

RESEARCH ARTICLE

A self-verification perspective on customer mistreatment and customer-directed organizational citizenship behaviors

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Summary

Customer mistreatment events play a major role in employees' subsequent customer service behaviors, and is believed to have implications for employees' sense of self. We extend this line of research by developing a self-verification account of the relationship between customer mistreatment and customer-directed OCBs (OCB-Cs) by examining theoretically prescribed novel mechanisms (i.e., self-verification) and boundary conditions (i.e., self-esteem and entity customer appreciation) for this relationship. We conducted a programmatic series of studies using daily diary (Study 1), audio vignette (Study 2), and behavioral experiment (Study 3) designs to test the proposed model. The overall pattern of results showed that customer mistreatment led employees to feel less self-verified, especially among those with higher trait self-esteem. These employees in turn were more likely to withhold OCB-Cs, especially among those perceiving lower levels of entity customer appreciation. Overall, these results deepen our understanding of the role of the self-concept in how employees experience and react to customer mistreatment--depending on how employees see themselves and how they see their customers in general.

KEYWORDS

customer mistreatment, customer appreciation, OCB-customer, self-esteem, self-verification, workplace aggression

1 | INTRODUCTION

Employees in the front lines of organizations are often confronted by difficult, rude, and aggressive customers. Targets of “customer mistreatment”—the poor-quality interpersonal treatment that workers receive from customers (Wang et al., 2011)—face a difficult interpersonal challenge: These employees need to continue delivering high-quality service even after the aggressive customer is long gone, satisfying subsequent customers by “going the extra mile.” Research has shown that these customer-directed organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB-Cs; Bettencourt & Brown, 1997) are

diminished by customer mistreatment (Shao & Skarlicki, 2014), though our understanding of this effect is still emerging. Why does customer mistreatment prompt employees to withhold OCB-Cs?

Existing work has suggested that targets of customer mistreatment withhold OCB-Cs because customer mistreatment depletes personal resources needed to engage in OCB-Cs (Shao & Skarlicki, 2014). While we see value in this resource perspective, one assumption it holds is that low levels of OCB-Cs are due to a lack of *ability* (i.e., means; Halbesleben et al., 2014) needed to carry out these behaviors. In contrast to this assumption, we know that discretionary behaviors like OCBs have primarily *motivational* underpinnings

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(Hoffman et al., 2007), which leaves open the question of what explains employees' lack of motivation to engage in OCB-Cs after experiencing customer mistreatment. To answer this question, we redirect attention in this literature to the employee's motivational core: their self-concept. Drawing upon self-verification theory, customer mistreatment can convey negative feedback about the sense of self, which threatens employees' self-worth. Self-verification theory (Swann, 1987) indicates that these employees are then motivated to respond to subsequent customers by disengaging from sources of negative feedback and by avoiding servile behaviors with a degrading connotation, altogether driving employees to withhold OCB-Cs.

This self-verification perspective also points to important boundary conditions that help us understand *for whom* customer mistreatment leads to withholding OCB-Cs. These boundary conditions reflect (a) how employees see themselves and (b) what employees see from customers in general. Customer mistreatment is more threatening to employees who see themselves in a highly positive light—possessing higher self-esteem. These employees are especially likely to feel that customer mistreatment provides feedback that contradicts their sense of self. Further, how employees respond to this diminished self-verification depends partly on the reactions they expect from customers. Ordinarily, OCBs provide opportunities for employees to receive appreciative reactions from recipients (Lemoine et al., 2015). However, in the customer service context, OCB-Cs are not always appreciated, especially as customers increasingly feel entitled to extraordinary service at a minimum (Fisk & Neville, 2011). Some employees may have learned from experience to expect a lack of appreciation from customers for their extra efforts; we expected these employees to be especially likely to withhold OCB-Cs in response to diminished self-verification. We conducted a series of three daily diary and experimental studies to test this theoretical model, depicted in Figure 1.

This research contributes to the literature by extending the role of the self in customer mistreatment. Scholars have hinted at customer mistreatment's implications for the sense of self (e.g., Shao & Skarlicki, 2014; Skarlicki et al., 2008; Walker et al., 2014), which has also been explored in theorizing on customer mistreatment (e.g., Amarnani, Bordia, et al., 2019). We systematically codify these ideas in a self-verification account of customer mistreatment. Self-verification presents a complementary lens that views customer mistreatment as not just an unfair experience or a form of stress, but also as a form of negative feedback about the sense of self. Additionally, we advance research on generalized vs. interaction-specific customer behavior (Walker et al., 2014; see also Cole et al., 2016) with a novel look at customer

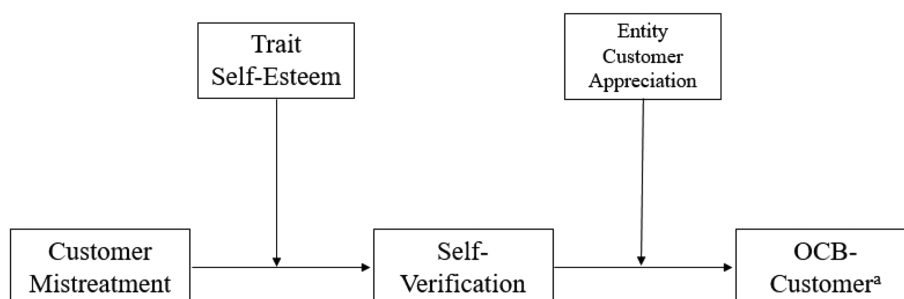
appreciation not as interaction-specific but rather as a generalized perception of how customers usually respond to service efforts.

1.1 | Customer mistreatment and self-verification

Customer mistreatment encompasses the range of low-quality treatment of employees by customers (Koopmann et al., 2015, p. 34), such as yelling angrily, speaking rudely, interrupting employees, and making excessive demands. Research has demonstrated the detrimental impact of customer mistreatment on in-role service performance (Amarnani, Restubog, et al., 2019; Baranik et al., 2017; Garcia et al., 2019) and sales performance (Skarlicki et al., 2008; Sliter et al., 2012). However, less is known about how customer mistreatment relates to service behaviors that go “above and beyond.” OCB-Cs are discretionary service behaviors that exceed minimum standards of service (Bettencourt & Brown, 1997). Employees engage in OCB-Cs by spontaneously providing customers with extra attention and care and by going out of their way to meet customers' needs. Research has shown customer mistreatment lowers OCB-Cs (Shao & Skarlicki, 2014; cf. Yue et al., 2017, for another perspective), but our understanding of the underlying mechanisms is still emerging. We unpack these mechanisms by introducing a perspective from self-verification.

Self-verification theory is a general framework for how people deal with feedback relevant to the self (Swann, 1987; Thatcher & Zhu, 2006). This theory suggests that people “have a fundamental need for others to see them as they see themselves” (Thatcher & Zhu, 2006, p. 1077). When the feedback and interpersonal treatment that a person receives is aligned with their own self-views, the person experiences *self-verification*, defined as the perception that one is viewed and treated in line with how they see themselves (Swann, 1987; Wiesenfeld et al., 2007). People desire self-verification because it confers psychological coherence; when that coherence is threatened, people strive to restore it (Swann, 2011). A person's experience of self-verification changes contextually during interpersonal interactions depending on the feedback and treatment the person receives. That is, when interpersonal feedback contradicts one's self-views, the person experiences lower levels of self-verification (for reviews, see Swann, 2011; vanDellen et al., 2011). When self-verification is undermined, people behave in ways that reaffirm self-views. In this way, self-verification plays a pivotal role in (a) the way people interpret interpersonal treatment and feedback and (b) how people respond when that interpersonal treatment contradicts self-views.

FIGURE 1 Theoretical model. ^aIn the Study 3 behavioral experiment, we incorporated both OCB-Customer Intentions and actual OCB-Customer Behavior serially



Customer mistreatment is widely believed to be disrespectful interpersonal treatment (Shao & Skarlicki, 2014; Skarlicki et al., 2008; van Jaarsveld et al., 2021; Walker et al., 2014), though this notion has received little direct empirical attention (for an exception, see Amarnani, Restubog, et al., 2019). Customer mistreatment sends negative feedback about employee (1) competence, (2) likeability, and (3) social worth in the eyes of the customer (Amarnani, Bordia, et al., 2019), which altogether undermines employee self-verification (Swann, 1987). In general, people want to feel good about themselves and deserve good things (Sedikides et al., 2003). Demeaning experiences like customer mistreatment generally contradict people's sense of self and what they feel they deserve. We propose the following:

Hypothesis 1. Customer mistreatment is negatively related to self-verification.

While customer mistreatment diminishes self-verification in general, these effects ought to be markedly stronger for people with higher self-esteem. Self-esteem refers to one's overall orientation towards the self (Rosenberg, 1979). Individuals with higher self-esteem tend to be thoroughly convinced of their positive attributes and capabilities. In contrast, people with lower self-esteem possess "evaluatively neutral" self-views which are more tempered than their high self-esteem counterparts (Campbell & Lavelle, 1993). Self-esteem has a lifelong stable component based on one's family environment in early-mid childhood (Kuster & Orth, 2013). Though self-esteem does vary within-person, over 70% of its variance is stable, similar to traits like agreeableness and conscientiousness (Orth & Robins, 2014); thus, we examine self-esteem as a stable individual difference (Orth & Robins, 2014).

Self-verification theory specifies that whether feedback is self-verifying depends on the person's self-esteem (Swann, 1987; Swann et al., 1992). Negative feedback is particularly self-contradictory for people with higher self-esteem, who then experience especially lower levels of self-verification. In this way, customer mistreatment ought to especially undermine self-verification among employees with higher self-esteem. Thus, we propose the following:

Hypothesis 2. Self-esteem moderates the negative relationship between customer mistreatment and self-verification such that this relationship is stronger among service employees with higher (vs. lower) levels of self-esteem.

1.2 | Self-verification and OCB-C

Self-verification theory also proposes that when people receive feedback that does not verify their sense of self, they strive to restore psychological coherence (Swann, 2011). This pursuit of psychological coherence has implications for employees' OCB-Cs to subsequent customers. More specifically, self-verification theory (Swann, 1987; see also Kraus & Chen, 2014) prescribes two sets of behavioral

responses to diminished self-verification: (dis)engagement and self-presentation. In order to explain how these responses unfold in employee-customer dyads that cross organizational boundaries, we need to first consider a contrast: self-verification and helping behaviors in co-worker dyads within the organization.

The rubric of self-verification allows for people to react to self-threats in prosocial as well as antisocial ways (vanDellen et al., 2011). There is evidence that threatened self-verification prompts an increase in prosocial behaviors within the organization to sustain ongoing relationships. Xu et al. (2017) argue that targets of ostracism are more helpful to co-workers by dint of self-verification. Huang and Paterson (2020) similarly report that targets of abusive supervision show increased helping towards colleagues, which is mediated by reputational concerns. When mistreatment is perpetrated within the organization, people are motivated to restore their value and reputation in established relationships by helping others who in turn express appreciation. In these instances, helping is more likely to elicit appreciation—positive feedback from colleagues that reinstates focal employees' value.

Self-verification theory further specifies that people strive for psychological coherence through self-presentation: trying to signal one's value and worth through displayed behaviors (Kraus & Chen, 2014). In intra-organizational contexts that lack structural status differentials, helping behaviors take on a positive connotation for the self. In this context, helping is a *prestige* strategy for displaying worth: "prestige involves displaying skills and knowledge valued by the group, which in turn brings respect, admiration, and, ultimately, high social rank" (Maner, 2017, p. 527). Hence, helping within the context of sustained relationships also enables the employee to self-present themselves in a positive light and accrue social standing.

Importantly, these prosocial outcomes of diminished self-verification are contingent on sustained work relationships. However, these conditions are unlikely to hold in one-off encounters that cross organizational boundaries. Customer mistreatment and OCB-Cs both typically occur in the context of one-off service interactions. Thus, the prosocial outcomes of low self-verification are less applicable to the customer-employee context. Moreover, OCB-Cs are less likely to elicit appreciation as customers increasingly feel entitled to these extra services as a default (Fisk & Neville, 2011). Hence, employees are likely to disengage from OCB-Cs which may not elicit much appreciation.

A second reason for withholding OCB-Cs comes from the self-presentation pathway in self-verification (Kraus & Chen, 2014). Unlike OCBs directed to colleagues, OCB-Cs occur in the context of status disparities in service (Yagil, 2006). OCB-Cs reinforce the notion that "the customer is always right"—taking on a somewhat degrading connotation by displaying a servile sense of self. In this case, withholding help is a *dominance* response for reinforcing worth (Maner, 2017). Unlike prestige responses, dominance responses are often deployed when there are status disparities (Pratto et al., 2006). Altogether, we propose that employees with lower self-verification are more likely to withhold OCB-Cs, restating the following prediction:

Hypothesis 3. Self-verification is positively related to OCB-Cs.

Integrating the predictions thus far, customer mistreatment provides negative feedback about the self, thereby diminishing employee self-verification—especially among employees who have higher self-esteem. In turn, these employees withhold OCB-Cs because OCB-Cs may not enable employees to restore psychological coherence by obtaining positive feedback (e.g., customer appreciation) and because withholding OCB-Cs can be a potential response to restore a positive sense of self. Integrating this reasoning together, we pose a first-stage moderated mediation hypothesis. We first tested these hypotheses in Study 1.

Hypothesis 4. Self-esteem moderates the indirect effect of customer mistreatment on OCB-Cs through self-verification such that the indirect effect is stronger among employees with higher (vs. lower) levels of self-esteem.

2 | STUDY 1

2.1 | Participants and procedure

Participants were recruited through MTurk in two waves during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ Only participants employed as “essential frontline workers” (i.e., grocery and pharmacy employees), at least 18 years old, working at least 30 h per week, and residing in the U.S. were eligible to participate. Participants completed a baseline survey assessing their demographic variables and self-esteem. One week after completing the baseline survey, these participants responded to two daily surveys over five working days (Monday to Friday). The two daily surveys were an early afternoon survey (measuring participants’ experienced customer mistreatment and self-verification in the morning) and an evening survey (measuring participants’ OCB-Cs in the afternoon). To eliminate retrospective reporting (see Wang et al., 2011), participants who failed to complete the survey at a measurement period were not allowed to participate in subsequent surveys. We retained participants who completed both daily surveys for at least three full days. In the final sample, there were 140 person-level observations and 497 day-level observations (daily assessments that included previous-day lagged measurements of self-verification and OCB-Cs). The sample was 57.9% male, average age of 34.7 (SD = 8.7), and average tenure of 5.4 years (SD = 4.9).

¹Due to data collection difficulties during the pandemic (Zacher & Rudolph, 2022), we were unable to obtain a sufficient number of high-quality responses in our data collection attempt (316 daily observations from 90 participants), so we also collected additional data 6 months later (181 daily observations from 50 new participants). To provide insight into sampling heterogeneity, we conducted additional checks. T-tests showed no differences in key variables and demographics across waves. Furthermore, results also did not differ meaningfully upon specifying the sample source as a Level-3 cluster. Thus, we combined data collected at these two waves in our final sample for analyses.

2.2 | Measures

Response anchors were on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) unless otherwise specified. Consistent with other daily diary research (Christensen et al., 2003), measures were shortened versions with items selected based on factor loadings. All measures are presented in Appendix A. *Global self-esteem* ($\alpha = .91$): A brief 5-item scale of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was used (Rosenberg, 1979). A sample item is “I am able to do things as well as most other people.” *Daily customer mistreatment* ($\alpha = .90-.93$): We used a short four-item measure of customer mistreatment (Skarlicki et al., 2008) adapted to the daily setting. A sample item is “this morning, my customers used condescending language (e.g., ‘you are an idiot’).” Frequency anchors were used (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *always*). *Self-verification* ($\alpha = .86-.92$): We adapted a three-item measure of self-verification from prior research (Wiesenfeld et al., 2007; Wood et al., 2009), adjusted to suit the service context. The three items are (1) “this morning, my customer/s saw me the same way I see myself”; (2) “this morning, my customer/s understood what kind of person I am”; and (3) “this morning, my customer/s treated me the way I deserve to be treated.” *Customer-directed organizational citizenship behaviors* (OCB-Cs; $\alpha = .82$): Participants reported their OCB-Cs using three items from Bettencourt and Brown (1997) adapted for daily diary designs. A sample item is “this afternoon, I helped customers with problems beyond what is expected or required.”

2.3 | Analytic strategy

Since these data possessed a multilevel nested structure in which daily assessments were nested within persons, the data were analyzed using multilevel regression with random effects (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002) in Mplus 7.4. We estimated all the parameters needed for the indirect effect in a single model (Bauer et al., 2006). To test cross-level moderation, we estimated a model in which trait self-esteem predicted the random slope between day t customer mistreatment and day t self-verification. Moderated mediation was then tested by comparing indirect effects across levels of self-esteem. We used Bayesian estimators with non-informative priors (Kruschke et al., 2012) to estimate indirect effects because within-person indirect effects tend to have a skewed distribution that is accounted for in Bayesian estimation. In all analyses, we controlled for lagged variables (e.g., day $t-1$ self-verification predicting day t self-verification) to allow for autoregressive control.

We also conducted multilevel confirmatory factor analysis (MLCFA) to assess the psychometric properties and discriminant validity of the measures. Following guidelines for integrity and transparency in CFA (Cortina et al., 2017), we confirm that the MLCFA model did not include residual covariances or other adjustments based on modification indices, nor did any estimation problems arise in the analyses. The MLCFA was specified at the within- and between-person levels for daily customer mistreatment, daily self-verification, and daily

OCB-Cs, and only at the between-person level for trait self-esteem. We observed good fit, $\chi^2(116) = 231.31$, CFI = .96, TLI = .95, RMSEA = .04, SRMR_{within} = .03, SRMR_{between} = .07, all standardized factor loadings >.50, supporting the hypothesized measurement model.

2.4 | Results and discussion

Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations are presented in Table 1. In the random intercepts random slopes model (shown in Table 2), we observed a significant slope of daily customer mistreatment with daily self-verification ($\gamma = -0.97$, 95% CI [-1.26, -0.72]), supporting Hypothesis 1. We also observed significant variance in that slope ($\tau = 0.15$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.31]), justifying further cross-level moderation analysis to test between-person predictors of that variance. Further analyses supported the hypothesized cross-level moderation effect. Trait self-esteem was statistically significantly related to the slope of daily customer mistreatment with daily self-verification ($\gamma = -0.34$, 95% CI [-0.59, -0.12]). The relationship was stronger among employees with higher ($B = -1.39$, $p < .01$) as opposed to lower self-esteem ($B = -0.62$, $p < .01$), supporting Hypothesis 2. In this study and both subsequent studies, lower vs. higher levels of moderators were set at ± 1 SD from the mean. The nature of this moderation effect and simple slopes are depicted in Figure 2.

Next, we extended the model to OCB-Cs. We observed a slope of daily self-verification on daily OCB-Cs ($\gamma = 0.16$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.25]), supporting Hypothesis 3. We probed the indirect effects of daily customer mistreatment on daily OCB-Cs through daily self-verification conditional on between-person self-esteem. Following Liu et al. (2012), we tested and found a multilevel moderated mediation effect (*index of moderated mediation* = -0.12, 95% CI [-0.28, -0.02]). The indirect effect was stronger among employees with higher self-esteem (*indirect effect* = -0.22, 95% CI [-0.42, -0.07]) than those with lower self-esteem (*indirect effect* = -0.10, 95% CI [-0.20, -0.03]), supporting Hypothesis 4.²

Overall, we found support for the premise that targets of customer mistreatment with higher trait self-esteem experienced lower levels of self-verification, which in turn predicted lower OCB-Cs. These results supported our theoretical model thus far. Nevertheless, our model thus far makes assumptions about whether employees expect to receive appreciation from customers. Employees vary meaningfully in the extent to which they generally perceive appreciation from customers. This generalized perception is expected to operate as

a critical second-stage boundary condition. We therefore extended our theoretical model to include this boundary condition and tested the full model (see Figure 1) in Studies 2 and 3.

3 | ENTITY CUSTOMER APPRECIATION AS A SECOND-STAGE BOUNDARY CONDITION

Self-verification theory specifies that people's response to diminished self-verification depends on their anticipated responses and feedback from the other party (Swann, 2011). In the case of OCB-Cs, the most relevant form of feedback is gratitude and appreciation from the beneficiaries of their service: their customers (Lilius, 2012). Customer appreciation refers to customers' affectively laden displays of gratitude for service provided (Palmatier et al., 2009), specifically for employees' extra efforts (Brock et al., 2016). This appreciation is a form of positive feedback that can bolster one's sense of worth by showing the employee that "their actions matter in other people's lives" (Grant & Gino, 2010, p. 947). Consistent with self-verification theory, employees' psychological coherence may be restored when they receive ample appreciation from customers for OCB-Cs. However, employees' experiences vary substantially in how much their customers generally tend to appreciate them.

We refer to this generalized perception of customer appreciation as *entity customer appreciation*. Following Walker et al. (2014), we distinguish between generalized perceptions of customer behavior (entity-level) vs. interaction-specific customer behaviors (event-level). Entity- and event-level constructs are not necessarily isomorphic. For example, event customer incivility refers to uncivil customer behavior in a specific encounter, whereas entity customer incivility instead captures people's sense of the norm or expectation for the level of civility in customer interactions (Walker et al., 2014). Cole et al. (2016) postulate that such perceptions tap what people anticipate will occur in future incidents.

Applying this line of reasoning to our model, entity customer appreciation provides insight into employees' expectations about whether their OCB-Cs will lead to appreciation from customers. As shown in Study 1, service employees with diminished self-verification withhold OCB-Cs. Self-verification theory indicates this relationship ought to be stronger among employees who generally do not expect customer appreciation for their extra efforts at work. The arguments for this relationship map onto both behavioral pathways in self-verification theory. Based on the (dis)engagement pathway, employees focus their resources wherever they expect to receive appreciation, thereby disengaging from customer encounters since they do not expect to be appreciated for their extra efforts. Based on the self-presentation pathway, when employees do not expect or anticipate customer appreciation for their extra efforts, engaging in OCB-Cs can be particularly degrading—in which case, OCB-Cs would not self-present a positive sense of self. Hence, we propose the following:

²These results held even after including autoregressive lagged control variables. Following guidelines for statistical control by Becker et al. (2016), we also separately conducted analyses controlling for daily state anger (Spielberger et al., 1983) since both the deontic justice (Cropanzano et al., 2003) and affective theoretical perspectives (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) indicate the important role for anger in response to customer mistreatment. Thus, it was important to demonstrate that these results hold after accounting for anger. The hypothesis tests remained unchanged after controlling for state anger in both the mediator and the outcome. Results are available upon request.

TABLE 1 Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of variables in study 1 ($N = 140$)

Variables	Mean	SD _w	SD _b	1	2	3	4
1. Self-esteem	3.79		1.12				
2. Daily customer mistreatment	1.49	0.33	0.69	-.41**		-.30**	-.12**
3. Daily self-verification	3.65	0.69	0.78	.44**	-.34**		.39**
4. Daily OCB-Cs	3.75	0.69	0.89	.18*	-.24**	.59**	

Note: Correlations below the diagonal are at the between-person level, while correlations above the diagonal are at the within-person level. Between-level correlations were calculated by averaging within-person constructs across days.

Abbreviations: OCB-Cs, customer-directed organizational citizenship behaviors; SD_b, between-person standard deviations; SD_w, within-person standard deviations.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

TABLE 2 Unstandardized regression estimates in study 1

Effect type	Within-person main effects		Cross-level moderation effects	
	Estimate	95% CI	Estimate	95% CI
Random intercept				
Day t SV				
Intercept	-0.66**	[-0.89, -0.43]	-0.43*	[-0.79, -0.08]
Self-esteem			0.14**	[0.01, 0.27]
Variance	0.19*	[0.08, 0.33]	0.27**	[0.13, 0.46]
Day t OCB-C				
Intercept	2.69**	[2.27, 2.99]	2.42**	[2.10, 2.87]
Variance	0.15*	[0.05, 0.31]	0.08*	[0.01, 0.24]
Random slopes				
Day t CM $\rightarrow$ day t SV				
Intercept	-0.97**	[-1.26, -0.72]	-1.01**	[-1.30, -0.74]
Self-esteem			-0.34**	[-0.59, -0.12]
Variance	0.89**	[0.53, 1.44]	0.79**	[0.45, 1.28]
Day t SV $\rightarrow$ day t OCB-C				
Intercept	0.16**	[0.05, 0.25]	0.16**	[0.05, 0.28]
Variance	0.12*	[0.02, 0.22]	0.09*	[0.02, 0.034]
Day t CM $\rightarrow$ day t OCB-C				
Intercept	-0.19	[-0.40, 0.01]	-0.18*	[-0.35, -0.03]
Variance	0.18*	[0.03, 0.46]	0.09*	[0.02, 0.34]
Day $t-1$ SV $\rightarrow$ day t SV				
Intercept	0.11*	[0.05, 0.17]	0.04	[-0.05, 0.14]
Variance	0.01*	[0.003, 0.015]	0.004*	[0.001, 0.013]
Day $t-1$ OCB-C $\rightarrow$ day t OCB-C				
Intercept	0.28**	[0.20, 0.38]	0.35**	[0.22, 0.44]
Variance	0.004*	[0.001, 0.015]	0.01*	[0.001, 0.015]
Residual variances				
Day t SV	0.36**	[0.30, 0.42]	0.34**	[0.29, 0.41]
Day t OCB-C	0.50**	[0.41, 0.61]	0.54**	[0.43, 0.65]

Abbreviations: CM, customer mistreatment; OCB-Cs, customer-directed organizational citizenship behaviors; SV, self-verification.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

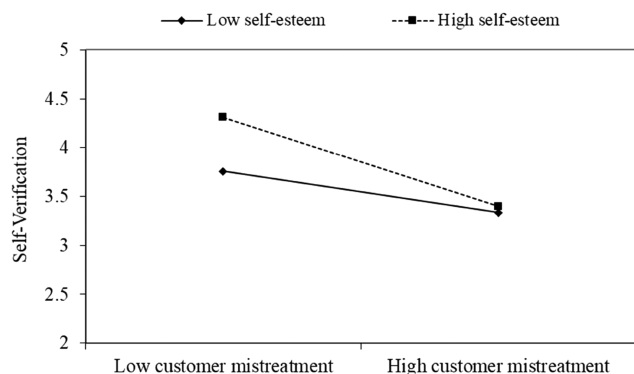


FIGURE 2 The interaction of customer mistreatment and employee self-esteem on self-verification in Study 1. *Note:* Self-verification refers to the perception that customers view and treat the employee in line with how employees see themselves

Hypothesis 5. Entity customer appreciation moderates the positive relationship between self-verification and OCB-C such that the relationship is stronger among employees who report lower (vs. higher) entity customer appreciation.

In the full model, we treat entity customer appreciation as a second-stage boundary condition that specifically captures people's expectations about what will happen when they engage in OCB-Cs. Customer mistreatment diminishes self-verification which in turn leads employees to withhold OCB-Cs. Further, the relationship between lower self-verification and withdrawal of OCB-Cs is exacerbated when employees do not expect or anticipate much appreciation for their OCB-Cs. We codify this second-stage moderated mediation prediction:

Hypothesis 6. The indirect effect of customer mistreatment on OCB-Cs through self-verification is conditional on entity customer appreciation such that the indirect effect is stronger among employees with lower (vs. higher) levels of entity customer appreciation.

4 | STUDY 2

4.1 | Participants

We recruited 250 customer service employees for an audio vignette experiment using MTurk. Participants completed the study in two waves. In Wave 1, participants completed a brief survey measuring trait self-esteem and entity customer appreciation. One week later, participants were invited to return for Wave 2 and undertake the experiment in earnest. Among the 237 participants in Wave 1, 166 participants returned to complete Wave 2 (70.0% response rate). Following best practice recommendations for experiments conducted through MTurk (Cheung et al., 2017), we advised participants to complete the study using a computer in a quiet room at home, and we

implemented attention checks to detect insufficient effort responding. Twenty-three participants (16.0%) failed the attention checks and were removed, leaving a final sample of 143. Results did not differ meaningfully upon removing these participants. The sample was 20.3% female, and the average age was 32.6 years ($SD = 9.0$). Participants were each paid \$1.25 for completing Wave 1 and \$2.50 for completing Wave 2. Participants were told upfront that they would be paid double for Wave 2 to maximize the response rate.

4.2 | Design and procedure

In Wave 1, participants completed a brief survey of self-esteem and entity customer appreciation. In Wave 2, participants returned for the experiment. The experiment featured a vignette design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions—customer mistreatment or control—in which participants imagined interacting with a customer. This “imagining” technique has been used to simulate the experience of dealing with an aggressive customer in laboratory experiments (e.g., Rafaeli et al., 2012). In order to increase realism and immersion, we used audio vignettes of a customer voicemail (e.g., Dwertmann & Kunze, 2021) following best practice in the design of vignette studies (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014) to enhance external validity. The scripts and prompt can be found in Appendix B.

Participants were asked to imagine they were working as a call center agent for a large telecommunication company handling a significant number of customer phone calls every day. They had just returned from a break and noticed a voicemail message from a customer. The customer voicemail varied according to experimental condition. In the control condition, participants listened to a message left by a dissatisfied customer stating that they had recently purchased a phone accessory which was not working. Noticing the money back guarantee policy, the customer calmly requests a refund. In the customer mistreatment condition, they listened to a message left by a customer in the same situation as the control condition. However, rather than speaking in a calm voice, the customer clearly expresses high levels of frustration and anger at the company and its employees, raising their voice and swearing while demanding a refund. In both conditions, the customer was played by the same trained actor. We strictly followed the conceptualization of customer mistreatment in developing the manipulation stimuli. Following this, participants were asked about the voicemail message (manipulation check) and their self-verification. They were then asked how they would behave towards subsequent customers they would interact with that day (OCB-Cs).

4.3 | Measures

Response anchors were 7-point scales (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*) unless otherwise specified. All measures are presented in Appendix A. *Global self-esteem* ($\alpha = .83$): The 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was used (Rosenberg, 1979). *Entity customer appreciation* ($\alpha = .81$): Customer appreciation was adapted from the

Gratitude Questionnaire (McCullough et al., 2004) applied to the customer service setting (following Palmatier et al., 2009). Frequency response anchors were used (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *always*). To assess entity customer appreciation, participants were shown the instruction: “Overall, how do your customers usually treat you?” A sample item is “My customers show me their appreciation.” *Self-verification* ($\alpha = .96$): The same measure was used as in Study 1, adjusted to fit the episodic context. *OCB-C intentions* ($\alpha = .82$): Participants reported their OCB-C intentions using the 5-item measure by Bettencourt and Brown (1997). Measures were embedded among distractors to minimize suspicion (Cheng & Wang, 2015).

4.4 | Results and discussion

As a manipulation check, participants responded to two questions on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *extremely*) asking how much the customer yelled and spoke aggressively ($\alpha = .80$). These questions were embedded in filler questions about the voicemail message. We observed a statistically significant difference in the manipulation check, $t(141) = 5.71$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .19$, across both conditions: control ($M = 2.7$, $SD = 1.3$) and customer mistreatment ($M = 3.8$, $SD = 0.8$). Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations can be found in Table 3. Analyses were conducted using PROCESS which computed bias-corrected bootstrapped standard errors and confidence intervals ($k = 5,000$). Results are shown in Table 4.

TABLE 3 Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of variables in study 2 ($N = 143$)

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Customer mistreatment	0.48	0.50				
2. Trait self-esteem	4.73	0.99	.08			
3. Entity customer appreciation	5.29	0.96	.03	.01		
4. Self-verification	5.00	1.70	-.46**	-.44**	.07	
5. OCB-C intentions	5.56	0.68	-.14	.04	.33**	.41**

Abbreviation: OCB-Cs intentions, intentions to engage in customer-directed organizational citizenship behaviors.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

TABLE 4 Summary of moderated mediation results in study 2

Predictor	Self-verification		OCB-C intentions	
	B	SE	B	SE
Customer mistreatment	-1.46**	0.19	0.12	0.10
Self-esteem	-0.66**	0.10	0.15**	0.05
Customer mistreatment $\times$ self-esteem	-1.52**	0.19		
Self-verification			0.22**	0.03
Entity customer appreciation			0.16**	0.05
Self-verification $\times$ entity customer appreciation			-0.07**	0.03

Abbreviation: OCB-Cs intentions, intentions to engage in customer-directed organizational citizenship behaviors.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

We observed a statistically significant main effect of customer mistreatment on self-verification ($B = -1.46$, $SE = 0.19$, $p < .01$), supporting Hypothesis 1. Turning next to the moderating role of self-esteem (Hypothesis 2), we observed a statistically significant interaction of customer mistreatment with self-esteem on self-verification ($B = -1.52$, $SE = 0.19$, $p < .01$). Specifically, we found a stronger negative relationship between customer mistreatment and self-verification among participants with higher ($B = -3.00$, $SE = 0.26$, $p < .01$) relative to lower self-esteem ($B = 0.05$, $SE = 0.27$, *ns*), supporting Hypothesis 2. Simple slopes are presented in Figure 3a. The next set of hypotheses extended these predictions to OCB-C intentions. We observed a significant effect of self-verification on OCB-C intentions ($B = 0.22$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .01$), supporting Hypothesis 3. We further proposed that the indirect effect of customer mistreatment on OCB-C intentions through self-verification was conditional on self-esteem. Results supported this conditional indirect effect (*index of moderated mediation* = $-.26$, $SE = .08$, 95% CI $[-.45, -.13]$) which was stronger among those with higher (*indirect effect* = $-.51$, $SE = .15$, 95% CI $[-.82, -.24]$) than lower self-esteem (*indirect effect* = $.01$, $SE = .07$, 95% CI $[-.15, .11]$), supporting Hypothesis 4.

Lastly, we examined entity customer appreciation as a second-stage moderator. This interaction effect was statistically significant ($B = -0.07$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .01$). We observed a stronger positive relationship between self-verification and OCB-C intentions among participants reported lower ($B = 0.29$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .01$) than higher

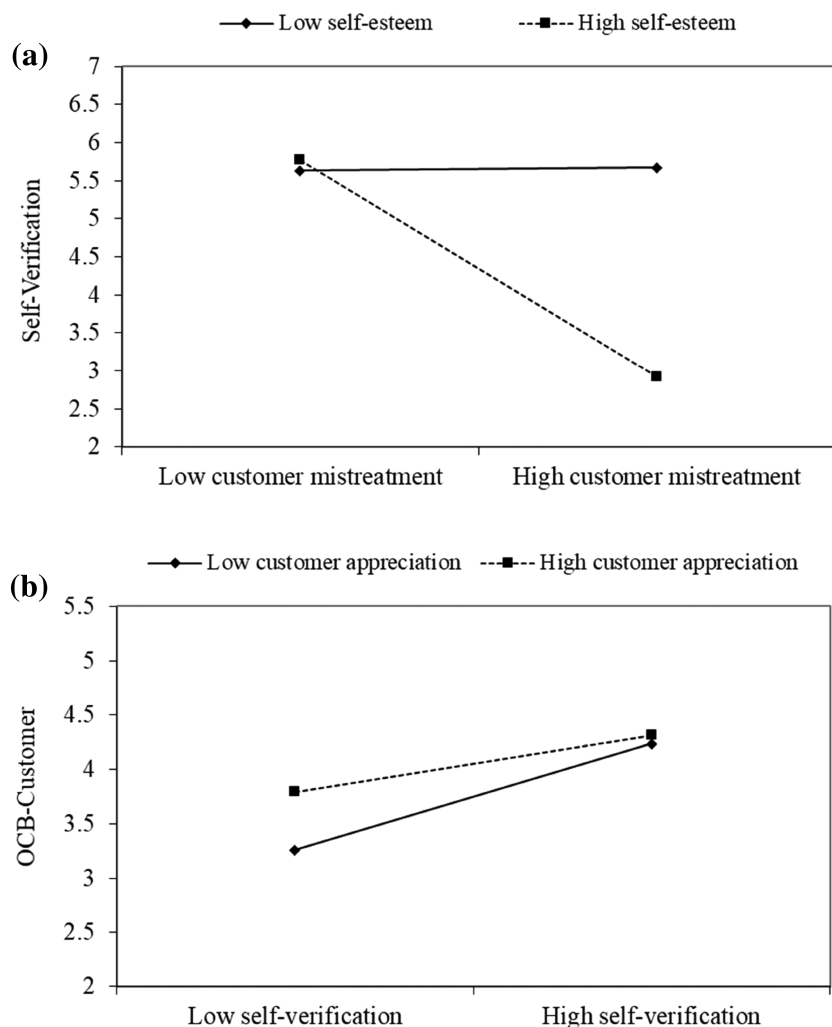


FIGURE 3 (a) The interaction of customer mistreatment and employee self-esteem on self-verification in Study 2 (top). (b) The interaction of self-verification and entity customer appreciation on OCB-C in Study 2 (bottom)

entity customer appreciation ($B = 0.14$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .01$), supporting Hypothesis 5. Simple slopes are shown in Figure 3b. Hypothesis 6 proposed that the indirect effect of customer mistreatment on OCB-C intentions through self-verification was conditional on entity customer appreciation. Results revealed that this conditional indirect effect was significant (*index of moderated mediation* = .14, $SE = .07$, 95% CI [.02, .27]); the indirect effect of customer mistreatment on OCB-C intentions was stronger among those reporting lower (*indirect effect* = $-.40$, $SE = .11$, 95% CI [$-.64$, $-.22$]) as opposed to higher entity customer appreciation (*indirect effect* = $-.13$, $SE = .10$, 95% CI [$-.37$, .02]), supporting Hypothesis 6.³

Overall, these results supported our theoretical model. Self-verification mediated the relationship between customer mistreatment and OCB-C intentions among employees with higher self-esteem. The link between self-verification and OCB-C intentions was moderated by entity customer appreciation—employees who rarely received customer appreciation were more likely to respond to diminished self-verification by intending to withhold OCB-Cs. This study built on Study 1 findings through an experimental design that

improves causal inference and holds customer characteristics constant. We also took efforts to increase external validity through audio vignettes (rather than written vignettes) to heighten immersion and realism that would not have been possible using traditional written vignettes.

Nevertheless, one weakness in both Studies 1 and 2 was the assessment of OCB-C. In Study 1, daily OCB-Cs were self-reported; in study 2, OCB-C intentions were also self-reported. While OCB-Cs are typically self-reported in customer mistreatment research (e.g., Shao & Skarlicki, 2014; Yue et al., 2017), the ecological validity of these findings will be strengthened by extending these findings to a distal outcome: observable OCB-C behavior.

5 | BEHAVIORAL ASSESSMENTS OF OCB-C

We designed Study 3 as a behavioral experiment that used a similar design as Study 2 but also provided participants with the opportunity to demonstrate OCBs to a subsequent customer in a service recovery task. OCB-Cs can be shown in service interactions with both satisfied customers and dissatisfied customers, though it is arguably more

³Just as in Study 1, results did not differ meaningfully upon controlling for state anger in predicting the mediator and the outcome.

important and more consequential when facing dissatisfied customers (Maxham & Netemeyer, 2003; Smith et al., 1999). Service recovery—the attempt to conciliate customers who are dissatisfied with service—can elicit a broad range of employee responses and provide opportunities for employees to engage in extra-role behaviors (de Jong & Ruyter, 2004). The service recovery context is ideal for a behavioral experiment because it does not require job-specific expertise that would otherwise be necessary to carry out OCB-Cs in normal customer interactions. Instead, service recovery involves a more general repertoire of possible strategies that vary in the extent to which the employee goes the extra mile (de Jong & Ruyter, 2004; Miller et al., 2000). As part of the service recovery task, participants wrote an email to a subsequent customer, which was rated by coders on the extent of OCB shown to that customer. This coded OCB-C variable was treated as a distal outcome, thereby building on and extending the moderated mediation hypotheses (Hypotheses 4 and 6, respectively) to behavioral OCB-C.

Hypothesis 4b. The serial indirect effect of customer mistreatment on behavioral OCB-C through self-verification and OCB-C intentions is conditional on self-esteem at the first stage.

Hypothesis 6b. The serial indirect effect of customer mistreatment on behavioral OCB-C through self-verification and OCB-C intentions is conditional on entity customer appreciation at the second stage.

6 | STUDY 3

6.1 | Participants

We recruited 208 customer service employees through CloudResearch (Litman et al., 2017). The study adopted a similar audio vignette experimental design as Study 2, albeit with a service recovery task at the end such that OCB-C to a subsequent customer can be assessed behaviorally. Just as in Study 2, we followed best practice recommendations for experiments conducted through online panels (Cheung et al., 2017) by advising participants to complete the study using a computer in a quiet room at home, and implementing attention checks to ensure high-quality and deliberate responding. Twenty-four participants (11.5%) failed the checks and were removed, leaving a final sample of 184. Results of hypothesis tests did not differ meaningfully upon removing these respondents. The sample was 40.5% female, and the average age was 41.7 years ($SD = 11.0$). Participants were paid \$2.50 each.

6.2 | Design and procedure

The same experimental procedure was used as in Study 2 with two differences: (1) Study 3 was completed in one sitting, and (2) a service

recovery task was appended to the end of the experiment to enable behavioral assessment of OCB-Cs. The task prompt can be found in Appendix C. Participants were told that they received an email from a long-term customer with multiple cell phone plans. The customer wanted a refund on her son's plan, expressing dissatisfaction with the reception in her son's area. We designed the email to convey the customer's dissatisfaction without customer mistreatment. Participants were told the usual procedure was to ask the customer to call the retention team who typically process such requests but that they nevertheless had the discretion to process the refund themselves if they stay late after work (discretion to stay late is often used in behavioral experiments on OCB; e.g., Koning & Van Kleef, 2015). The participants also had the discretion to call the Billing department to ensure the refund went through. Lastly, participants were told that they could also choose to ignore the customer as some emails “slip through the cracks.” Overall, the task allowed for behavioral responses that varied in employees' extra efforts to help the customer. These emails were coded to provide a rating of behavioral OCB-C.

6.3 | Coding of behavioral OCB-C

Two trained graduate students in psychology who were blind to our hypotheses coded participants' email responses. The emails were coded for OCB-Cs by rating the emails on two items: (Item 1) “how much did the employee go the extra mile for the customer?” and (Item 2) “how helpful was the employee to the customer?” Written emails were rated on an extent scale (1 = to a small extent; 7 = to a great extent). Participants who chose to ignore the customer's message were automatically rated a 0 on both items. The first 15 emails were coded in tandem by the two coders; these initial ratings were discussed among the coders. The two coders then independently coded the remaining 169 emails. Both items were averaged to form scale scores. Inter-rater reliability and agreement were assessed following LeBreton and Senter (2008). We observed low levels of average deviation (Item 1 $AD_M = 0.14$; Item 2 $AD_M = 0.14$; Scale $AD_M = 0.14$) as well as high intraclass coefficients (Item 1 $ICC_2 = .87$; Item 2 $ICC_2 = .85$; Scale $ICC_2 = .87$), which altogether supported the decision to aggregate ratings across coders. Scale scores were then averaged across coders.⁴

⁴After they were given the opportunity to email the customer, participants were also asked “What will you do once your shift ends?” The response options were “Nothing. Go home and get some rest. I've done everything I intend to do already” (coded as 1), “Stay an extra 15 minutes to process Karen's refund, then go home” (coded as 2), and “Stay an extra 15 minutes to process Karen's refund, then call the Billing department to make sure that the refund is processed and does not get stuck in the system” (coded as 3). This self-reported end-of-shift behavior was highly correlated with behavioral OCB-C from coded emails ($r = .72$), which further supports the validity of the coded behavioral OCB-C variable. Although analyses and hypothesis tests were reported using the coded behavioral OCB-C variable, results did not differ meaningfully when self-reported end-of-shift behavior was used instead.

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Customer mistreatment	0.49	0.50					
2. Trait self-esteem	5.50	1.29	.07				
3. Entity customer appreciation	4.47	1.12	.07	.23**			
4. Self-verification	3.46	2.05	-.88**	.03	.04		
5. OCB-C intentions	4.79	1.51	-.24**	.22**	.29**	.41**	
6. Behavioral OCB-Cs	3.02	2.21	-.07	.17*	.05	.16*	.26**

TABLE 5 Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of variables in study 3 ($N = 184$)

Abbreviation: OCB-Cs intentions, intentions to engage in customer-directed organizational citizenship behaviors.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

TABLE 6 Summary of moderated mediation results in study 3

Predictor	Self-verification		OCB-C intentions		Behavioral OCB-Cs	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Customer mistreatment	-3.63**	0.13	1.19**	0.09	0.79	0.72
Self-esteem	0.11*	0.05	0.55**	0.10	0.26	0.19
Customer mistreatment $\times$ self-esteem	-0.42**	0.11				
Self-verification			0.55**	0.10	0.21	0.13
Entity customer appreciation			0.31**	0.09	-0.11	0.15
Self-verification $\times$ entity customer appreciation			-0.10*	0.04		
OCB-C intentions					0.28*	0.13

Abbreviation: OCB-C intentions, intentions to engage in customer-directed organizational citizenship behaviors.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

6.4 | Measures

Response anchors were 7-point Likert scales (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*). We used the same measures of self-esteem ($\alpha = .94$), entity customer appreciation ($\alpha = .95$), self-verification ($\alpha = .97$), and OCB-C intentions ($\alpha = .98$) as in Study 2.

6.5 | Results

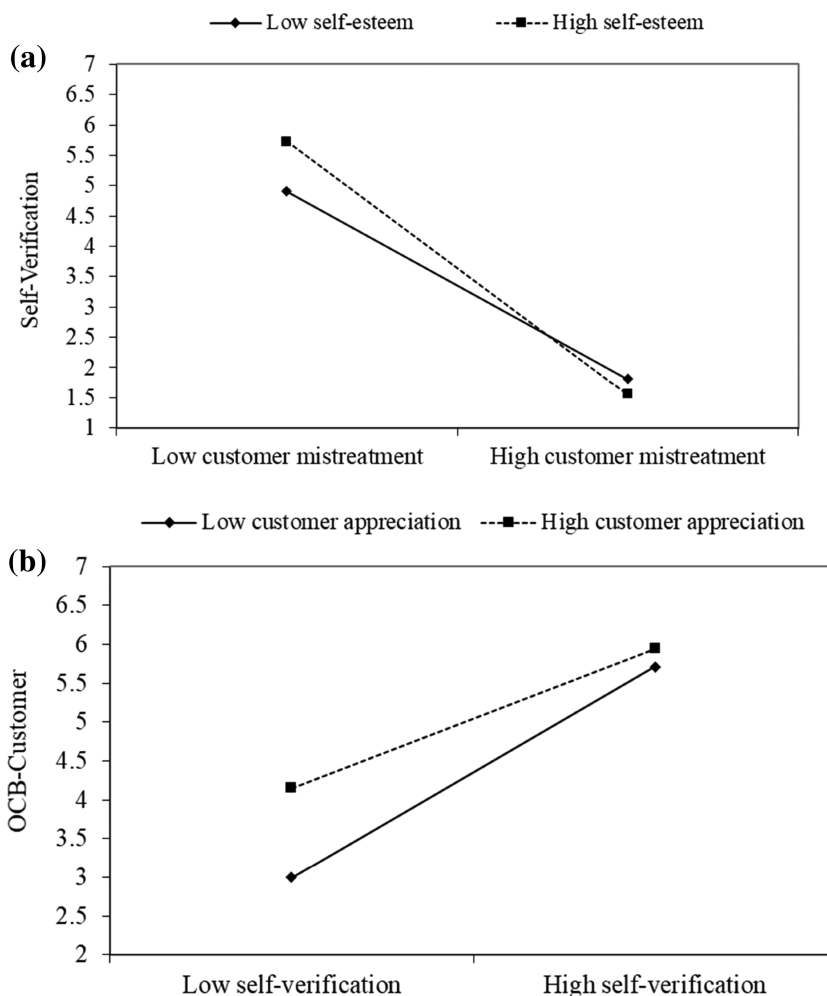
Participants responded to the same manipulation check as in Study 2. We observed a statistically significant difference in this manipulation check, $t(183) = 24.0$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .77$, across the control condition ($M = 1.1$, $SD = 0.5$) and customer mistreatment condition ($M = 3.5$, $SD = 0.8$). Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations can be found in Table 5. Bias-corrected bootstrapped ($k = 5,000$) standard errors and confidence intervals were computed for indirect effects using the PROCESS macro. Results are shown in Table 6. We observed a statistically significant effect of customer mistreatment on self-verification ($B = -3.63$, $SE = 0.13$, $p < .01$), supporting Hypothesis 1, as well as a statistically significant interaction of customer mistreatment with self-esteem on self-verification ($B = -0.42$, $SE = 0.11$, $p < .01$). There was a stronger negative effect of customer mistreatment on self-verification among participants with higher ($B = -4.13$,

$SE = 0.18$, $p < .01$) than lower self-esteem ($B = -2.99$, $SE = 0.21$, $p < .01$), supporting Hypothesis 2. Simple slopes are shown in Figure 4a. We also observed a statistically significant positive effect of self-verification on OCB-C intentions ($B = 0.55$, $SE = 0.10$, $p < .01$), supporting Hypothesis 3.

We observed that the indirect effect of customer mistreatment on OCB-C intentions through self-verification was conditional on self-esteem (*index of moderated mediation* = $-.27$, $SE = .08$, 95% CI $[-.44, -.13]$) which was stronger among those with higher (*indirect effect* = -2.68 , $SE = .42$, 95% CI $[-3.50, -1.86]$) than lower self-esteem (*indirect effect* = -1.99 , $SE = .37$, 95% CI $[-2.75, -1.33]$), supporting Hypothesis 4. In addition, the serial indirect effect of customer mistreatment on behavioral OCB-Cs via self-verification and OCB-C intentions was conditional on self-esteem (*index of moderated mediation* = $-.08$, $SE = .04$, 95% CI $[-.18, -.01]$) such that this indirect effect was again stronger among those with higher (*indirect effect* = -0.82 , $SE = .36$, 95% CI $[-1.55, -0.13]$) than those with lower self-esteem (*indirect effect* = -0.59 , $SE = .26$, 95% CI $[-1.13, -0.09]$), supporting Hypothesis 4b.

Turning to the role of entity customer appreciation, we observed a statistically significant interaction between self-verification and entity customer appreciation on OCB-C intentions ($B = -0.10$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .05$). Specifically, there was a stronger positive relationship between self-verification and OCB-C intentions among those

FIGURE 4 (a) The interaction of customer mistreatment and employee self-esteem on self-verification in Study 3 (top). (b) The interaction of self-verification and entity customer appreciation on OCB-C in Study 3 (bottom)



reporting lower ($B = 0.62$, $SE = 0.10$, $p < .01$) than higher entity customer appreciation ($B = 0.40$, $SE = 0.12$, $p < .01$), supporting Hypothesis 5. The nature of this interaction was presented in Figure 4b. We also found that the indirect effect of customer mistreatment on OCB-C intentions through self-verification was conditional on entity customer appreciation (Hypothesis 6) (*index of moderated mediation* = .36, $SE = .14$, 95% CI [.07, .61]). This indirect effect was stronger among those reporting lower (*indirect effect* = -2.36 , $SE = .11$, 95% CI [-3.09 , -1.68]) than higher entity customer appreciation (*indirect effect* = -1.55 , $SE = .41$, 95% CI [-2.40 , -0.82]), supporting Hypothesis 6. Lastly, we extended this moderated mediation effect serially to behavioral OCB-Cs and found that the indirect effect of customer mistreatment on behavioral OCB-Cs via self-verification and OCB-C intentions was conditional on entity customer appreciation (*index of moderated mediation* = .10, $SE = .07$, 95% CI [.002, .25]), such that this indirect effect was stronger when entity customer appreciation was lower (*indirect effect* = -0.69 , $SE = .31$, 95% CI [-1.31 , -0.09]) than higher (*indirect effect* = -0.45 , $SE = .21$, 95% CI [-0.90 , -0.06]), supporting Hypothesis 6b.⁵ Overall, Study 3 showed

support for the full model, extending Study 2 findings to coded behavioral OCB-Cs based on service worker participants' responses to a customer email. This result further demonstrates the robustness and ecological validity of the model by grounding the OCB-C outcome in actual behavior.

7 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

These studies systematically unpacked the self-verification processes linking customer mistreatment to extra-role OCB-Cs. Our proposed model was supported in a series of studies. Study 1 showed that daily self-verification mediated the relationship between daily customer mistreatment and daily OCB-Cs, particularly among employees with higher as opposed to lower levels of trait self-esteem. These results were replicated in Study 2 using a vignette experiment design which further showed that entity customer appreciation served as a second-stage moderator. Study 3 examined our full model and extended our Study 2 findings to behavioral displays of OCB-C in a service recovery task in a behavioral experiment. These results held even with autoregressive control in Study 1 and after controlling for state anger in all three studies, which altogether further demonstrate the robustness of the results.

⁵As in Studies 1 and 2, results held upon controlling for state anger in predicting the mediator and the outcome.

7.1 | Theoretical implications

These results have important theoretical implications. First, we introduce a novel theoretical perspective to the customer mistreatment literature: self-verification (Swann, 1987). Many foundational studies in customer mistreatment have hinted that employees experience customer mistreatment as a challenge to employees' sense of self and their dignity (e.g., Shao & Skarlicki, 2014; Skarlicki et al., 2008; Walker et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2011), yet this idea received little direct and systematic consideration until more recently (e.g., Amarnani, Bordia, et al., 2019; Amarnani, Restubog, et al., 2019). We build on initial theorizing and research on customer mistreatment and the self by developing and testing a theoretical model of customer mistreatment and self-verification. Consistent with self-verification theory (Swann, 1987), perceptions of the self-influenced the extent to which customer mistreatment diminished self-verification, while perceptions of the other influenced the behavioral response to diminished self-verification. These studies explore the interplay of self- and interpersonal perceptions in shaping the response to customer mistreatment.

These results also extend our understanding of the extra-role outcomes of customer mistreatment. Previous research has highlighted that targets of customer mistreatment tend to withhold OCB-Cs when they lack resources (Shao & Skarlicki, 2014). In this study, we present an alternative-yet-complementary take on why customer mistreatment prompts the withholding of OCB-Cs: self-verification. Employees felt they were not treated in line with their self-views, which in turn prompted them to withhold OCB-Cs. Our findings differ from those revealed in prior research. Xu et al. (2017) found that employees engage in OCBs towards their colleagues when experiencing ostracism. The provision or withholding of OCBs may depend on the social relationship. Displaying OCBs can be a prestige response to gain social worth in ongoing relationships; withholding OCBs can be a dominance response to reinforce superiority and social worth in one-off encounters. In short, our work extends prior research (Xu et al., 2017) and demonstrates that employees' responses to diminished self-verification depend on whether the perpetrator is within the organization or not. Research adopting a multi-foci approach can further extend this line of inquiry.

We also contribute to the literature by taking next steps to advance our understanding of the interplay between event-level and entity-level aspects of the service process (building on Walker et al., 2014). We did so by including the notion of entity customer appreciation—the employee's generalized perception that their customers are appreciative. We found that employees were more likely to withhold OCB-Cs as a reaction to diminished self-verification when they held lower levels of entity customer appreciation. These effects were stronger among employees who had come—through painful experience—to learn not to expect customers to appreciate their extra efforts. Examining the interplay between entity and event processes in the service and mistreatment literatures will continue to be highly generative.

These studies extend our understanding of the nomological network of self-verification. While self-verification is often invoked in research on feedback and interpersonal treatment, it is seldom measured (Ferris et al., 2015; Xu et al., 2017). A related construct that has received attention is self-verification striving (Cable & Kay, 2012), which captures between-person differences in preferences for self-verification (as opposed to the within-person experience of self-verification; Wiesenfeld et al., 2007). Self-verification striving is related to commitment and performance (Cable & Kay, 2012). We demonstrate that experienced self-verification is robustly associated with extra-role outcomes. More research is needed that measures self-verification to deepen our understanding of its nomological network.

While our observed results are generally aligned with theory, there were differences across the studies regarding lower self-esteem. The slope of customer mistreatment predicting self-verification was negative for employees with lower self-esteem in Studies 1 and 3, while it was not significant in Study 2.⁶ Our theory development focused on (a) the relative difference in slopes between higher and lower self-esteem, and (b) the negative slopes at higher self-esteem, but was relatively silent as to the direction of slopes at lower self-esteem. Notably, lower self-esteem is actually closer to neutral (Campbell & Lavalley, 1993). Some scholars speculate that people with lower self-esteem possess ambivalent preferences for feedback and interpersonal treatment, desiring both (a) positive feedback as a reassurance and also (b) negative feedback because it provides psychological coherence; these preferences are not necessarily simultaneous as people with lower self-esteem toggle between these preferences (de la Ronde & Swann, 1993). Altogether, we believe that there is genuine heterogeneity in how people with lower self-esteem respond to customer mistreatment. Future research should explore the boundary conditions that intervene in this process.

7.2 | Practical implications

Our findings have important practical implications for organizations whose viability and longevity depend on their ability to satisfy customers. Service organizations and their managers often focus on trying to appease angry customers even at a cost to mistreated workers (van Jaarsveld et al., 2015). However, allowing employees to be subject to mistreatment may ironically lead to reduced OCB-Cs. These results strengthen the business case to prioritize employees over individual customers. One case in point is Starbucks' Employees First policy; CEO Howard Schultz explicitly declared that Starbucks prioritizes employees over customers. Firms that value employees over customers—particularly when customers are abusive—may reap long-term returns by preventing diminished OCB-Cs.

⁶There were also notable differences between the three studies in the zero-order correlation of self-esteem and self-verification. However, Aiken and West (1991) caution that such lower-order effects are unstable when these are contingent upon higher-order effects, and are likely not interpretable. In contrast, the higher-order effect (interaction of self-esteem with customer mistreatment) was consistent across studies.

Moreover, these studies suggest a caveat to proclamations in the popular management press that self-esteem is the key to sales and service success (e.g., Frankel, 2014). The solution may not necessarily be to recruit and select service workers with lower self-esteem, but rather for organizations and managers to offer opportunities for service employees to self-verify themselves at work. For example, managers should be encouraged to validate their colleagues and subordinates through positive feedback on service employees' efforts, attitudes, and performance. Similarly, employee recognition programs can be introduced to the workplace to acknowledge service employees' dedication and commitment to high quality customer service, which not only offers employees opportunities for self-verification, but might also encourage employees to take pride in their work. In addition, training programs can be offered to service workers (e.g., self-compassion and resilience training programs) to help them maintain a non-judgmental sense of self. These training programs can help service employees cope effectively with customer mistreatment.

7.3 | Strengths, limitations and future directions

Each study was subject to noteworthy limitations. Study 1 combined two daily diary samples with data collected separately. Doing so can increase statistical power, but attention to sampling heterogeneity is needed. We did not observe any mean differences in substantive and demographic variables across the two samples. We also did not observe any differences in results when the model was re-specified with sample source as a Level 3 cluster. Nevertheless, some caution is warranted in interpreting these results. The next set of studies used vignettes to manipulate customer mistreatment. While manipulation checks supported the effectiveness of our manipulation, there may have been other differences between the conditions. Methodologists suggest that this problem can be solved by developing multiple parallel vignette stimuli that are “sampled” during data collection (Westfall et al., 2014). We believe this approach will improve the robustness of inferences from vignette research.

Another issue is that the correlation between the customer mistreatment manipulation and self-verification was much higher in Study 3 than in Study 2. Since we used the same manipulation and the same measure of self-verification in both studies, we speculate that this difference may be due to sampling error. We likewise observed that self-esteem and OCB-Cs had higher levels in Study 3 than in Study 2, which may reflect differences in the sorts of participants that self-selected into these respective studies. While the high correlation in Study 3 portends issues with discriminant validity, it is important to note that discriminant validity is meant to show that two “tests” are distinct (Campbell & Fiske, 1959). Confusion can arise because the same statistics that inform discriminant validity in a correlational context can instead be used to indicate the magnitude of an effect in an experimental context (Goh et al., 2016). To be sure, we also conducted CFAs of self-verification and the customer mistreatment manipulation check. The CFA treating these factors as distinct showed reasonable fit, $\chi^2(4) = 50.244$, CFI = .96, TLI = .91, SRMR = .07, and

markedly better fit than an alternative one-factor model treating these factors as identical, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 115.091$, $p < .001$. Future research is needed to replicate these findings and compare effect sizes across different experimental stimuli and samples (Westfall et al., 2014).

Nevertheless, we believe that these weaknesses in each individual study are compensated for by strengths in the other studies in the entire empirical package. The use of both daily diary and experimental designs maximizes both internal and external validity altogether. It is reassuring that the results were largely consistent across the studies despite differences in sampling strategy, experimental manipulation vs. daily diary assessment of customer mistreatment, effect sizes, and the measurement of OCB-Cs. Indeed, the studies varied in how OCB-Cs were assessed: self-report (Study 1), intention (Study 2), and coded behavior in a specific and potentially contrived context (Study 3). Each measurement approach has strengths and weaknesses: Self-reports capture OCB-Cs with more breadth but perhaps more bias, while behavioral coding captured OCB-C with higher fidelity but perhaps narrower breadth. These approaches compensated for one another and showed similar results across the studies. All three studies provided convergent evidence to minimize common method bias by (1) introducing time lags in Studies 1 and 2; (2) using experimental manipulations in Studies 2 and 3; and (3) controlling for lagged variables in Study 1. Moreover, interaction effects also tend not to emerge as statistical artifacts of common method variance (Siemsen et al., 2010). The series of studies also implemented different designs that altogether strengthen causal inferences—autoregressive control in Study 1 and experimentation in Studies 2 and 3. Causal inference is an important consideration in customer mistreatment research—as it can be difficult to tease apart causes from consequences when people are mistreated (Aquino & Thau, 2009; Cheng et al., 2019)—which requires more attention in future research. Overall, we believe that these studies compensate for each other's weaknesses and altogether strengthen the robustness of the inferences made across the studies.

More research is needed to unpack the self-verification perspective on customer mistreatment. Field studies will help explore the role of organizational factors like service HR practices and service climate. Future research should also attend closely to occupational context. Our Studies 2 and 3 depicted a busy work setting to mirror the reality of call center work and help employees immerse themselves more fully in the setting (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). While we expect our findings to generalize to other service settings (e.g., Study 1), research is needed in a broader range of service contexts. Relatedly, this self-verification process may unfold differently in higher-status frontline roles (e.g., doctors and teachers; Mattar, 2021). The higher status in these jobs may provide additional opportunities to self-verify; furthermore, the repeated interactions with the same recipients may increase the likelihood of helping (i.e., prestige responses rather than dominance responses). Lastly, all our studies adopted shorter time scales to investigate self-verification at the daily/event level. Future research can explore whether chronic, repeated customer mistreatment at the entity level may also elicit sustained desires to verify the self (e.g., Thatcher & Zhu, 2006). More research is needed to understand the effects of customer mistreatment across temporal construal.

There is also a need to integrate resource and self-verification perspectives. Research has shown that targets of customer mistreatment withhold OCB-C because they lack resources (Shao & Skarlicki, 2014), yet we observed that employees with higher self-esteem (i.e., possessing higher levels of a personal resource) were more likely to withhold OCB-Cs from customers. These findings diverge, yet we speculate that these resource- and self-based accounts can be integrated in a self-regulation hierarchy. Diefendorff and Gosserand (2003) present a theoretical model of self-regulation in the service context involving self goals (“maintain a desired self-concept”) and work goals (“meet performance goals”). Ordinarily, both goals are aligned for employees. However, customer mistreatment pits both goals against each other by threatening the employee's self-concept. Under these conditions, behaviors that ordinarily support work goals—like OCB-Cs—also undermine people's efforts to maintain a desired self-concept and self-verify. People with high self-esteem would be more motivated to pursue self goals when they conflict with work goals. At the same time, targets of customer mistreatment eschew OCB-Cs because they are rendered bereft of the resources (i.e., means) needed to carry out OCB-Cs (Shao & Skarlicki, 2014). Self-regulation hierarchy can unify the resource and self-perspectives by positioning OCB-Cs within the context of multiple goal pursuit (Unsworth et al., 2014)—self goals vs. work goals—while accounting for the lower order means (i.e., resources) needed to engage in OCB-Cs.

This series of studies takes important next steps to understand why employees stop going the extra mile when customers behave badly, which erodes the quality of service received by subsequent, otherwise innocent customers. These “spiral” processes in which mistreatment begets withholding are consequential not just for employees and customers but also for the viability of the organization itself. Building on self-verification theory, we find evidence for a self-verification process driving this withholding behavior, demonstrating that self-perceptions serve as a lens through which employees view (and respond to) customer mistreatment. The critical next step will be to intervene in this self-verification process to halt this “spiral”—doing so for the benefit of customers, employees, and organizations.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful to Michael Fischer for helpful feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript and to Deshani Ganegoda, Vinh Lu, David Jones, Amirali Minbashian, and Luke Zhu for feedback on the first author's doctoral dissertation which developed into this paper. We are also grateful for research assistance from Pavel Cruz, Claire Simpaio, and Alloysius Paril. This research was supported by a Prime Minister's Australia Asia Fellowship awarded to the first author. Open access publishing facilitated by The University of Western Australia, as part of the Wiley - The University of Western Australia agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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How to cite this article: Amarnani, R. K., Restubog, S. L. D., Shao, R., Cheng, D. C., & Bordia, P. (2022). A self-verification perspective on customer mistreatment and customer-directed organizational citizenship behaviors. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 43(5), 912–931. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2610>

APPENDIX A: MEASURES USED IN STUDIES 1–3

A.1 | Study 1

A.1.1 | Trait self-esteem

Below are statements that describe how you may think about yourself in general. Please use the following scale to indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each statement.

1. At times, I think I am NO good at all. (reversed)
2. I am able to do things as well as most other people.
3. I feel I do NOT have much to be proud of. (reversed)
4. I certainly feel USELESS at times. (reversed)
5. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a FAILURE. (reversed)

A.1.2 | Daily customer mistreatment

1. This morning, my customers have made demands that I could not deliver.
2. This morning, my customers have yelled at me.
3. This morning, my customers have used condescending language (e.g., “you are an idiot”).
4. This morning, my customers have spoken aggressively to me.

A.1.3 | Daily self-verification

Thinking about the experiences with your customers this morning, we want to know how you felt. Please indicate the level at which you agree with the following statements.

1. This morning, my customer/s saw me the same way I see myself.
2. This morning, I felt that my customer/s understood what kind of person I am.
3. This morning, my customer/s treated me the way I deserve to be treated.

A.1.4 | Daily OCB-Cs

Below are statements about how you behave at work. Please think over your work behaviors THIS AFTERNOON and indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements.

1. This afternoon, I voluntarily assisted customers even if it means going beyond job requirements.
2. This afternoon, I helped customers with problems beyond what is expected or required.
3. This afternoon, I often went above and beyond the call of duty when helping customers.

A.2 | Studies 2 and 3

A.2.1 | Trait self-esteem

We would like to learn a little more about your life experiences. Please rate how much you agree with the following:

1. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.
2. At times, I think I am NO good at all. (reversed)
3. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.
4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.
5. I feel I do NOT have much to be proud of. (reversed)
6. I certainly feel USELESS at times. (reversed)
7. I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane/status with other people.
8. I WISH I could have more respect for myself. (reversed)

9. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a FAILURE. (reversed)
10. I take a positive attitude towards myself.

A.2.2 | Entity customer appreciation

Overall, how do your customers usually treat you?

1. My customers express their gratitude to me.
2. My customers are thankful to me.
3. My customers show me their appreciation.

A.2.3 | Self-verification

What did you think about the customer's behavior?

1. This customer saw me the same way I see myself.
2. I felt that this customer understood what kind of person I am.
3. This customer treated me the way I deserve to be treated.

A.2.4 | OCB-C (intentions)

How would you treat your next customers for the rest of the day?

1. Go beyond job requirements to voluntarily assist the next customers.
2. Go beyond expectations in helping the next customers.
3. Go above and beyond the call of duty in serving the next customers.
4. Willingly go out of your way to satisfy the next customers.
5. Provide service above your usual standard to the next customers.

APPENDIX B: PROMPT AND SCRIPT FOR AUDIO VIGNETTES IN STUDIES 2 and 3

B.1 | Prompt

The prompt below was shown to all participants. It was designed in consultation with call center workers to heighten realism and immersion (following best practice for designing vignettes; Aguinis & Bradley, 2014)

Before you listen to the audio recording below, imagine that you are working at XYA Services Ltd as a call center agent for a large telecommunications company. Customers call you about issues with their accounts, billing, and technical support. Sometimes customers leave voice messages instead, so you would have to call them back to help them with their issue.

The calls just come one after another—with only a very short break halfway through your shift. You are under pressure to get through your calls as quickly as you can because the company is tracking your call stats.

Now that the holiday season is here, it feels like the number of calls has doubled. It is exhausting and overwhelming—you can barely keep up. Sometimes little mistakes happen, but you try to keep focused on the task at hand.

Anyway, you have just finished your short break—halfway through your shift—and return to your cubicle. You see the light blinking on your caller. A customer has left you a voice message.

Play the clip below to hear the customer's message.

B.2 | Scripts

Scripts were drafted by the first and fourth authors based on the definition of customer mistreatment and in consultation with call center workers. To make the two manipulation conditions comparable and only differ on customer mistreatment, both conditions involved a dissatisfied customer. However, in the customer mistreatment condition, the tone and verbal content of the voice message were rude and aggressive, whereas in the control condition, the tone and verbal content were calm. Both scripts were designed to be approximately the same length; the customer mistreatment recording was 40 s, while the control condition recording was 54 s. The pre-final scripts were pilot tested for realism among call center workers. The same voice actor was hired to act out both scripts under the direction of the first author.

B.3 | Customer mistreatment condition

Audiorecording can be found online (<https://bit.ly/CMSVexpt>).

Are you there? Look this is not the first time I have had to call your company and I really expect this to work by now. Can you just get my system to work? That's all I ask. You guys just want to go on and on about technical things. I just want this thing to work. I have never worked with such a bunch of idiots. I came into the store, I asked for this and it does not work. If you can't fix it I am going to ... (Pause)

I'm sick to death of dealing with you, you should fix the problem. I don't care how you do it, but I want you to fix it and I want you to fix it now. Can I just, like, get a refund? Actually, put your manager on the line goddammit (hang up).

B.4 | Neutral (control) condition

Audiorecording can be found online (<https://bit.ly/CMSVcontrol>).

Are you there? Hi, I called earlier and I was really hoping to have this work now. My details are [bleep] and I live at [bleep]. My account number is [bleep].

So yeah I really just want to get my system to work soon. I went into the store and asked for the new accessory that you guys have been advertising so much but since I took it home and opened the packaging, it doesn't work. Last time I called, one of your colleagues asked me lots of questions and I got put on hold but I think the line dropped out and you know ... I was busy, I couldn't call back.

Anyway ... umm actually now I see your company's policy, I can see that I am entitled to a full refund for any reason if I ask within 30 days of purchase. So, since I purchased this 10 days ago, could you call me back so we can arrange the refund? OK thank you.

APPENDIX C: SERVICE RECOVERY TASK FOR ASSESSING BEHAVIORAL OCB-C IN STUDY 3**C.1 | Prompt**

All participants were shown the prompt below after undergoing the vignette manipulation and answering the self-report survey questions in Study 3. Below the prompt, a large text box was provided in which participants could enter their email response.

After you deal with the customer voice message, you turn to your email inbox. You see an email

From: Karen Jones
Subject: PHONE SERVICE PROBLEM
Message:

Dear XYA Customer Service,

I am a long term customer who has three phone accounts with XYA for different members of my family.

I recently signed up a new phone service for my son and I am very unhappy with you signal coverage in the areas where he travels to.

I would like to cancel and get a refund on the money that I have paid for my son's account.

Karen Jones

(Karen then lists her account number and details)

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XYA's internal policy for handling these types of refund requests is to tell customers to call 1-888-424-6688. That number will connect dissatisfied customers to XYA's Customer Retention team. However, you do actually have the discretion to occasionally approve these types of refunds yourself, but to do so you would need to stay an extra 15 minutes--after a long and busy shift--to put in the paperwork. If you really wanted to go the extra mile for this customer, you could then also contact the Billing team to ensure that your refund approval has gone through correctly to ensure your refund approval didn't get stuck in the system. Being honest and realistic, how will you respond to the customer? Please type your email response in the text box below. Or ... you could just ignore the email if you like, it's not ideal but you get hundreds of emails; some emails just slip through the cracks