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Master's Thesis of Business Administration

The Effect of Workplace Incivility on Consumer Complaint Behavior

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Abstract

The Effect of Workplace Incivility on Consumer Complaint Behavior

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A healthy work environment increases productivity, encourages a positive mindset, and drives business success. The working condition easily influences the employees. Thus, creating and maintaining a positive atmosphere is essential. However, workplace incivility is a common issue across many companies and is rising. Studies have found that behaving disrespectfully and displaying harmful manners to one another at the workplace strongly affects employees' work performance and mental health, reporting lower efficiency. Incivility in the workplace also affects customers since witnessing such undesirable events generates a negative impression. Therefore, this research aims to present the effect of witnessing workplace incivility on consumer complaint behavior by examining the dual mediating effect of anger and sympathy. A scenario-based experiment was conducted to explore the impact. Study 1 demonstrates that customers who witness disrespectful behaviors

between employees are likelier to show consumer complaint behavior than customers in the no-witnessing condition. Also, the result reveals that seeing uncivil behavior between employees at the workplace causes consumers to feel anger toward the uncivil employee while sympathy toward the victim employee. However, the study displays that only sympathy leads to higher consumer complaint behavior, while anger does not evoke negative intentions among consumers. These results suggest the importance of understanding that consumers could generate negative responses even from a third party's perspective witnessing employee-employee incivility.

Keyword : Workplace Incivility, Anger, Sympathy, Consumer Complaint Behavior

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Cortina et al. (2001) defined incivility as a lack of consideration for another person. Such behaviors include being insensitive, disrespectful, or directing rude behavior. Incivility in the workplace can have severe consequences for both individuals and organizations. For individuals, it can lead to increased stress, reduced job satisfaction, and decreased productivity. It can also hurt mental and physical health, evoking burnout, depression, and even physical illness. For organizations, incivility can create a toxic work environment that prevents retaining top talent or increases turnover intentions. Moreover, incivility can lead to decreased productivity and efficiency, as employees on the receiving end of rude behavior may be less likely to participate in constructive partnership and problem-solving. Plus, it can damage the organization's reputation and make it challenging to attract high-potential employees or new customers.

Therefore, workplace incivility is more than just a problem within the organization. Employee-employee incivility is widespread in organizations (Cortina et al., 2001; Pearson and Porath, 2005), which results in a higher possibility of consumers witnessing such incidents. Displaying disrespectful behaviors in front of customers and letting them observe the scene can adversely affect consumers' perception of the firm. Thus, this study examines how customers witnessing workplace incivility affects consumer complaint behavior.

A prior study on this subject primarily focused on the effects on consumer anger and negative inferences about the companies (Porath et al., 2010). Also, a recent study by Jin et al. (2020) revealed that after witnessing incivility at work, customers feel sympathy toward the unfairly treated employee and show positive feedback, such as leaving greater tips to the server. Hence, the current study extends from past studies by exploring the mediating role of sympathy toward the victimized employee on consumer complaint behavior and anger toward the uncivil employee.

Chapter 2. Theoretical Background

Workplace Incivility

Workplace incivility refers to the low intensity or relatively moderate behavior with an uncertain purpose that violates workplace norms (Pearson et al., 2005). Interruptions, rude comments, condescending tones, and inconsiderate behaviors are all examples of workplace incivility (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Cortina & Magley, 2009). Treating colleague in such a way is unacceptable, unfair, and ill-mannered. Nevertheless, workplace incivility is a pervasive problem in organizations and is frequently spotted by consumers. A pilot study by Porath et al. (2010) showed the prevalence of workplace incivility. The study asked 58 undergraduates whether and where they had witnessed employee–employee incivility as customers. The result showed that approximately 40% reported seeing at least one act of employee incivility per month. Most consumers (73.2%) recalled incivility occurrences involving reprimands of one employee by another, frequently for job-related misbehavior (75%). Also, those discourteous encounters were observed in a wide range of industries. This result demonstrates that employee–employee incivility is expected in the workplace, and customers are easily exposed to witnessing it.

Moreover, a study by Pearson and Porath (2009) reported that 99% of the employees who participated in the study answered that they had

witnessed workplace incivility. This result shows that workplace incivility is more than just a problem within the organization. Observing such events can generate adverse inferences about the organization or lead to dissatisfaction, including consumer complaint behavior.

Consumer Complaint Behavior (CCB)

Several factors can influence consumer complaint behavior. For example, the severity of the problem can play a role. Consumers are more likely to act if the issue is severe, such as if a product causes injury or illness. However, despite the reasons, it all leads to dissatisfaction. In short, consumer complaint behavior refers to the actions consumers take when they are dissatisfied with a product or service. Examples include expressing dissatisfaction with the company, posting negative reviews online, or taking legal action. Founding from previous studies, CCB is considered to be caused by feelings or emotions related to perceived dissatisfaction (Day, 1984; Landon, 1980). Therefore, dissatisfaction plays a crucial part in determining complaint behavior.

In addition, generally, CCB is categorized into two classifications: behavioral and nonbehavioral responses (Singh, 1988). Behavioral responses are any actions that take “expression of dissatisfaction” (Landon, 1980), while nonbehavioral responses include doing nothing about the incident after a service failure. For instance, if customers experience a loss of motivation and believe that complaining will not

lead to a resolution or will result in retaliation, they may be less likely to voice their complaints in a behavioral way. On the other hand, consumers may also be influenced by the availability of alternative options. If other similar products or services are available, consumers may be more willing to switch to a different provider, which is an example of a behavioral response. Considering that most of the studies on CCB are primarily focused on behavioral responses such as Word-Of-Mouth, switching, and complaining (Zeelengerg & Pieters, 2004), this research also concentrates on behavioral responses of CCB.

Sympathy

Sympathy is a feeling of pity or sorrow for someone else's misfortune. When witnessing workplace incivility, sympathy is a natural response to seeing someone else treated unfairly or unkindly. This feeling can motivate people to help the mistreated individual and to stand up against the person who is being uncivil. When people witness workplace incivility, the instinct may be to feel sorry for the person being maltreated. According to previous studies, sympathy, an instinctive feeling, can mediate the third party's perspective on incivility even when they are not directly related to the event (Blader et al., 2013; Dunford et al., 2015; Mitchell et al., 2015; Wenzel and Okimoto, 2016). People may also feel a sense of outrage towards the person who is being uncivil and a desire to do something to intervene or stop the behavior. This is where sympathy motivates people to take

action.

As stated by Mercer (1972), sympathy is compassionate toward the suffering of others and evokes the urge to ease their distress. Sympathy is an essential emotion since it contributes to making social bonds between individuals (Clark, 2007). Especially regardless of the cause of mistreatment, witnessing uncivil behavior directed at an employee can promote sympathy toward the unfairly treated employee (Ambrose et al., 2015; Mattila et al., 2014; Pick et al., 2016; Priesemuth, 2013; Umphress et al., 2013). From a third perspective, seeing an employee treated rudely or disrespectfully by a supervisor or manager can generate sympathy toward the victim employee. This is because witnessing such behavior can make people empathize with the victim and desire to support them. This feeling can influence consumer complaint behavior since seeing such an incident can be regarded as a failed service encounter. For example, suppose a customer sees two employees showing rude behaviors to each other. In that case, he/she may be more likely to speak out about the behavior and complain to the company or leave negative reviews about their experience. Thus, encountering unpleasant situations can negatively impact the company's reputation since consumers increasingly value companies with a positive workplace culture.

Anger

According to Porath et al. (2010), anger is induced in goal

incongruent, unfair, and blameworthy situations or events. Feeling anger toward someone uncivil in the workplace is a normal response. When an individual witnesses someone being impolite, it can trigger anger because it goes against the expectations of how people should behave in a professional setting. Anger is often a way of expressing frustration or dissatisfaction. When people are unhappy with how they are being treated, they may feel angry to express their dissatisfaction. This will result in the same outcome even when they are mere observers of incivility events.

In the context of consumer behavior, anger can lead to complaints if a customer is dissatisfied with a product or service. For example, suppose a person buys a faulty television and cannot get a refund or exchange it for a working one. In that case, they may become angry and seek to express their dissatisfaction through a complaint. Complaining can be seen as a way for consumers to assert their rights and hold companies accountable for their actions. Research has shown that angry consumers are more likely to express their dissatisfaction through complaints than those who are not angry. In conclusion, anger is a typical emotional response to dissatisfaction and can affect consumer complaint behavior. It can motivate consumers to assert their rights and hold companies accountable for their actions.

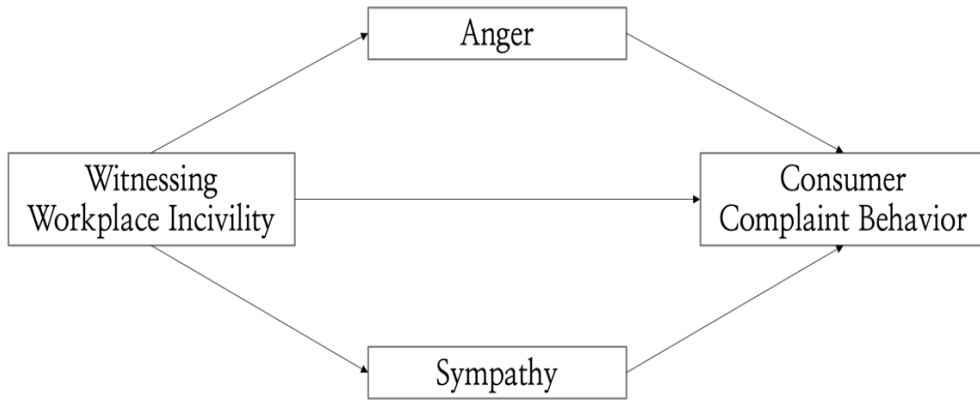
Chapter 3. Conceptual Framework & Hypotheses

H1: Witnessing workplace incivility affects consumer complaint behavior such that witnessing workplace incivility increases consumer complaint behavior.

H2: The effects of witnessing workplace incivility on consumer complaint behavior is mediated by anger such that witnessing workplace incivility (vs. control condition) increases customer' s anger toward the uncivil employee, leading to increase in consumer complaint behavior.

H3: The effects of witnessing workplace incivility on consumer complaint behavior is mediated by sympathy such that witnessing workplace incivility (vs. control condition) increases customer' s sympathy toward the victim employee, leading to increase in consumer complaint behavior

[Figure 1] Conceptual Framework



Chapter 4. Experiments

STUDY 1: THE EFFECT OF WITNESSING WORKPLACE INCIVILITY ON CCB AND THE MEDIATING ROLE OF ANGER AND SYMPATHY

Purpose

Study 1 was designed to examine the main effect that witnessing workplace incivility increases consumer complaint behavior compared to the control condition. It also tests the dual mediation effect of anger and sympathy on the relationship between witnessing workplace incivility and increased consumer complaint behavior.

Method

A total of 105 participants were recruited using Prolific, an online survey, in exchange for a small monetary compensation ($M_{age} = 32$, $SD = 9.97$, 48% female). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions of witnessing workplace incivility (witnessing vs. control). All participants were asked to read a scenario related to their condition for manipulation. The questionnaire began with reading a hypothetical scenario related to their belonged condition.

The control condition stated,

Imagine that you are shopping for a new cell phone at a local electronic store. You are browsing around and find the newly launched model and want to ask questions about the product. When trying to get attention of a store staff, you notice the employee is on his/her phone. The store manager comes out from the corner to answer your questions. Then you notice that the manager reacts to the employee by saying, "Please be more considerate of the customers who are waiting. You can check your phone on your break."

The witnessing workplace incivility condition stated,

Imagine that you are shopping for a new cell phone at a local electronic store. You are browsing around and find the newly launched model and want to ask questions about the product. When trying to get attention of a store staff, you notice the employee is on his/her phone. The store manager comes out from the corner to answer your questions. Then you notice that the manager reacts to the employee by saying, "Get off the phone you idiot! I told you to put away your phone during work hours."

After reading the scenario, all participants were given a questionnaire that measured their perceptions of anger toward the uncivil employee, sympathy toward the victim employee, and consumer complaint behavior. The dependent variable, consumer complaint behavior, was measured with three items asking,

“How likely is that you would definitely complain to the store on your next visit?” , “How likely is that you would speak to your friends and relatives about your bad experience?” , and “How likely is that you would convince your friends and relatives not to use that store?” (1 = Least Likely, 7 = More Likely, $\alpha = .90$). Participants also assessed anger toward the uncivil employee with two items each on a seven-point Likert scale “I feel anger toward the manager.” and “I feel upsetness toward the manager.” (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree, $\alpha = .98$). For sympathy, participants completed four items to measure sympathy toward the victim employee, each using seven-point Likert scale, asking them to “Indicate the extent to which you feel each of the following emotion toward the employee; sympathetic, compassionate, tender, and softhearted” (1 = Not at all, 7 = Extremely, $\alpha = .96$).

Next, participants assessed two items, each on a seven-point Likert scale, for manipulation of workplace incivility “The employees at the store treat each other fairly.” and “The employees at the store treat each other respectfully.” (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree). Then, the survey ended with asking participants’ standard demographic questions.

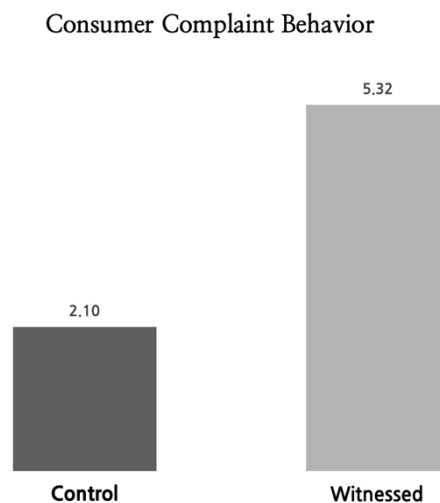
Results

First, a one-way ANOVA was conducted for a manipulation check with witnessing workplace incivility as the independent variable and the manipulation check questions as the dependent variable. ($M_{\text{control}} = 4.61$ vs. $M_{\text{Witnessed}} = 2.43$; $F(1, 103) = 64.418$, $p < .001$). The mean

of the control condition and witnessed condition differed, with a lower mean in the witnessed condition. This means the participants' perceived the manager' s attitude toward the employee was uncivil in the witnessed condition compared to the control condition.

Next, a one-way ANOVA showed the direct effect of witnessing workplace incivility on consumer complaint behavior. As expected, respondents in the witnessing condition revealed higher complaint behavior than those in the control condition ($M_{\text{control}} = 2.10$ vs. $M_{\text{Witnessed}} = 5.32$; $F(1, 103) = 322.815$, $p < .001$), thus supporting hypothesis 1 (refer to Figure 2).

[Figure 2] Direct effect of witnessing workplace incivility on consumer complaint behavior.



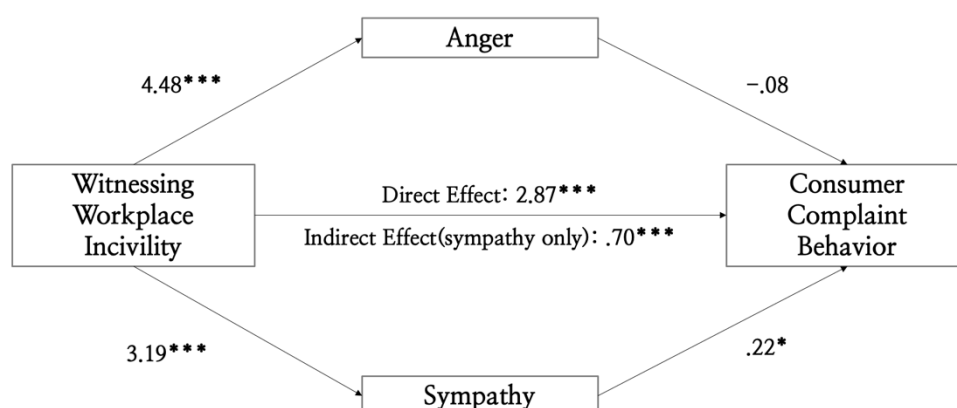
The Hayes PROCESS Model 4 was conducted to test the dual mediation effect of anger and sympathy with witnessing workplace incivility as the independent variable, anger toward the uncivil employee and sympathy toward the victim employee as the mediators, and consumer complaint behavior as the dependent variable. Witnessing workplace incivility is positively related to anger toward the uncivil ($\beta = 4.48, p < .001$) employee and sympathy toward the victim employee ($\beta = 3.19, p < .001$). Sympathy was also positively related to consumer complaint behavior ($\beta = 4.48, p = .03$), confirming that sympathy mediated the relationship between witnessing workplace incivility and customer complaint behavior.

Specifically, witnessing the manager's uncivil behavior toward the employee increased the sympathy toward the subject of workplace incivility, leading to higher customer complaint behavior compared to the control condition. Thus, supporting hypothesis 3. However, anger was negatively related to consumer complaint behavior ($\beta = -.08, p = .60, CI = [.3597, .2074]$), showing that anger toward the uncivil employee did not mediate the relationship between witnessing workplace incivility and customer complaint behavior. Hence, hypothesis 2 was not supported. See Table 1 and Figure 3 for the indirect effects of anger and sympathy, and the main effect and dual mediation results.

[Table 1] Indirect effects of Anger and Sympathy

IV	Mediator	DV	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Witnessing Incivility	Anger	Complaint Behavior	-.3407	.6061	-1.5652	.8484
Witnessing Incivility	Sympathy	Complaint Behavior	.6951	.2983	.1503	1.3276

[Figure 3] Main effect and dual mediation effect results



* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Discussion

Study 1 demonstrates that when consumers witness employee–employee incivility at the workplace, they become angry toward the abusive employee and feel sympathy toward the unfairly treated employee. Although anger did not generate higher consumer complaint

behavior than when consumers did not witness such an incident, sympathy evoked higher complaint behavior among consumers.

Chapter 5. General Discussion

Current research identifies how consumers, especially from a third-party perspective, are affected by witnessing workplace incivility and examines its effects. First, the results of study 1 supported hypothesis 1, which reported that witnessing incivility at work displayed higher CCB compared to the control condition. In contrast to the control condition, respondents in the witnessed condition perceived the supervisor's attitude toward the employee as unfair and disrespectful. Thus, they reported higher complaining behaviors. In other words, employees acting impolitely and discourteously to each other in front of customers brings harmful results to the firm.

Furthermore, the study found the mediating effect of sympathy on CCB. Incivility induced a higher CCB when customers felt sympathy toward the victim employee, supporting hypothesis 3. On the contrary, anger was not statistically significant in mediating the effect of witnessing workplace incivility on CCB. Thus, the result did not support hypothesis 2. Although witnessing such an uncivil incident evoked anger toward the disrespectful employee, anger did not lead to a higher CCB. Instead, it resulted in lower levels of CCB.

The present study contributes to the literature on workplace incivility, especially its effect on a third party. The results provide an understanding of the relationship between witnessing incivility and

sympathy and how feeling sorry and compassionate toward the victim could make the observer take harmful actions on the firm. Furthermore, this research has managerial implications for developing good organizational management, such as encouraging employee civility. Creating a healthy company culture should be one of the top priorities since it is a driving force for better performance overall. A corporate culture that adapts a healthy work–life could provide guidelines for employees on how to treat each other and help them feel more engaged in the team. Overall, it helps build a good reputation among customers, the general public, and employees.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

One limitation of this study is that only sympathy was statistically significant and reported to mediate the relationship between witnessing workplace incivility and consumer complaint behavior. Anger was not statistically significant and thus did not support hypothesis 2. Therefore, future research should explore the boundary condition on the indirect effect of anger toward uncivil employees to increase the generalizability.

Also, the study used scenarios, and it was conducted online. Online surveys are flexible because it is easy, convenient, and inexpensive. Thus, its population is growing and is widely used to collect data. However, due to its nature, it is difficult to monitor the participants, which can lead to a lack of accountability of respondents. Moreover, considering the magnitude of workplace incivility in real-world situations and unpredictable distractions, future studies could examine the relationship through a field experiment.

For instance, the scenarios in the present research used a hypothetical company name, which could have lowered realistic and hindered participants from focusing on the given situation. However, going out to the field and interviewing a working employee at a real company could bring more accurate results. Different circumstances could also play a role. For example, imagining witnessing workplace incivility at a busy restaurant with many other customers present,

participants could draw different results on the level of anger toward the uncivil employee or sympathy toward the victim employee.

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국문 초록

건강한 근무환경은 직원들의 생산성 향상 및 긍정적인 정신건강 향상에 큰 역할을 한다. 기업의 근무환경이 어떠한지에 따라 직원들에게 긍정적이거나 부정적인 영향을 미칠 수 있기 때문에 안정적인 근무환경을 조성하는 것은 중요하다. 그러나 조직 내 무례함은 많은 회사에서 문제로 떠오르고 있으며 그 수 또한 증가하고 있다. 조직 내 무례함은 업무 성과 저하와 스트레스와 같이 직원들에게 민감한 영향을 주어 업무 효율성이 떨어질 뿐만 아니라 고객이 이러한 상황을 목격하는 경우 기업에 관해 부정적인 인식을 초래할 수 있다. 따라서 본 연구는 분노와 공감의 이중 매개효과를 통해 조직 내 무례함을 목격하는 것이 소비자 불만 행동에 미치는 영향을 확인하고자 한다. 연구 1 은 시나리오 기반 실험을 통해 조직 내 무례함을 목격한 고객이 불만 행동을 보일 가능성이 더 높다는 것을 검증하였다. 또한 직장에서 직원들 간의 무례한 행동을 목격하는 것이 소비자들로 하여금 해당 직원에 대한 분노와 피해 직원에 대한 동정심을 느끼게 한다는 것을 확인하였다. 구체적으로, 조직 내 무례함을 목격한 고객의 경우 피해를 입은 직원에게 동정심을 느껴 불만 행동을 야기하는 것으로 나타났다. 이러한 결과는 소비자가 단순히 직원과 직원 사이 간의 무례함을 목격하는 제 3 자의 관점일 때도 피해를 입은 직원의 상황에 공감을 느껴 제공받은 서비스에 부정적인 반응을 일으킬 수 있다는 사실의 중요성을 시사한다.

주요어: 조직 내 무례함, 분노, 동정심, 고객 불만 행동

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