

Customer Aggression and Organizational Turnover Among Service Employees in Metro Manila, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

The “Customer is always right” has been the motto of many service organizations for the longest time. It mirrors companies’ commitment to do their utmost best in creating a good customer environment to ensure that customers enjoy quality service. But there are instances that customers can get aggressive in social interactions with service employees. These instances do not only affect the marketing and sales aspect of the organization but can ultimately affect the service employees’ output quality and even prompt them to quit. This paper examined how customer aggression affects turnover intentions of service employees. This looked specifically on the effects of customer aggression on the emotional exhaustion, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions of service employees. Survey data was collected using stratified sampling from 328 service employees of KFC branches around Metro Manila. These data were analyzed using the GLM module in Jamovi. Results showed that customer aggression indeed influences emotional exhaustion and in turn decreases job satisfaction and increases turnover intentions. The mitigating effects of distributive justice on the customer aggression-emotional exhaustion relationship was confirmed. However, the mitigating effect of organizational pride on the job satisfaction-turnover intentions relationship has been found to be significantly weak. These findings revealed the importance of having policies that communicate equity and justice, as well as the existence of rewards and recognition programs that can boost employee morale and loyalty.

Key words: *customer aggression, distributive justice, emotional exhaustion, job satisfaction, organizational turnover*

INTRODUCTION

Customers are the lifeblood of businesses. For the longest time, businesses try their best to gauge the motivations, preferences, attitudes, and behaviours of their customers to gain their favours and make their products and services more attractive to customers. This is because of the freedom of choice and the number of choices that customers can choose from that the markets for products and services have become competitive. The principle “the customer is always right” has risen and has become a staple in company policies and manuals. But are customers really always right?

Several videos have circulated the internet in the past months showing irate customers acting aggressively towards the service personnel. In the Philippines, a video which shows a crying service employee has recently circulated the social media through a post in Facebook. According to the post, this was the result of an altercation with a drive-thru customer who became verbally aggressive to the service employee of a well-known fast-food chain (Franco, 2021). This is just one of the many documented and undocumented aggressions that some of the frontline employees must endure.

Customer aggression can take the form of uncivil behaviour (lack of respect for others), physical/verbal aggression (intention to injure), or assault (intention to harm another person) (Linsley, 2006). There are various possible causes on why it happens. It can be that the customer is intoxicated or stressed out (Yagil, 2008). It is being legitimized and normalized both by the society and industry because there is this notion that “the customer is always right” and, thus, they are to be afforded with perfect service and are dignified to demand something (Yagil, 2017). Its impact on the service employees can be relative, depending on individual coping strategies (Yagil, 2008), negative affectivity, self-efficacy (Goussinsky, 2012), and workplace and organizational support (Rafaeli, 2012).

Research regarding customer aggression and its detrimental impacts on employee outcomes in front line service jobs is sparse (Karatepe, 2011). The scant literature still asserts that customer aggression influences employee outcomes and overall well-being (Sommovigo et al., 2019) as it affects employee burnout, employee displaced aggression (Liu et al., 2021), emotional exhaustion, stress, and absences (Grandey et al., 2004) that reduce service recovery performance and job satisfaction and further aggravates turnover intentions (Karatepe, 2009).

Customer aggression has a strong impact on workforce quit rate (Liu et. al, 2021). High employee turnover can be detrimental to an organization’s overall performance because it can result in increased cost of recruitment and impaired service and organizational morale although there are various factors that can influence or mitigate employee turnover like job security, retirement benefits and financial crises (Khan, 2014).

Customer aggressive behaviours can affect employees and the performance of their duties in many ways. In a study conducted by Bi et al. (2021), it shows that frontline restaurant employees experience three types of jay-customer behaviours namely verbal abuse, physical abuse, and sexual harassment. Verbal abuse is found to be most frequently experienced by the employees and is directly related to frontline employees' job stress which in turn reduces their level of job satisfaction. It has also been found, however, that the relationship between verbal abuse and job stress can be moderated by employee empowerment and leadership style (Boukis et al., 2020).

Customer verbal aggression is associated with higher role stress and retaliation intentions, while the display of excessive demands from the customers is associated with higher rumination and stronger withdrawal intentions. These effects are contingent upon the supervisor's leadership style. Empowering leadership style has a more positive impact on the employees' wellbeing than laissez-faire leadership style (Boukis et al., 2020). Furthermore, employees' service sabotage actions induced by dysfunctional customer behaviour can be exacerbated by low social support and emotional exhaustion experienced by service employees (Hwang et al., 2021). According to Otori et al. (2018), both customer aggression and job stress significantly contribute to employee burnout and emotional exhaustion.

Contextually, this study examines how customer aggression affects the level of emotional exhaustion and in turn the job satisfaction and turnover intentions among the service employees of KFC in Metro Manila. The moderating roles of distributive justice and emotional organizational pride were also examined.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Human resource management practices, in combination with the effective work climate (Gelade & Ivery, 2006), have been proven to positively impact the organizational performance in the service industry, i.e., hotel and accommodations (Chand & Katou, 2007). These practices encourage organizational commitment among the employees which eventually leads to retention of knowledgeable and skilled employees that can be achieved (Lamba & Choudhary, 2013). Minimal turnover ratio results to individual and organizational performance improvement (Watrous et al., 2006). These things can be achieved through employee motivation (Chew, 2005; Dar et al., 2014; Du Plessis et al., 2015). Employee motivation can be brought about by positive work environment, pay and benefits, management systems and organizational vision, have a positive influence on customer satisfaction (Ahmad et al., 2012). Customer satisfaction is at the heart of any service organization since this is the measure of their effectiveness and performance. Thus, in service organizations, customers play a vital role in motivating or demotivating employees (Blašková & Blaško, 2008).

Customer aggression and emotional exhaustion

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Moderating effect of distributive justice

A moderating factor that can influence customer aggression's effect on emotional exhaustion is distributive justice. A study conducted by Krishnan et al. (2018) shows that among the three types of justice (distributive, procedural and interactional), distributive justice has the most influence towards job performance. This can be explained as the positive effect of job satisfaction since according to the study conducted by Al-Zu'bi (2010), organizational justice is antecedent to job satisfaction. Hussain & Khan (2018) discovered that distributive justice, along with procedural and informative justices, have a negative relationship with turnover intention in the context of the print media sector in Pakistan, while interpersonal/interactional justice shows a positive relationship with turnover intentions. This shows that the lack of distributive justice not only affects job performance but also is a predictor of turnover intentions. This is supported by a study conducted by Raza et al. (2017) which shows that distributive justice has a negative correlation with turnover intention and a positive correlation with trust in leaders. Both relationships can be moderated by Islamic Work Ethics (IWE) and organizational culture.

Emotional exhaustion and Job Satisfaction

A study conducted by Alola et al. (2019) shows pieces of evidence that customer incivility (or aggression) and emotional exhaustion have positive and significant relationships that can influence service employees' work outcomes and that customer incivility is a critical antecedent of turnover intentions. Contrary to the premise of the current study, Alola et al. (2019) found out that customer incivility has no significant influence on the job satisfaction of employees in the Nigerian hospitality industry. This is supported by the findings of Azharudeen & Arulrajah (2018) that emotional exhaustion, propelled by emotional and job demands, highly influence turnover intentions among the employees. Customer incivility or aggression is not the only factor that affects emotional exhaustion. Together with abusive supervision and as moderated by employee resilience, customer incivility has an indirect effect on the capacity to satisfy customers. This means that job performance of low-resilience employees is easily affected by customer aggression and abusive supervision (Al-Hawari et al., 2019). Similarly, driven by service employees' job insecurity, emotional exhaustion is proven to affect employees' job performance as measured by Shin & Hur (2019) after 3 months. However, results show that in the South Korean context, only co-worker incivility, and not customer incivility, moderated the relationship between job insecurity and emotional exhaustion.

The job/employee satisfaction has a positive relationship with employee retention (Taşpinar & Türkmen, 2019). This means that when employees are satisfied with their jobs, their turnover intentions are low. The cause and the effect of job satisfaction's role in this correlation can be further explained by the results of various studies.

According to Al Kahtani et al. (2021), job satisfaction, as impacted by employee empowerment or the practice of giving employees the liberty to have decision making powers in their day-to-day work, increases organizational commitment. This means that delegating responsibilities and autonomy towards employees can give them the feeling of accomplishment (job satisfaction) which, in turn, increases organizational commitment and ultimately organizational success. In the similar vein, job satisfaction can mediate the relationship between customer relationship and service quality (Mahafzah et al., 2020). This means that employees are keener to perform well and do things that are above and beyond their job description when they are satisfied.

Moderating Effect of Emotional Organizational Pride

Other factors that also influence job satisfaction and ultimately job performance are organizational justice and organizational pride. Particularly distributive justice and procedural justice have significant influence on job performance (Widyanti et al., 2020). Organizational pride and reputation also mitigate turnover intentions, especially with

the presence of interpersonal justice (Castro-González et al., 2021) that organizational pride has minimal influence on job satisfaction. The former is contrary, however, to the results of Fiernaningsih et al. (2019)'s study which shows that although work-life balance has a significant positive effect on job satisfaction, organizational pride has no significant effect on job satisfaction. In other words, the sense of pride of employees on company reputation does not always directly increase job satisfaction.

Customer Aggression and Turnover Intentions

The relationship of emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction with turnover intentions is proven by a study by Scanlan & Still (2019) which found out that job resources of rewards and recognition, job control, feedback and participation increase job satisfaction, lower burnout, and employee turnover; while the job demands of emotional demands, shift work and work-home interference was associated with higher levels of exhaustion. This is supported by the study conducted by Wen et al. (2020) on the frontline hotel employees and Schiffinger & Braun (2019) among flight attendants. The latter study's results show that time pressure and scheduling satisfaction emerged as the most important predictors of emotional exhaustion, more so than the well-established.

Proposed Framework

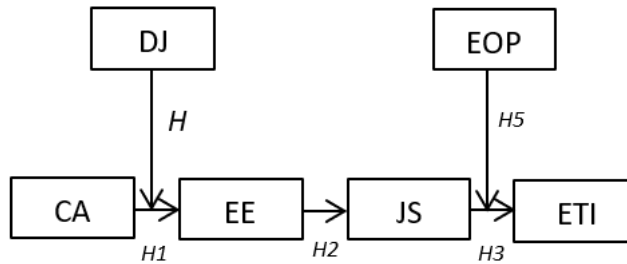


Figure 1
Conceptual Framework

From the proposed framework, the following hypotheses are derived:

- H.1. Customer aggression (CA) directly and positively relates to emotional exhaustion (EE) among frontline food service employees.
- H.2. Emotional exhaustion (EE) based on customer aggression negatively relates to job satisfaction (JS) among frontline food service employees.
- H.3. Job satisfaction (JS) negatively relates to turnover intentions (ETI) among frontline food service employees.
- H.4. The negative relationship between customer aggression (CA) and emotional exhaustion (EE) is moderated by distributive justice (DJ) among frontline food service employees.
- H.5. The relationship between job satisfaction (JS) and frontline service employee turnover intention (ETI) is moderated by organizational pride (EOP).

METHODOLOGY

This is a descriptive study which intends to describe the current circumstances or state concerning the customer aggression and its effects on the turnover intentions of KFC's restaurant team members (RTMs). The purpose of this study is to test the hypotheses regarding the causal relationships among the variables.

The researchers conducted the study on the 202 branches of KFC in Metro Manila, Philippines. Using the Slovin's Formula with 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error, 328 respondents were picked from the target population. This study employed proportionate stratified sampling technique to have each city properly represented in the sample. Sampling distribution is based on the number of KFC RTMs per city as presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Sampling Distribution

Cities and Municipality in NCR/Metro Manila	Number of RTMs per City*	% of Population Distribution **	Sample Size
Manila	201	11%	36
Mandaluyong	87	5%	16
Marikina	76	4%	13
Pasig	103	6%	20
Quezon City	394	22%	72
San Juan	11	1%	3
Caloocan	78	4%	13
Malabon	87	5%	16
Navotas***	0	0%	0
Valenzuela	128	7%	22
Las Piñas	118	6%	19
Makati	132	7%	22
Muntinlupa	103	6%	20
Parañaque	152	8%	26
Pasay	46	3%	10
Pateros***	0	0%	0
Taguig	113	6%	20
TOTAL	1829	100%	328

Note: Data as of May 31, 2021, ** $(RTM / RTM * 100)$, ***No KFC store, RTM= restaurant team members per city, RTM= total restaurant team members in Metro Manila.

The researchers used already developed and validated scales for this study, adopted from the study of Kashif, et al. (2017) titled, "Customer Aggression and Organizational Turnover among Service Employees: The Moderating Role of Distributive Justice and Organizational Pride" with their permission. The constructs were adopted from different studies: five-item scale for customer aggression (Baron and Neuman, 1996), four-item scale for distributive justice (Tang and Sarsfield-Baldwin, 1996), five-item scale for emotional exhaustion (Poddar and Madupalli, 2012), four-item scale for job satisfaction (Poddar and Madupalli, 2012), four-item scale for emotional organizational pride (Goudarzi et al., 2011) and five-item scale for employee turnover intentions (Poddar and Madupalli, 2012).

The individual constructs have the Cronbach alpha value: for Customer Aggression is 0.9305, which is excellent; for Distributive Justice is 0.8941, which is good; for Emotional Exhaustion is 0.8103, which is good; for Job Satisfaction is 0.9461, which is excellent; for Emotional Organizational Pride is 0.9867, which is excellent; and for Employee Turnover Intention is 0.8409, good.

Because the instrument is a modification from different sources, a pilot testing was conducted to 20 non- participants of the study to find out if any error exists (if any) in the measuring instrument (Hair, et al, 2014) [46]. Using Cronbach alpha test for reliability, the coefficients of constructs range from .8103 (Good) to .9867 (Excellent) which are above the acceptable value of $\alpha \geq .7$ (Srinivasan and Lohith, 2017).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics on Table 2 showed standard deviations of 0.473 (age), 0.493 (sex), and 0.913 (company tenure). Based on the results of Kurtosis and Skewness, it shows that the gathered data for the sample population are all normally distributed based in it is near absolute value 1 ((Büyüköztürk, *Çokluk*, & Köklü, 2014; Demir et al., 2016; Huck, 2012; Ramos et al., 2018) except for the Company Tenure which showed moderate non-normality ($1 > \alpha < 2.3$) (Lei and Lomax, 2005). Most of the RTMs are newly hired or they only have been affiliated with KFC for 1-3 years.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics

	Age	Sex	Company Tenure
Standard Deviation	0.473	0.493	0.913
Minimum	0	0	0
Maximum	1	1	3
Skewness	-0.701	-0.361	1.25
Kurtosis	-1.52	-1.88	0.715
Shapiro-Wilk W	0.596	0.625	0.735
Shapiro-Wilk p	<.001	<.001	<.001

Multiple Regression Analysis

To check appropriateness of employing parametric tests on the data, assumptions on autocorrelation, collinearity and normality were checked Durbin- Watson. Based on the value of DW Statistic of 1.88 and $p=.256$, it was concluded that there is no autocorrelation between the data sets since the obtained value fell between the ranges of 1.5 to 2.5 ($2.5 > 1.5 < 2.5$). Therefore, there was no serial correlation in the model used in the study.

Table 3
Collinearity Statistics

	VIF	Tolerance
Customer Aggression	1.14	0.876
Distributive Justice	1.30	0.767
Emotional Exhaustion	1.22	0.817
Job Satisfaction	1.44	0.694
Emotional Organizational Pride	1.26	0.794

Results of collinearity statistics (see Table 3) show that there is no multi-collinearity (VIF <10; Tolerance > 0.1). Results revealed a VIFs of CA= 1.14; DJ=1.30; EE=1.22; JS=1.44; EOP= 1.26 which are less than the threshold value of 5 ($5 \geq 1 \leq 5$) (Kock and Lyn, 2012) [52]. While all the Tolerance are greater than 0.1, it implies that the variables were not collinear.

Table 4
Normality Test (Shapiro-Wilk)

Statistic	p
0.980	<.001

The data passed the assumptions check on auto-correlation, multi-collinearity, and normality hence the researchers proceeded with the regression analysis.

The individual regression analyses for each variable show that the effect of Customer Aggression on the Emotional Exhaustion (see Table 5) was positively significant (H1: $\beta = 0.317$, $t = 6.07$, $p < .001$), while the effect of Emotional Exhaustion on Job satisfaction was negatively significant (H2: $\beta = -0.184$, $t = -5.16$, $p < .001$). Moreover, job satisfaction has negative weak effective on employee turnover intention (H2: $\beta = -0.271$, $t = -4.4975$ $p < .001$). Hence, results accept H1, H2 and H3 of the study. These imply that negative behavior of employees may cause exhaustion and may affect the job satisfaction

and performance of service employees. These findings are congruent to the findings of the study of Alola et al. (2019) which posited that customer incivility (or aggression) and emotional exhaustion has a positive and significant relationship that can influence service employees' work outcomes and that customer incivility is a critical antecedent of turnover intentions.

Customer incivility or aggression is not the only factor that affects emotional exhaustion. Together with abusive supervision and as moderated by employee resilience, customer incivility has an indirect effect on the capacity to satisfy customers. This means that job performance of low-resilience employees is easily affected by customer aggression and abusive supervision (Al-Hawari et al., 2019).

Moderation Analyses

Moderation analysis was performed to assess the moderating roles of Distributive Justice and Emotional Organizational Pride to Customer Aggression and Employee Turnover Intentions.

Results on the moderation effects of Distributive Justice and Emotional Organizational Pride (see Table 7) revealed that Distributive Justice moderates the relationship between Customer Aggression and Emotional Exhaustion (H4: $\beta = 0.15458$, $z = 2.7089$, $p = 0.007$); however, it has been found that Emotional Organizational Pride does not moderate the relationship between Job Satisfaction and Employee Turnover Intentions (H5: $\beta = 0.00480$, $z = 0.0825$, $p = 0.934$).

The results on moderating effect of distributive justice to the negative effect of customer aggression on job satisfaction is supported by the existing literature on the same because it has been proven by other studies that distributive justice can increase job satisfaction (Al-Zu'bi, 2010; Clay-Warner et al., 2005; Usmani & Jamal, 2013; Velez & Neves, 2017).

Table 5

Regression coefficients of dependent and independent variables.

Hypotheses	Relationship	Estimate	SE	Lower	Upper	β	df	t	P
H1	CA→EE	0.317	0.0522	0.2142	0.4195	0.315	324	6.07	<.001
H2	EE→JS	-0.184	0.0357	-0.254	-.1138	-.243	324	-5.16	<.001
H3	JS→ETI	-.343	0.0763	-0.4933	-0.1931	-0.271	324	-4.4975	<.001

However, based on the results of this study, the moderating role of emotional organizational pride is contrary to the findings of the study from which the researchers adopted their instruments (Kashif et al., 2017) as well as other existing literature (Goudarzi et al., 2011; Kraemer & Gouthier, 2014; Mas-Machuca et al., 2016) that supports the negative effect of emotional organizational pride (or organizational pride in general) on the employee turnover intentions (or the intention to quit the job). The researchers speculate that this is attributed to the scant studies on this relationship in the context of Philippine fast-food industry. Especially since this study is conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, the work attitudes and motivations might not be the same as when the other studies were conducted (Labrague & Santos, 2020).

Moderation Table 6

Effects (interactions)

Hypotheses	Relationship	Estimate	SE	Lower	Upper	β	Z	P
H4	CA→DJ→EE	0.15458	0.0571	0.0427	0.266	0.1398	2.7089	0.007
H5	JS→EOP→ETI	0.00480	0.0582	-0.1093	0.119	0.0230	0.0825	0.934

The significant beta coefficients for the conceptual model are also demonstrated in Figure 1.

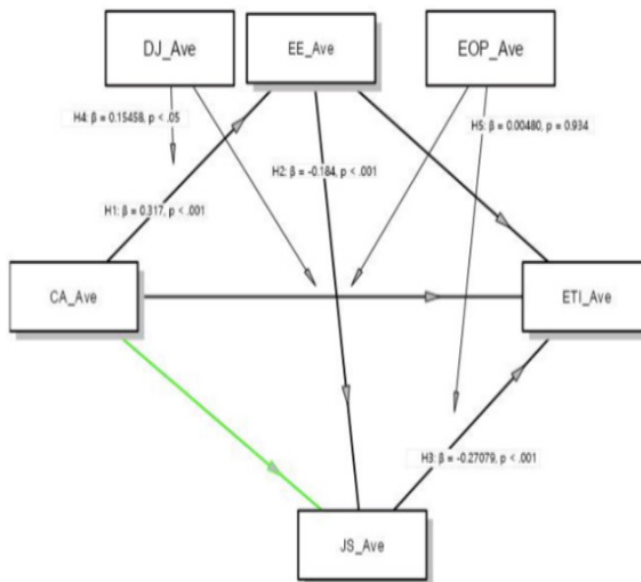


Figure 2
Model Diagram

The Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory, show that the loss of resources or what individuals value which can be objects, conditions, personal characteristics, and energies causes stress (Hobfoll, 2001). In the instances of customer aggression, employees lose resources (i.e., peace of mind and sense of safety) (Grandey, et al., 2004) which causes stress and burnout (Hobfoll, 1989). Work stress has been proven to affect levels of emotional exhaustion experienced by employees (Boles et al., 1997; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016; Stordeur, 2001).

The negative relationship between emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction is consistent with the explanation of AET on the effects of emotions and moods to the job satisfaction and job performance (Weiss & Copranzo, 1996). Moreover, their inverse relationship is supported by existing literature with varying factors affecting them such as emotional dissonance (Lewig & Dollard, 2003) and mindfulness or emotional intelligence (Hülshager et al., 2013).

In the overall model fit (see Table 8) the dependent variable, employee turnover intentions, was regressed on independent variables (customer aggression, emotional exhaustion, job satisfaction, distributive justice, and emotional organizational pride) to test if they have a significant effect on variations of the dependent variable. This signifies that the independent variables play a significant role in employee turnover intentions of KFC RTMs. The results clearly direct the positive significant effect ($p < .001$) of the customer aggression on the employee turnover intentions. The adjusted R-squared = 0.281 depicts that the model explains 28.1% of the variance in employee turnover intentions.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The primary aim of this study was to test a model on the effect/s of customer aggression to the employee turnover intentions of RTMs in the branches of KFC in Metro Manila, Philippines. This was done by analyzing the customer aggression's effect on employee turnover intentions through emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction. The researcher also studied with moderating effects of distributive justice and emotional organizational pride.

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that customer aggression, indeed, has a direct effect on emotional exhaustion, and it can be moderated by distributive justice. This means that the intensity or frequency of customer aggression that service employees experience directs the degree of emotional exhaustion that they feel. Likewise, results of this study show that emotional exhaustion has an inverse effect on job satisfaction which means that when service employees are emotionally exhausted, the likelihood

that they are getting satisfaction from their jobs is diminishing. Results also show that job satisfaction, indeed, has an inverse effect on employee turnover intentions and it is poorly moderated by emotional organizational pride. This reinforces the general belief that when an organization no longer satisfies the need of employees, those employees will likely leave. However, this study contradicts the findings of other studies on the effect of emotional organizational pride. This might mean that in the Philippine context of fast food industry in the middle of a pandemic, emotional organizational pride does not weigh as much as other factors that might make employees in the company.

Upon examining the existing policies and programs of KFC Philippines, the researchers recommend the following:

1. Rewards and recognition programs should include recognizing RTMs who experience customer aggression and handle it well. Also, entitlement to an additional paid leave after the incident for instance to give them the opportunity to rest and recuperate from the encounter should be considered. This would make the employees feel the support of the organization. If the organization permits, a humorous special award for handling customer aggression may also be helpful since humor can be one of the coping strategies for emotional exhaustion.
2. Policies responding to customer aggression are currently lacking. Customer aggression is a common occurrence. It is so common that it is easy to assume that it is normal. Having equitable and just policies would make the employees feel that there is a structure in dealing with customer aggression and, thus, it would not be too confounding. Employees can always refer to policies/guidelines when they are about to be overcome with strong emotions.
3. Having at least one security personnel in each KFC store would also ensure the safety of the employees.
4. Stress management or counseling or even mere debriefing exercises after experiencing customer aggression should also be a matter of organizational policy to help employees process the events and their emotions.

Moreover, the contradictory findings of this study on the mitigating effects of emotional organizational pride are also worth exploring. Further, research can be done in other studies if there will be similar results in other organizations or other service institutions. Other factors that might affect the relationship of customer aggression and turnover intentions can also be investigated to contribute to the scant literature regarding the field of study.

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