−0.251	1.000
Mean	3.52	2.63	2.93	2.93	2.72	4.06	4.02	2.61
Standard Deviation	1.16	1.24	1.34	1.34	1.29	0.87	0.94	1.20

Notes: Composite scores for each measure were obtained by averaging scores across items representing that measure. DCE = Disproportionate Customer Expectations; CVA = Customer Verbal Aggression; DC = Disliked Customers; ACE = Ambiguous Customer Expectations; EE = Emotional Exhaustion; JP = Job Performance; ERCS = Extra-Role Customer Service; TI = Turnover Intentions. Correlations ≥ $\left|0.149\right|$ are significant at the 0.05 level or better (one-tailed test).
Source: Research results.

4. Structural model results

The fully mediated model ($\chi^2 = 593.85$, $df = 368$) was compared with the partially mediated model ($\chi^2 = 586.33$, $df = 365$) ($p < 0.01$). The result demonstrated a non-significant difference in fit ($\Delta\chi^2 = 7.52$, $\Delta df = 3$). The results suggested that the fully mediated model appeared to provide a better fit than the partially mediated model. As depicted in Table 2, the fit statistics for the fully mediated model were as follows: ($\chi^2 = 593.85$, $df = 368$; $\chi^2/df = 1.61$; CFI = 0.91; IFI = 0.91; RMSEA = 0.067; SRMR = 0.082). The results also suggested that the fully mediated model fit the data acceptably.

The results regarding the hypothesised relationships are also shown in Table 2. The results of SEM reveal that DC ($\gamma_{31} = 0.93$, $t = 11.21$) seems to be the most important indicator, followed by CVA ($\gamma_{21} = 0.88$, $t = 8.88$), ACE ($\gamma_{41} = 0.86$, $t = 10.70$), and DCE ($\gamma_{11} = 0.66$, $t = 7.17$). The results of SEM also indicate that customer-related social stressors, as manifested by DCE, CVA, DC, and ACE, are significantly and positively related to emotional exhaustion ($\gamma_{51} = 0.87$, $t = 9.41$). Hence, Hypothesis 1 is supported.

According to the results of SEM, emotional exhaustion has a significant negative relationship with job performance ($\beta_{65} = –0.17$, $t = –1.75$) and extra-role customer service ($\beta_{75} = –0.27$, $t = –2.94$). Therefore, Hypotheses 2(a) and 2(b) are supported. In addition, the results show that emotional exhaustion is significantly and positively associated with turnover intentions ($\beta_{85} = 0.58$, $t = 5.51$). Hence, Hypothesis 2(c) is supported.

Sobel test results are also illustrated in Table 2. Specifically, customer-related social stressors are significantly and negatively related to job performance (–0.15, $t = –1.74$) and extra-role customer service (–0.24, $t = –2.91$) through the mediating role of emotional exhaustion. Therefore, Hypotheses 3(a) and 3(b) are supported. The results also indicate that customer-related social stressors are significantly and positively related to turnover intentions (0.51, $t = 5.35$) through the mediating role of emotional exhaustion. Hence, Hypothesis 3(c) is supported. These results explicitly suggest that emotional exhaustion fully mediates the relationship between customer-related social stressors and

Table 2. Structural model results.

Hypothesised Model Parameters		Path estimate	*t*-Value
H1	Customer-related social stressors → Emotional exhaustion (γ_{51})	0.87	9.41
H2(a)	Emotional exhaustion → Job performance (β_{65})	−0.17	−1.75
H2(b)	Emotional exhaustion → Extra-role customer service (β_{75})	−0.27	−2.94
H2(c)	Emotional exhaustion → Turnover intentions (β_{85})	0.58	5.51
H3(a)	Customer-related social stressors → Emotional exhaustion → Job performance	−0.15	−1.74
H3(b)	Customer-related social stressors → Emotional exhaustion → Extra-role customer service	−0.24	−2.91
H3(c)	Customer-related social stressors → Emotional exhaustion → Turnover intentions	0.51	5.35
	Disproportionate customer expectations ← Customer-related social stressors (γ_{11})	0.66	7.17
	Customer verbal aggression ← Customer-related social stressors (γ_{21})	0.88	8.88
	Disliked customers ← Customer-related social stressors (γ_{31})	0.93	11.21
	Ambiguous customer expectations ← Customer-related social stressors(γ_{41})	0.86	10.70
R^2 for:			
Customer-related social stressors	0.71		
Emotional exhaustion	0.76		
Job performance	0.03		
Extra-role customer service	0.07		
Turnover intentions	0.34		
Model fit statistics:			
$\chi^2 = 593.85$, $df = 368$; $\chi^2 / df = 1.61$; CFI = 0.91; IFI = 0.91; RMSEA = 0.067; SRMR = 0.082			

Notes: T-values: one-tailed test $t > 1.3$, $p < 0.10$; $t > 1.65$, $p < 0.05$; and $t > 2.33$, $p < 0.01$. CFI = Comparative Fit Index; IFI = Incremental Fit Index; RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; SRMR = Standardised Root Mean Square Residual.
Source: Research results

the aforementioned job outcomes. The results explain 71% of the variance in customer-related social stressors, 76% in emotional exhaustion, 3% in job performance, 7% in extra-role customer service, and 34% in turnover intentions.

5. Discussion

5.1. Evaluation of findings

The results suggest that the fully mediated model seems to have a better fit than the partially mediated model. The results also suggest that the relationships demonstrated in the research model are supported. The result regarding the relationship between customer-related social stressors and emotional exhaustion is congruent with other studies (Ben-Zur & Yagil, 2005; Dormann & Zapf, 2004; Karatepe et al., 2010). In short, the indicators of customer-related social stressors jointly exacerbate frontline employees' emotional exhaustion.

According to the results reported in this study, emotional exhaustion appears to have a stronger relationship with extra-role customer service than with job performance. This result suggests that emotionally exhausted employees have insufficient energy and emotional resources, and therefore, are unable to go out their way to help customers or solve customer complaints. Emotionally exhausted employees also have elevated intentions to leave the organisation, because suffering from high levels of emotional exhaustion on a continuing basis inevitably leads to heightened turnover intentions. The results concerning the relationship between emotional exhaustion and these job outcomes lend credence to extant research (Castanheira & Chambel, 2010; Cropanzano et al., 2003; Karatepe, 2011; Karatepe et al., 2009).

The results also provide support for the health impairment process of the JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Llorens et al., 2006). Specifically, emotional exhaustion fully mediates the relationship between customer-related social stressors and job outcomes–job performance, extra-role customer service, and turnover intentions. Employees who are faced with customer-related social stressors experience emotional exhaustion. Such employees are in turn incapable of having effective performance in service delivery process and displaying extra-role customer service behaviours, and report turnover intentions.

5.2. Contributions to the current knowledge base

The first strength of this study is related to the evaluation of the customer-related social stressors, as manifested by DCE, CVA, DC, and ACE, → emotional exhaustion → employee outcomes relationship using the health impairment process of the JD-R model. The second strength of the study is ascertaining whether emotional exhaustion simultaneously reduces job performance and extra-role customer service. Another strength refers to the sample of the study. Specifically, the present study uses data gathered from frontline hotel employees with a time lag of one month in Cameroon, which is an under-represented sub-Saharan African country in this research stream. By testing the above-mentioned relationships, this study extends research on customer-related social stressors and emotional exhaustion in frontline service jobs to the sub-Saharan African countries.

5.3. Contributions to practice

The results reported in this study offer several useful implications for business practice. First, it is critical for managers to obtain feedback from their frontline employees about

various types of aggressive customer behaviours. This can be done through weekly communication meetings. Then, such feedback can be used as case studies to teach frontline employees effective coping mechanisms against various types of aggressive customer behaviours. Feedback emerging from frontline employees can also help managers to identify the problematic or wrong customers for the firm. Second, the nature of frontline service jobs appears to inhibit management actions for improvement in job demands (Babakus et al., 2009). Management of the hotels should make improvements in job resources, such as co-worker and supervisor support and rewards (Karatepe et al., 2010). Specifically, training programmes that centre on the critical roles of co-worker and supervisor support in handling problems associated with customer-related social stressors would be helpful for frontline employees and their supervisors. Frontline employees who are able to cope with customer-related social stressors effectively can then be rewarded. These improvements would help managers to retain high performing employees.

Third, since employing mentors seems to create additional costs for the firm, it is important to benefit from more experienced senior managerial employees as mentors in the workplace. Such employees could provide professional assistance to junior employees to handle problems arising from elevated levels of emotional exhaustion. Finally, managers should make sure that they hire individuals who really fit well with the immediate demands of frontline service jobs and organisational culture. This can be arranged using objective tests and mini case studies. It is also critical that the details of the relevant job positions are explained to candidates so that they fully understand management expectations.

5.4. Limitations and avenues for future research

Although the present study contributes to the existing knowledge base pertaining to the full mediating role of emotional exhaustion in the relationship between customer-related social stressors and job outcomes, several limitations are of note. First, the hypothesised relationships were tested using data collected from frontline employees with a time lag of one month. Although time-lagged designs offer some evidence concerning temporal causality, it is difficult to make causal inferences conclusively. Therefore, in future studies, investigating the relationships in the research model over a longer period of time than was done in this study would be useful. Second, in future studies, inclusion of other organisationally valued performance outcomes, such as creative performance, service recovery performance, co-worker performance, and team performance in the research model would be illuminating. Third, using other dimensions of burnout such as cynicism and professional efficacy that can link customer-related social stressors to frontline employees' job outcomes, would enhance the current knowledge base in this research stream.

Fourth, job (e.g., co-worker support) and personal (e.g., job resourcefulness) resources may be used as buffers against the detrimental effects of customer-related social stressors and emotional exhaustion on job outcomes. With this realisation, future studies may focus on job and personal resources as moderators of the effects of customer-related social stressors and emotional exhaustion on job outcomes. In closing, it is important to broaden the database in this research stream via data to be gathered in developing non-Western countries. With this in mind, future studies with large sample sizes in different service settings (e.g., insurance, banks, airlines) in Cameroon and other similar sub-Saharan African countries can test the applicability of the research model.

6. Conclusion

Based on the health impairment process of the JD-R model, this study proposes and tests whether emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between customer-related social stressors, as manifested by DCE, CVA, DC, and ACE, and three organisationally valued job outcomes, such as job performance, extra-role customer service, and turnover intentions. These relationships are evaluated via data gathered from full-time frontline hotel employees with a one-month time lag in Cameroon.

The results suggest that the research model is viable and all hypotheses are supported. According to the results, the indicators of customer-related social stressors jointly increase emotional exhaustion. As hypothesised, emotional exhaustion reduces job performance and extra-role customer service and heightens turnover intentions. Lastly, emotional exhaustion fully mediates the relationship between customer-related social stressors and these job outcomes. When the critical role of frontline employees in service delivery and complaint handling processes is considered, a richer and deeper understanding of factors affecting frontline employees' attitudinal and behavioural outcomes will continue to be important.

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