

Customer Mistreatment, Employee Health, and Job Performance: Cognitive Rumination and Social Sharing as Mediating Mechanisms

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The current study examined employee outcomes associated with customer mistreatment, conceptualizing customer mistreatment as signaling failure regarding employees' pursuit of task and social goals at work. We argue that employees make internal attributions when experiencing customer mistreatment and are likely to engage in rumination because of this perceived goal failure. The goal of this article was to test this conceptualization and examine the outcomes of customer mistreatment-induced rumination as well as emotional labor strategies as potential protective mechanisms against customer mistreatment. Findings from time-lagged data collected from 737 call-center customer representatives indicated that cognitive rumination mediated the relationship between customer mistreatment and supervisor-rated job performance, customer-directed sabotage, employee well-being, and emotional exhaustion. The second mediator, social sharing of negative events, mediated the relationship between customer mistreatment and emotional exhaustion only. As expected, cognitive rumination was positively related to customer sabotage and emotional exhaustion and negatively related to job performance and well-being. Social sharing of negative events was positively related to both well-being and emotional exhaustion. Finally, we found that deep acting, but not surface acting,

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buffered the effects of customer mistreatment on cognitive rumination and social sharing. Limitations, future research directions, and managerial implications are discussed.

Keywords: *customer mistreatment; cognitive rumination; social rumination; social sharing of negative events; well-being; productivity; emotional exhaustion; sabotage*

Like many employees, customer service representatives face numerous work-related stressors. One stressor that is unique to service employees is customer mistreatment. Customer mistreatment is defined as the low-quality treatment that employees receive from customers and comes in many forms ranging from dealing with ambiguous customer demands to customer verbal aggression (Dorman & Zapf, 2004). Although early studies suggested that customer-employee interactions were not related to employee burnout (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998), more recent research shows that aggression from customers is actually more likely to occur than aggression from coworkers (LeBlanc & Kelloway, 2002) and that these interactions have substantial adverse effects on employees (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002). In particular, customer mistreatment has been related to burnout (Dorman & Zapf), emotional distress (Harris & Reynolds, 2003), and absenteeism (Grandey, Dickter, & Sin, 2004), making it a concern for service organizations.

Although a great deal of research has found that customer mistreatment is damaging for employee health and performance, the mechanisms underlying this effect remain largely unexplored (Pearson & Porath, 2004). This is problematic, as identification of mechanisms between customer mistreatment and employee health and performance would allow for more refined theory development. In this study, we address this gap by examining cognitive rumination and social sharing of negative work events as potential mechanisms that mediate the relationship between customer mistreatment and customer service outcomes, including employee well-being, emotional exhaustion, customer-directed sabotage, and job performance.

In the current study, we conceptualize customer service as a goal-fulfilling process using Diefendorff and Gosserand's (2003) control theory perspective of emotional labor, whereby customer service representatives use customer reactions to gauge how well their current performance matches their performance goals and rely on emotional labor to minimize the discrepancy between the two in order to achieve their goals. We further extend Diefendorff and Gosserand's control theory perspective by integrating Martin and Tesser's (1996) goal progress theory, which suggests that high levels of customer mistreatment may be related to increased cognitive rumination and social sharing of negative events because customer mistreatment may signal failure in service goal pursuit. In turn, cognitive rumination and social sharing of negative events may be negatively related to employee well-being and performance. Additionally, the way in which employees manage their emotions during customer mistreatment may result in differences in the extent to which customer mistreatment induces cognitive rumination and social sharing. Specifically, deep and surface acting may moderate the relationships between customer mistreatment and rumination and social sharing. We test these hypotheses using a sample of call-center service representatives, who are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of customer mistreatment (Skarlicki, van Jaarsveld, & Walker, 2008; Wang, Liao, Zhan, & Shi, 2011).

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses Development

A Control Theory Perspective on Customer Service: Customer Mistreatment, Rumination, and Social Sharing

In the current study, we examine customer service interactions following a control theory model of behavioral regulation (Carver & Scheier, 1981, 1994; Diefendorff & Gosserand, 2003; Martin & Tesser, 1989). Diefendorff and Gosserand applied control theory to understanding the emotional labor process, suggesting that employees engage in an ongoing negative feedback loop that involves self-perception of their own emotional displays during customer service interactions. In particular, employees compare their emotional displays to the company display rules (e.g., smiling, being friendly). If a discrepancy is present, employees will alter their subsequent cognitions or behaviors to reduce the discrepancy, engaging in emotional regulation strategies.

A central component of control theory is the idea that people pursue goals ranging from distal self-goals, such as agency and esteem, to more proximal achievement and action plan goals (Carver & Scheier, 1981, 1994; DeShon & Gillespie, 2005; Diefendorff & Gosserand, 2003; Martin & Tesser, 1989, 1996, 2006). At work, these more proximal goals are usually achieved via behaviors such as seeking feedback, allocating resources, and managing impressions. In the customer service context, customer service employees achieve their goals by collaborating with their customers, helping customers solve their problems, meeting customer needs, and managing their emotions (Dormann & Zapf, 2004). When goals are being met and no discrepancy is present, the feedback loop continues with little conscious awareness (Gross, 1998). An exception occurs when goals are not being met, especially when the situation is novel or unexpected, the discrepancy is high, and the display is of particular importance to the individual (Diefendorff & Gosserand). One notable example of this is customer mistreatment, as mistreatment from a customer may be unexpected and result in a high discrepancy between what the employee is feeling and what they should be outwardly showing.

We argue that customer mistreatment represents a key affective event at work that elicits a strong emotional reaction (Diefendorff & Gosserand, 2003; McCance, Nye, Wang, Jones, & Chiu, 2013), which signals to the employees that they are failing to achieve their goals as evidenced by the discrepancy between their felt emotions and the company-desired emotions (Wang, Liu, Liao, Gong, Kammeyer-Mueller, & Shi, 2013). This control theory perspective on customer mistreatment differs from that of other researchers who have viewed customer mistreatment from justice (Skarlicki et al., 2008) and stressor (Dormann & Zapf, 2004) perspectives in that we believe customer service representatives may attribute their experiences of customer mistreatment to their own actions, rather than simply as environmental injustices or stressors. Indeed, Weiner's (1985) attributional theory of achievement motivation and emotion suggests that individuals ascribe internal attributions when the experiences are consistent. Following this theorizing, the more frequent the mistreatment, the more likely employees will attribute customer mistreatment to themselves as the service providers and question their own abilities to achieve service goals.

As such, employees experiencing higher levels of customer mistreatment may be more likely to use coping strategies to deal with negative encounters. Coping can be conceptualized as "cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands

that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984: 141) and can be characterized as adaptive (i.e., effective at improving the outcome) or maladaptive (i.e., ineffective; Lazarus, 1993; Wang, Liu, Zhan, & Shi, 2010). We argue that the nature of customer service representatives’ tasks makes adaptive coping difficult on their jobs. First, customer service representatives often cannot engage in effective problem-solving coping when customer mistreatment happens because the customer usually leaves after the mistreatment. Second, because of the need for desirable emotional expression in the service industry, customer service representatives have few options for reducing the negative feelings that they have as a result of customer mistreatment (Diefendorff & Gosserand, 2003; Wang et al., 2013). For example, unlike in interpersonal relationships, a customer service representative can rarely have a conversation with the customer about the mistreatment. As such, the negative emotional reactions to customer mistreatment may carry on and not sufficiently resolve themselves during the work time.

Further extending Diefendorff and Gosserand’s (2003) control theory perspective of emotional labor, we adopt Martin and Tesser’s (1989) goal progress theory to gauge the maladaptive coping that is likely used by customer service representatives. Goal progress theory suggests that goal failure (e.g., receiving customer mistreatment) is associated with cognitive rumination, which is defined as “a class of conscious thoughts that revolve around a common instrumental theme and that recur in the absence of immediate environmental demands requiring the thoughts” (Martin & Tesser, 1996: 7). Rumination occurs because the failure to achieve the goal heightens the accessibility of goal-related information that can be easily cued (Martin & Tesser, 2006). These ruminative thoughts typically remain until the goal is achieved or is no longer pursued. Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, and Lyubomirsky (2008) suggest that rumination is a maladaptive coping strategy that strengthens individuals’ beliefs about facing an uncontrollable situation, making it difficult to engage in adaptive coping. Empirical support for goal progress theory is strong (Martin & Tesser, 2006; Watkins, 2008), and organizational researchers have recently demonstrated that employees tend to ruminate after customer mistreatment, which subsequently leads to higher levels of negative moods the next morning (Wang et al., 2013).

In addition to cognitive rumination, we expect that social rumination, in the form of social sharing of negative events, may be associated with customer mistreatment. One of the most common ways individuals engage in coping is the use of social support, which is defined as the assistance received or the feeling of attachment from an interpersonal relationship that is perceived as supportive, caring, or loving (Hobfoll & Stokes, 1988). Researchers have pointed out that social support is considered an “enigma” because of the mixed evidence regarding whether social support is an adaptive response to work-related stressors (Beehr, Farmer, Glazer, Gudanowski, & Nair, 2003; Haggard, Robert, & Rose, 2011; Zellars & Perrewé, 2001), prompting calls for research on the manner in which social support occurs (Haggard et al.). In the current study, we take a fine-grained approach to examining social support by focusing on the process of social sharing of negative work events conceptualized as a type of rumination (Haggard et al.) and defined as a person’s tendency to reach out to others in order to discuss negative experiences (McCance et al., 2013). Although both cognitive rumination and social sharing of negative work events are coping processes that share a negative focus, rumination is conceptualized as an individual’s cognitive process, whereas social sharing of negative work events is conceptualized as a social, interpersonal process of discussing problems with others (Rose, 2002). We argue that customer mistreatment may be

associated with social sharing of negative work events, as employees actively try to cope with the discrepancy felt between their current situation and their ideal situation (Carver & Scheier, 1981; Diefendorff & Gosserand, 2003; Martin & Tesser, 1989) by sharing their experience with their social contacts (e.g., significant others, family members, coworkers, and friends). In fact, previous research has suggested that customer service representatives may engage in social sharing of negative events because they anticipate building stronger friendships by excessive self-disclosure (Haggard et al.). In addition, a recent laboratory study by McCance et al. showed that the experience of customer mistreatment was followed by social sharing.

Following goal progress theory, we expect that ruminative thoughts and behaviors may be common among employees who frequently experience customer mistreatment, as these employees may perceive few opportunities to achieve or disengage from their goals when customer mistreatment happens. Therefore, we expect:

Hypothesis 1: Customer mistreatment will be positively related to (a) employee cognitive rumination and (b) social sharing of negative work events.

Cognitive Rumination and Social Sharing and Well-Being, Emotional Exhaustion, Customer-Directed Sabotage, and Job Performance

Although we propose that customer mistreatment is related to cognitive rumination and social sharing of negative events, we do not believe that these are adaptive coping mechanisms. Following the goal progress theory, they promote rehearsing negative events (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2012), and these thoughts interfere with adaptive coping. Specifically, cognitive rumination can be counterproductive to well-being (Folger, Cropanzano, & Goldman, 2005; Harrington & Loffredo, 2010), and there is robust support for the relationship between cognitive rumination and depression and anxiety (Mor & Winquist, 2002). Cognitive rumination maintains one's negative emotions and prolongs the negative impact of daily stressors (Moberly & Watkins, 2008; Suls & Martin, 2005; Wang et al., 2013), which may lead to more experiences of negative states of mind, such as negative affect and decreased self-efficacy (Denson, Spanovic, & Miller, 2009; Martin & Tesser, 1996).

Similar to cognitive rumination, we argue that social sharing of negative events is negatively related to well-being because rumination results in increased negative affect, interference with thought processes, and maintenance of interfering thoughts related to the unattained goal (Martin & Tesser, 1996). Research has shown that social sharing of negative events is associated with higher levels of internalization of social-relational symptoms (Rose, 2002, 2007). Past research on children and college students has supported the link between social sharing of negative events and psychological distress (Calmes & Roberts, 2008; Rose, 2007), but Haggard et al. (2011) found mixed results when examining social sharing in the workplace, noting that although social sharing is associated with a prolonged negative focus, it may also strengthen friendships. Supporting the benefits of social sharing, McCance et al. (2013) found that sharing feelings, facts, and positive experiences about a negative encounter at work was an effective way of reducing anger among employees. On the other hand, Brown, Westbrook, and Challagalla (2005) found that social sharing amplified negative feelings. The current study seeks to add clarity to these mixed findings by examining a specific type of

social sharing that focuses on the discussion of unpleasant events that happened at work with coworkers, significant others, family members, and friends. On the basis of goal progress theory (Martin & Tesser), we argue that social sharing of negative events will be negatively related to well-being since the repeated discussion of problems will prolong negative affect, thoughts related to the unattained goal, and interference with adaptive thought processes. Thus, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2a: Cognitive rumination will be negatively related to well-being.

Hypothesis 2b: Social sharing of negative work events will be negatively related to well-being.

The inability to disengage from an unattained goal may also be associated with emotional exhaustion. According to goal progress theory (Martin & Tesser, 1996), unattained goals will have an impact on affect to the extent that (a) the goal is important to the person, (b) the goal is psychologically close to the attainment of higher-order goals, and (c) the amount of resources expended in an attempt to achieve the unattained goal is large, all factors that are present during customer mistreatment encounters. In addition to directly prolonging the experience of negative affect through the rehearsal of negative events (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991), rumination inhibits adaptive problem-solving and instrumental behaviors (Martin & Tesser), making it harder for individuals to engage in distracting activities that could improve their mood (Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1995). Furthermore, Martin and Tesser argue that prolonged rumination may cause individuals to feel that they are unable to control their thoughts. As such, it is conceivable that customer service representatives may struggle to cope with the emotional demands that arise from rumination, which could lead to emotional exhaustion. Indeed, recent research supports the link between rumination and emotional exhaustion (Donahue, Forest, Vallerand, Lemyre, Crevier-Braud, & Bergeron, 2012; Flaxman, Ménard, Bond, & Kinman, 2012). The same relationship has been found for social sharing of negative events. For example, Zellars and Perrewé (2001) found greater exhaustion and burnout when the content of employees' conversations was negative (e.g., about problems) rather than positive or not job related.

Hypothesis 3a: Cognitive rumination will be positively related to emotional exhaustion.

Hypothesis 3b: Social sharing of negative work events will be positively related to emotional exhaustion.

Goal progress theory suggests that cognitive rumination is associated with the maintenance of feelings of anger (Martin & Tesser, 1989) and thoughts about revenge and aggression after a provocation (Collins & Bell, 1997; McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001; McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, Worthington, Brown, & Hight, 1998). Empirical evidence has supported this aspect of goal progress theory (Martin & Tesser, 1996), showing that simply thinking about a mild affective target causes individuals to develop more extreme reactions (Tesser, Martin, & Mendolia, 1995). More recently, Bushman and colleagues (C. A. Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Bushman, Bonacci, Pedersen, Vasquez, & Miller, 2005) further developed this theory, positing that cognitive rumination about a provocation may be linked to four antecedents of aggression: physiological arousal, awareness of negative affect felt as a result of the trigger event, negative attributions of the transgressor's behavior, and negative behavioral intentions in response to the provocation. On the basis of this theorizing,

Bushman et al. (2005) found that cognitive rumination indeed predicted displaced aggression. Furthermore, we propose that social sharing of negative events operates under similar mechanisms. It is important to note that individuals holding catharsis beliefs, the belief that venting anger will get rid of the feelings of anger, do occasionally experience some positive emotions because of their own beliefs that venting anger will make them feel better (Bushman, Baumeister, & Phillips, 2001). Despite these occasional positive emotions, however, Bushman et al. (2001) found that venting was largely ineffective at reducing aggression, and other empirical work has found that venting amplifies the adverse effects of negative emotions (Brown et al., 2005). In our study, we examined social sharing of negative events with significant others, other family members, friends, and coworkers, suggesting individuals engaging in social sharing in these varied contexts may be prolonging feelings of physiological arousal, awareness of negative affect, negative attributions of the transgressor's behavior, and negative behavioral intentions (Bushman et al., 2005) both at work and after work. Because of this excessive focus (Tesser et al.), we expect:

Hypothesis 4a: Cognitive rumination will be positively related to customer-directed sabotage.

Hypothesis 4b: Social sharing of negative work events will be positively related to customer-directed sabotage.

Finally, a general tenant of goal progress theory (Martin & Tesser, 1996) is that rumination leads to improved performance when it is beneficial to think about information related to the unattained goal but leads to worse performance if thinking about earlier information gets in the way of accomplishing a current goal. We argue that an employee who is ruminating about an interaction that occurred in the past may not be able to fully focus on the present customer service interaction. Cognitive rumination may also place high cognitive demands on an employee (Rafaeli, Erez, Ravid, Derfler-Rozin, Treister, & Scheyer, 2012), which relates to poor problem-solving performance, concentration and memory impairment, and more negative appraisals of situations (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). Given that attentional resources are limited, focusing on nontask activities by ruminating should hurt task performance (Kanfer & Ackerman, 1989). Indeed, Porath and Erez (2007) found support for this, showing that disruption to cognitive processes fully mediated the relationship between rudeness and task performance. We extend this line of theorizing and argue that social sharing of negative events will be negatively related to task performance as well, since social sharing, similar to cognitive rumination, tends to prolong distracting negative thoughts and feelings.

Hypothesis 5a: Cognitive rumination will be negatively related to job performance.

Hypothesis 5b: Social sharing of negative work events will be negatively related to job performance.

Given Hypotheses 1 through 5, we expect that both cognitive rumination and social sharing of negative events may manifest as mechanisms that mediate the relationships between customer mistreatment and well-being, emotional exhaustion, customer-directed sabotage, and job performance. In particular, on the basis of Hypothesis 1, we argue that customer mistreatment is associated with ruminative thoughts and social sharing of negative work events. In turn, as developed in Hypotheses 2 through 5, these ruminative thoughts and social sharing of negative work events are likely to lead to lower levels of well-being and job performance, as well as higher levels of emotional exhaustion and customer-directed sabotage.

Hypothesis 6a: Cognitive rumination will mediate the relationship between customer mistreatment and well-being, emotional exhaustion, customer-directed sabotage, and job performance.

Hypothesis 6b: Social sharing of negative work events will mediate the relationship between customer mistreatment and well-being, emotional exhaustion, customer-directed sabotage, and job performance.

Deep and Surface Acting as Moderators of the Relationships Between Customer Mistreatment, Cognitive Rumination, and Social Sharing of Negative Work Events

Finally, we examine emotional labor strategies as the boundary conditions under which the relationships between customer mistreatment, cognitive rumination, and social sharing of negative events may be magnified or reduced (Colquitt & Zapata-Phelan, 2007). Emotional labor refers to the “effort, planning, and control needed to express organizationally desired emotions during interpersonal transactions” (Morris & Feldman, 1996: 987). Deep acting, a form of emotional labor, involves changing thoughts by perspective taking (e.g., taking the other person’s point of view) or by refocusing attention in a positive way in order to regulate feelings (Gross, 1998). In contrast, surface acting involves changing behaviors by suppressing or faking expressions (Grandey, 2000). Following the control theory perspective of emotional labor (Diefendorff & Gosserand, 2003), we argue that when there is a discrepancy between the employees’ felt emotions (e.g., anger) and the emotions that need to be displayed for customer service (e.g., pleasantness), employees are likely to use emotional labor strategies to reduce the discrepancy in order to achieve their emotional display goals. The use of emotional labor strategies may amplify or counter the negative effects that result from customer mistreatment.

Specifically, employees using surface-acting strategies to help themselves follow display rules tend to be aware of the discrepancy between felt and expressed emotions. As a result, the emotional dissonance remains and employees may direct their attention to the unresolved negative emotion felt as a result of customer mistreatment (Grandey, 2003). At the same time, surface acting, such as suppressing felt emotions while faking unfeeling emotions, requires significant self-regulation effort from the employee (Beal, Trougakos, Weiss, & Green, 2006; Diefendorff, Croyle, & Gosserand, 2005). Therefore, surface acting does not necessarily reduce the discrepancy between feelings and display rules (i.e., emotion-rule dissonance; Grandey, Diefendorff, & Rupp, 2013) and may actually increase such discrepancy, thereby leading to greater rumination.

On the other hand, employees using deep-acting strategies are more likely to experience congruence between their emotional experiences and expressions. This is because deep acting helps to modify the inner affective experience and focuses on promoting sincere positive emotions toward the customer (Diefendorff et al., 2005; Grandey, 2003). As such, the discrepancy in their emotional regulation process due to customer mistreatment may be decreased. With the perceived discrepancy diminishing, salience of customer mistreatment as a signal of goal failure may be weakened. Accordingly, employees who use deep-acting strategies may be less likely to engage in ruminative reactions because customer mistreatment may not be perceived as indicating failure to pursue their service goals.

Furthermore, from the perspective of goal progress theory (Martin & Tesser, 1996), there are two ways to end the rumination that results from failing to achieve a goal: accomplishing

the goal or distracting attention away from the goal. Because deep acting serves to better align the discrepancy between felt emotions and expected emotions, deep acting helps customer service representatives accomplish their goals. Surface acting, on the other hand, does not help with goal achievement and fails to distract employees from their goals (Diefendorff & Gosserand, 2003). Taken together, these arguments suggest:

Hypothesis 7: Surface acting interacts with customer mistreatment such that the positive relationships between customer mistreatment and cognitive rumination and social sharing of negative events will be stronger when surface acting is high (vs. low).

Hypothesis 8: Deep acting interacts with customer mistreatment such that the positive relationships between customer mistreatment and cognitive rumination and social sharing of negative events will be weaker when deep acting is high (vs. low).

Method

Participants and Procedure

We collected data on call-center service representatives who worked in the customer support department of a large cell-phone service provider located in Shenzhen, China, at two time points, 3 months apart. Among all 1,013 customer service representatives, 737 completed the survey at both time points, resulting in a response rate of 72.75%. The majority of participants were female (77.7%), and the average age was 24.7 years. The average position tenure was 2.6 years, and the average organizational tenure was 3.0 years. All measures were administered in Chinese. A translation/back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1970) was followed to translate the English-based measures into Chinese.

Measures

Customer mistreatment was measured at Time 1 using 18 items adapted from Wang et al. (2011). A response scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*all the time*) was used, and participants were asked how often they had experienced the following treatments from their customers in the past week. A sample item is “customers yelled at you.” The coefficient alpha of this scale was .93.

Cognitive rumination was measured at Time 2 using an eight-item measure (McCullough, Bono, & Root, 2007). Participants were asked how often in the past month they had the following experience. A sample item is “I couldn’t stop thinking about the bad experience my client gave me”; responses were provided on a scale from 0 (*never*) to 5 (*all the time*). The coefficient alpha was .88.

Social sharing of negative work events was measured at Time 2 and was adapted from Gable, Reis, Impett, and Asher (2004). Participants were asked how frequently they had talked about unpleasant things that happened at work in the past month with their significant others, other family members, friends, and coworkers, creating a four-item measure. Responses were made on a scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*all the time*). The coefficient alpha was .78.

Emotional labor. Surface acting was measured using a five-item scale and deep acting was measured using a three-item scale (adapted from Brotheridge & Lee, 2003; Grandey, 2003). A response scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*always*) was used, and participants were

asked generally how much they had to engage in certain behaviors to do their jobs effectively. A sample item for surface acting is “put on an act in order to deal with customers in an appropriate way,” and a sample item for deep acting is “make an effort to actually feel the emotions that I need to display toward others.” Both were measured at Time 1, and the alpha coefficients were .83 and .82 for surface and deep acting, respectively.

Well-being was measured at Time 2 using a three-item measure (Berkman, 1971; Wright & Cropanzano, 2000). The survey asked participants to indicate how much they generally agree with feeling “on top of the world,” “particularly excited or interested in something,” and “pleased about having accomplished something.” Responses were made on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The coefficient alpha was .72.

Emotional exhaustion was measured at Time 2 using Wharton’s (1993) six-item measure. Sample items ask participants to indicate how they generally feel and included, “I feel emotionally drained from my work,” “I dread getting up in the morning and having to face another day on the job,” and “I feel burned out from my work.” A response scale from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*) was used. The coefficient alpha was .92.

Customer sabotage was measured at Time 2 using the scale developed by Skarlicki et al. (2008) and was assessed using five items. Participants were asked about the frequency they had engaged in the following work behaviors in the past month. A sample item includes the frequency that participants “hung up on the customers.” Responses were made on a scale from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*frequently*). The coefficient alpha was .86.

Job performance in general was rated by each employee’s immediate supervisor with a five-item scale developed by Janssen and Van Yperen (2004) at Time 2. A sample item from this scale is “this employee fulfills all responsibilities required by his/her job.” A response scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) was used. The coefficient alpha was .92.

Control variables. We controlled for age, gender, and negative affectivity. Negative affectivity was measured as a control variable at Time 1 using the 10-item negative affect scale from Watson, Clark, and Tellegan’s (1988) Positive and Negative Affect Schedule. This scale has been used in Chinese samples before and has shown good reliability and construct validity (e.g., Reise, Widaman, & Pugh, 1993). Two sample items are “irritable” and “distressed.” Responses range from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The Cronbach’s alpha of this scale was .85.

Results

The descriptive statistics for all variables are shown in Table 1. As expected, customer mistreatment was positively correlated with cognitive rumination ($r = .19, p < .05$) and social sharing of negative work events ($r = .22, p < .05$). Cognitive rumination was positively correlated with customer-directed sabotage ($r = .32, p < .05$) and emotional exhaustion ($r = .40, p < .05$) and negatively correlated with job performance ($r = -.20, p < .05$) and well-being ($r = -.21, p < .05$). Social sharing of negative work events was positively correlated with customer-related sabotage ($r = .22, p < .05$) and emotional exhaustion ($r = .31, p < .05$).

Measurement Model Testing

Following J. C. Anderson and Gerbing’s (1988) two-step approach for testing structural equation models, we used individual items for indicators and first tested a measurement

Table 1
Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations for All Study Variables

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Age	—											
2. Gender	-.01	—										
3. Negative Affectivity	-.04	.02	.85									
4. Customer Mistreatment	.07	-.01	.09*	.93								
5. Deep Acting	.06	-.04	-.04	.06	.82							
6. Surface Acting	-.06	.02	.29*	.07*	.19*	.83						
7. Cognitive Rumination	.04	.03	.10*	.19*	.01	.07*	.88					
8. Social Sharing	-.05	-.05	.13*	.22*	.06	.14*	.35*	.78				
9. Well-Being	-.01	.02	-.05	-.02	.14*	.09*	-.21*	.03	.72			
10. Emotional Exhaustion	-.01	.08*	.14*	.28*	.00	.11*	.40*	.31*	-.18*	.92		
11. Customer Sabotage	.06	-.03	.12*	.15*	-.02	.11*	.32*	.22*	-.17*	.11*	.86	
12. Job Performance	.00	.00	-.02	.02	.25*	.05	-.20*	-.01	.39*	-.06	-.24*	.92
<i>M</i>	24.70	0.22	2.29	1.59	4.02	3.27	0.90	2.27	3.50	2.23	1.15	3.99
<i>SD</i>	2.16	0.42	0.66	0.67	0.66	0.83	1.04	0.79	0.93	1.32	0.39	0.94

Note: Gender is coded as 1 for male and 0 for female. When applicable, alpha reliability coefficients are presented on the diagonal.
* $p < .05$.

model (M_0) that included all the latent constructs (i.e., customer mistreatment, deep acting, surface acting, cognitive rumination, social sharing of negative work events, well-being, emotional exhaustion, customer-directed sabotage behaviors, job performance, and negative affectivity) and observed covariates (i.e., age and gender). The covariates were included to ensure that the subsequent structural equation models were nested to the measurement model. Due to the large amount of measurement indicators, the CFA model had convergence issues and we therefore used fewer items for modeling several of the constructs (i.e., customer mistreatment, cognitive rumination, job performance, and customer sabotage). Specifically, we used 10 items for customer mistreatment, 6 items for cognitive rumination, 3 items for job performance, and 4 items for customer sabotage. The correlations between the full and shortened measures are customer mistreatment = .97, cognitive rumination = .99, job performance = .93, and customer sabotage = .87, showing support for the validity of the short measures. In addition, in the modeling, 7 pairs of error variance were correlated due to the language overlap in the wording of the items. The resulting 10-factor measurement model provided a good fit to the data, $\chi^2(1414) = 2,510.37$, $p < .01$, standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = .04, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .04, and comparative fit index (CFI) = .94. In addition, all the scale items loaded significantly onto their corresponding latent constructs (standardized factor loadings ranged from .45 to .91, with most loadings falling between .70 and .91). We also tested an alternative model, where the items for cognitive rumination and social sharing of negative work events were specified to load on one factor rather than two. This 9-factor model had substantially worse fit, $\Delta\chi^2(11) = 563.49$, $p < .01$, than the 10-factor measurement model, indicating that cognitive rumination and social sharing of negative work events were two distinctive constructs.

Structural Model Testing

A full mediation model (M_1) and a partial mediation model (M_2) were tested on the basis of the measurement model (M_0). In both M_1 and M_2 , the structural paths were specified following

Table 2
Effects of Control Variables and Direct Effects of Customer Mistreatment on Mediators and Outcome Variables in the Partial Mediation Model (M_2)

Control Variables	Mediators		Outcome Variables			
	Cognitive Rumination	Social Sharing	Well-Being	Emotional Exhaustion	Sabotage	Performance
Age	0.02	-0.02	-0.01	-0.01	0.01	0.01
Gender	0.08	-0.11	0.04	0.30*	0.00	0.07
Negative Affectivity	0.21*	0.07	-0.05	0.20†	0.09**	-0.06
Customer Mistreatment			0.04	0.45**	0.03	0.11

Note: Unstandardized structural path coefficients are reported.

† $p < .10$.

* $p < .05$.

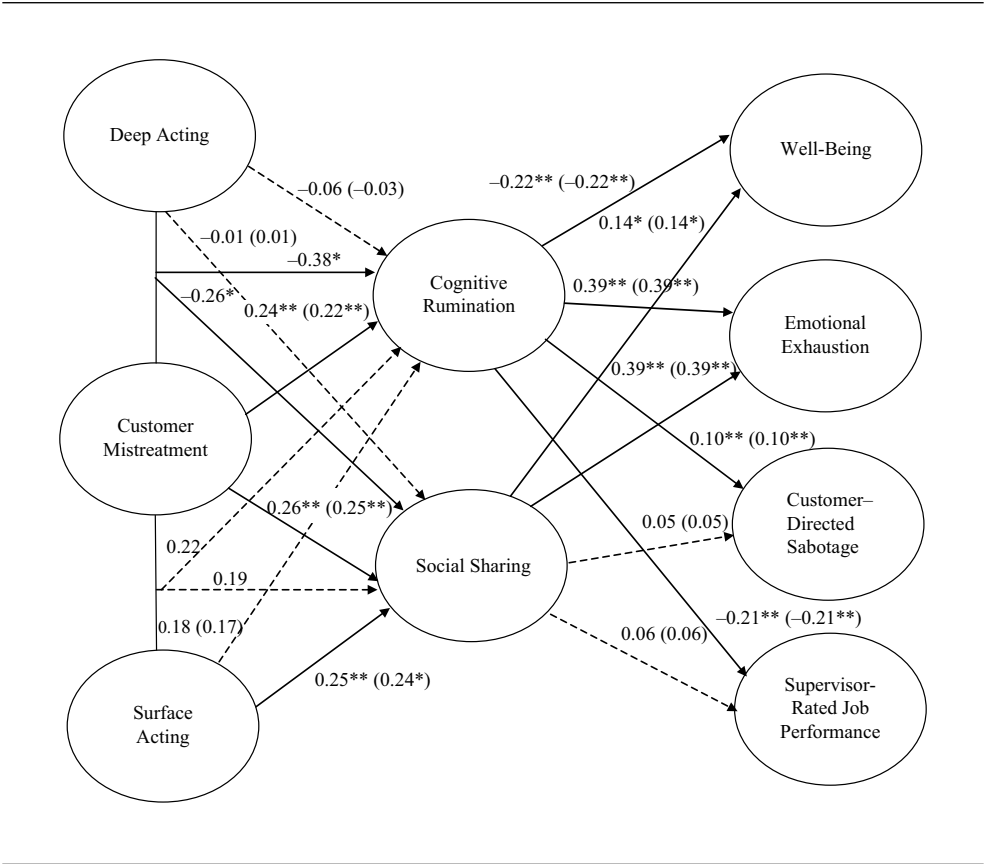
** $p < .01$.

Hypotheses 1 through 5 and the effects of gender, age, negative affect, deep acting, and surface acting were controlled. The direct effects of customer mistreatment were estimated on the outcome variables in M_2 but not in M_1 . Both the full mediation model and partial mediation model yielded good fit to the current data— M_1 : $\chi^2(1425) = 2,586.70$, $p < .01$, SRMR = .05, RMSEA = .04, CFI = .93; M_2 : $\chi^2(1421) = 2,559.76$, $p < .01$, SRMR = .05, RMSEA = .04, CFI = .94. Comparing the fit of these two models, we found the model fit of M_2 was significantly better than the model fit of M_1 , $\chi^2(4) = 26.94$, $p < .01$. Therefore, we retained the partial mediation model for testing our current hypotheses. However, the only significant direct path in M_2 was from customer mistreatment to emotional exhaustion ($\gamma = .45$, $p < .01$). The effects of control variables and the direct effects of customer mistreatment are presented in Table 2.

An inspection of M_2 shows that all proposed paths were statistically significant and in the hypothesized direction with few exceptions (see parenthetical coefficients in Figure 1). Customer mistreatment positively predicted cognitive rumination ($R^2 = 5.2\%$) and social sharing ($R^2 = 7.2\%$), supporting Hypothesis 1. Cognitive rumination was negatively related to well-being, supporting Hypothesis 2a. Interestingly, social sharing was positively related to well-being, the opposite of Hypothesis 2b. Both cognitive rumination and social sharing were negatively related to emotional exhaustion, providing full support for Hypotheses 3a and 3b. Only cognitive rumination, not social sharing, was related to customer-directed sabotage, providing support for Hypothesis 4a but not 4b. Finally, Hypothesis 5a was supported but not Hypothesis 5b, with only cognitive rumination, not social sharing, being negatively related to job performance. The R^2 values were .08 for well-being, .26 for emotional exhaustion, .17 for customer-directed sabotage, and .05 for job performance.

To test the mediation hypotheses, we used the Sobel test and a bootstrapping approach, including 95% bootstrap confidence intervals using 1,000 bootstrap samples in Mplus 7.1 (MacKinnon, Lockwood, & Williams, 2004; Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Table 3 shows the results. Rumination mediated the relationship between customer mistreatment and well-being, emotional exhaustion, customer-directed sabotage, and job performance, fully supporting Hypothesis 6a. To address Hypothesis 6b, we examined social sharing as a mediator and found that it mediated the positive relationship between customer mistreatment and emotional exhaustion but not well-being, customer-directed sabotage, or job performance, thus providing weak partial support.

Figure 1
Unstandardized Structural Path Coefficients for the Partial Mediation Model With the Interaction Effects



Note: Coefficients in parentheses are from the partial mediation model (M_2) where the interaction terms were not included. Dashed arrows indicate nonsignificant effects. For the purpose of brevity, direct effects of customer mistreatment on the outcome variables, as well as the effects of control variables, are not shown here but can be found in Table 2.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

Finally, we estimated a moderation model to test Hypotheses 7 and 8, which included the latent interaction effects between customer mistreatment and deep and surface acting on cognitive rumination and social sharing of negative work events (see Figure 1 for estimates of coefficients). We followed guidelines by Klein and Moosbrugger (2000) for testing latent interaction effects via maximum likelihood estimation, using numerical integration. This procedure factors in the distributional characteristics of nonnormally distributed interactions between latent variables, produces unbiased parameter estimates, and is more efficient than other methods (Schermelleh-Engel, Klein, & Moosbrugger, 1998), such as weighted least squares based on the augmented moment matrix (Jöreskog & Yang, 1996). This model (-2

Table 3
Estimates and Bootstrap Confidence Intervals for Indirect Effects of Customer
Mistreatment Via Rumination and Social Sharing

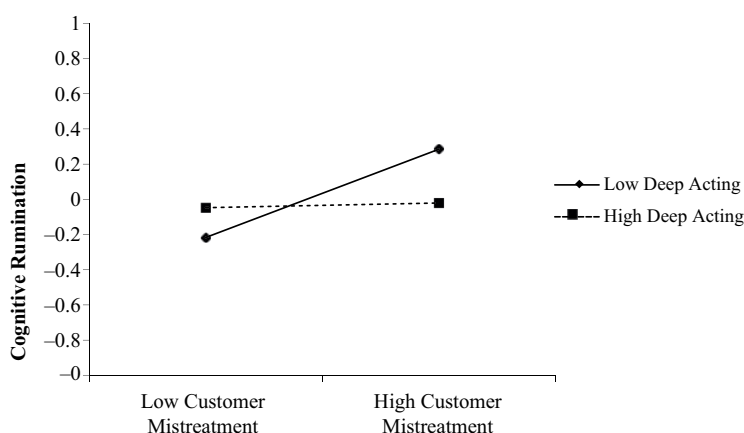
Mediators	Outcomes	Estimates	95% CI (PB)	95% CI (BCB)
Cognitive Rumination	Well-Being	-0.05*	[-0.10, -0.01]	[-0.10, -0.02]
	Emotional Exhaustion	0.09*	[0.03, 0.16]	[0.03, 0.17]
	Customer-Directed Sabotage	0.02*	[0.01, 0.04]	[0.01, 0.05]
	Job Performance	-0.05*	[-0.10, -0.01]	[-0.10, -0.01]
Social Sharing	Well-Being	0.03†	[0.00, 0.07]	[0.00, 0.08]
	Emotional Exhaustion	0.10*	[0.04, 0.17]	[0.04, 0.18]
	Customer-Directed Sabotage	0.01	[0.00, 0.03]	[0.00, 0.04]
	Job Performance	0.01	[-0.02, 0.05]	[-0.02, 0.05]

Note: Unstandardized estimates are reported. CI = confidence interval; PB = percentile bootstrap; BCB = bias-corrected bootstrap. Significance results for Sobel tests are reported.

† $p < .10$.

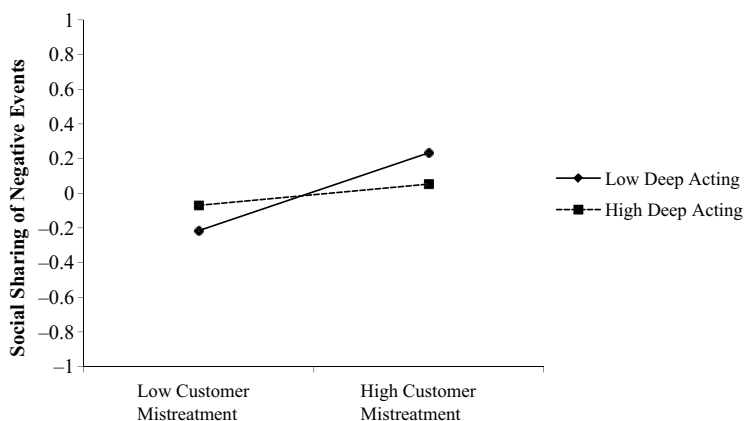
* $p < .05$.

Figure 2
Plotted Interaction of Customer Mistreatment and Deep Acting on
Cognitive Rumination



log likelihood = 79,414.98) fit the data significantly better than the partial mediation model (M_2) without the interaction terms, $\Delta -2$ log likelihood (4) = 18.68, $p < .01$. The interaction between customer mistreatment and surface acting did not show a significant relationship with cognitive rumination ($\gamma = .22$, $p = .35$) or social sharing of negative work events ($\gamma = .19$, $p = .24$), failing to support Hypothesis 7. The interaction between customer mistreatment and deep acting did show a significant relationship with rumination ($\gamma = -.38$, $p < .05$) and social sharing ($\gamma = -.26$, $p < .05$), supporting Hypothesis 8. These relationships are plotted in Figures 2 and 3. Specifically, deep acting interacted with customer mistreatment such that employees

Figure 3
Plotted Interaction of Customer Mistreatment and Deep Acting on
Social Sharing of Negative Events



who reported more deep acting had fairly similar cognitive rumination and social sharing across low and high levels of customer mistreatment. Employees who reported less deep acting, however, reported more cognitive rumination and social sharing when experiencing more customer mistreatment. The inclusion of the interaction terms accounted for 1.64% R^2 increment for cognitive rumination and 1.73% R^2 increment for social sharing.¹

Discussion

In the current study, we examined rumination and social sharing of negative events as potential mediators of the relationship between customer mistreatment and well-being, emotional exhaustion, customer-directed sabotage, and job performance. We also examined the moderating role of deep and surface acting between customer mistreatment and rumination and social sharing. Three sets of major findings emerged from this study. First, rumination mediated the relationship between customer mistreatment and job performance, customer-directed sabotage, well-being, and emotional exhaustion, whereas social sharing mediated the relationship between customer mistreatment and emotional exhaustion only. Second, rumination was maladaptive in terms of influencing all employee outcomes, whereas social sharing was positively related to emotional exhaustion but also positively related to well-being. Third, deep acting moderated the relationship between customer mistreatment and rumination and social sharing, such that employees who engaged in deep acting appeared to experience less rumination and social sharing as a result of experiencing customer mistreatment.

Previous researchers have conceptualized customer mistreatment from the perspectives of interactional justice (Rupp, McCance, & Grandey, 2007) and job demands (Dormann & Zapf, 2004; Grandey et al., 2004; Wang et al., 2011). Our results lend support to the growing

body of research that suggests multiple mechanisms may be at play and that one important theoretical angle is viewing customer mistreatment from a goal-failure perspective (Wang et al., 2013). We further develop the Wang et al. (2013) conceptualization of customer mistreatment as goal failure by integrating the control theory model of behavioral regulation (Carver & Scheier, 1981, 1994; Diefendorff & Gosserand, 2003) with the goal process theory (Martin & Tesser, 1996). Results from the current study support the idea that customer mistreatment signals goal failure to customer service representatives by demonstrating that customer mistreatment triggers ruminative processes, which are generally induced by goal failure and goal blockage as specified by goal process theory (Martin & Tesser).

We also expand on this goal-failure perspective by examining two forms of rumination (i.e., cognitive rumination and social sharing of negative events) as explanatory mechanisms in the customer mistreatment–outcome relationships. Consistent with previous findings, our results showed that cognitive rumination was harmful for employees. Although individuals often report that ruminating helps them to gain insight into their problems, understand why difficult situations have happened, and make sense of a negative memory, the actual effect of rumination is often negative (Mor & Winquist, 2002). Past research suggests that chronic rumination may lead to health problems (Denson et al., 2009), cognitive impairment (Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1995) that impedes job performance, and thoughts of aggression (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008) that can be linked to employee sabotage. The current findings provided further empirical support for these theoretical linkages, showing that rumination was harmful not only for the employee, as demonstrated by its positive relationship with emotional exhaustion and negative relationship with employee well-being, but also for the organization, as demonstrated by its positive relationship to customer-directed sabotage and negative relationship to job performance.

Compared to ruminative thinking, the role of social sharing of negative work events is less clear. Consistent with previous research (Haggard et al., 2011; McCance et al., 2013), the current findings showed that employees who experienced customer mistreatment discussed their negative experiences with others more frequently. However, such social sharing was not related to customer-directed sabotage or job performance, supporting a small number of studies that have also noted that coworker support may not necessarily relate to employee performance outcomes. For example, Liaw, Chi, and Chuang (2010) found that leadership support, but not coworker support, was related to employee performance. They suggest that employees who receive support from their supervisors tend to reciprocate this support via the social exchange mechanism in the form of increased performance, whereas employees who receive support from coworkers are more likely to reciprocate support and help to the individual coworkers in the social-relational domain but not to the organization.

Furthermore, social sharing of negative work events was positively related to both well-being and emotional exhaustion, showing that employees who shared their problems with their coworkers, close friends, and family reported higher levels of well-being but also higher levels of emotional exhaustion. This pattern of findings is counterintuitive, as well-being and emotional exhaustion tend to be negatively correlated ($r = -.18, p < .05$, in the current study). However, this finding was not completely unexpected, as mixed findings for social sharing of negative events have been reported in the literature (Brown et al., 2005; Calmes & Roberts, 2008; Haggard et al., 2011; McCance et al., 2013; Rose, 2007). One possible explanation is that once employees feel as though they failed to accomplish a goal during a customer interaction, talking to coworkers, friends, and loved ones may serve to help the employees feel

closer to others and make sense of the situation to improve the employees' confidence (Haggard et al.), having a positive impact on employees' overall well-being. Nevertheless, social sharing may also drain employees of their valuable emotional resources, because sharing negative events with friends, family, and coworkers may repeatedly trigger one's negative emotion and thus deplete employees' emotional reservoir, resulting in higher levels of emotional exhaustion. Bushman et al. (2001) reported a similar pattern of results, showing that people who vented their anger to others to regulate their moods were ineffective in reducing their feelings of aggression but did experience small boosts in positive affect. In sum, social sharing may be a double-edged sword, improving psychological well-being while draining emotional resources.

Finally, the current study extends our understanding about emotional labor. The vast majority of research on emotional labor has found that surface acting is harmful for both employees and the organization (Grandey, 2003), whereas deep acting tends to have more favorable employee and organization outcomes (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Grandey, 2000). We add support to this line of research, demonstrating that employees' deep acting buffered the detrimental effects of customer mistreatment in leading to ruminative processes. The control theory perspective of emotional labor suggests that this is because deep acting may effectively reduce the discrepancy between felt emotions and display rules, thus weakening the salience of customer mistreatment as a signal of goal failure and preventing such experiences from leading to ruminative processes (Beal et al., 2006; Diefendorff et al., 2005). Given the "service with a smile" approach of most customer service jobs, employees are challenged with balancing their own reactions to difficult customers with the organization's desired reactions. Our finding suggests that employees who engage in deep acting can protect themselves against the harmful process of rumination and thereby reduce emotional exhaustion and customer-directed sabotage and increase well-being and job performance, adding important information regarding how and why deep acting is beneficial for employees and organizations. Overall, our finding that deep acting is a more effective strategy for protecting employees from cognitive rumination and social sharing of negative events aligns with Gross's (1998) work, who noted that deep acting is a more antecedent-focused form of self-regulation, whereas surface acting is more response focused. Thus, from the control theory and goal progress theory perspectives, deep acting is the more effective strategy because it enables employees to authentically reduce the discrepancy between felt emotions and required expressed emotions as well as meet organizational display rules. On the other hand, employees who are surface acting are still aware of this discrepancy while meeting company display rules. Thus our unexpected null finding may have been due to this combined effect of employees partially achieving their goals (i.e., meeting company display rules), which cancelled out the potential negative effects of surface acting.

Implications for Practice

The findings from the current study show that it may be useful for organizations to provide training sessions for customer service employees on how to recognize when they are engaging in social or cognitive rumination and how to develop deep-acting skills. By training customer service employees to recognize why customers may be being verbally aggressive or unable to clearly communicate what they need, employees may feel less negative emotions and may perceive these interactions in a less personal manner. One type of training that has received

support in the literature is *mindfulness-based stress reduction* (Quillian-Wolever & Wolevar, 2002). Mindfulness-based stress reduction teaches individuals to pay attention to the present moment in a nonjudgmental way (MacKenzie, Poulin, & Seidman-Carlson, 2006) and is related to reduced rumination (Jain et al., 2007). By training employees to become more aware of their thoughts, employees can improve their ability to catch negative thoughts and break the cycle of ruminative thinking (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). Indeed, Hülshager, Alberts, Feinholdt, and Lang (2013) recently identified mindfulness as a predictor of emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction, mediated by emotion regulation. Another promising training technique is teaching employees to use distracting thoughts to elevate their mood temporarily, before returning to the problematic situation (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991). Engaging in one task long enough to become absorbed (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), such as taking a short break, going for a walk, and switching work tasks, may help to break the cycle of rumination (Nolen-Hoeksema et al.) before returning to work. We encourage managers to allow customer service employees some amount of flexibility so that they are able to take such breaks when needed.

Future Research and Limitations

Future research should examine whether rumination and social sharing mediate the relationship between other types of stressors and work outcomes. In particular, future research should examine whether rumination and social sharing play important roles in understanding the negative outcomes associated with stress rooted in other interpersonal relationships at work, such as supervisor-employee or peer-peer relationships. Another interesting avenue for future research is to examine rumination and social sharing and other health behaviors. For example, Heatherton and Baumeister (1991) have argued that rumination may be linked to escapist behaviors, such as binge drinking and absenteeism, as reaction to work-related stress.

We also demonstrate that social sharing appears to be a double-edged sword, having both helpful and harmful relationships with employee mental states. Future research should take a fine-grained approach to understanding individual coping strategies based on social relationships. For example, it would be interesting to see how employees' friends, families, and coworkers respond to negative situations and how these different responses affect employees' moods. Additionally, future research should examine the relationship between rumination and social support, as past studies have found that individuals who ruminate extensively tend to lose social support (Nolen-Hoeksema & Davis, 1999). Finally, we encourage researchers to examine employees' perceptions of customer mistreatment, especially on how employees assign self versus others the blame when experiencing customer mistreatment.

Although the current study had a number of strengths, including using multisource data and a large sample size, it was not without limitations. Specifically, although our research design separated the predictors from mediators and outcomes by a time lag, inferring causality is still inappropriate, as our design was not able to control the baselines of the mediators and outcomes. For example, emotional exhaustion may cause social sharing of negative work events rather than vice versa. Therefore, readers should be cautious in making causal inferences when interpreting our findings. Finally, although the relationship between social sharing of negative work events and well-being was positive, the bivariate relationship between these variables was not significant, suggesting a possible suppressor effect. Given that the positive relationship between well-being and forms of venting has been found in past research (Bushman et al., 2001), it is important for future research to continue to examine the relationship between social sharing of negative work events and multiple indicators of employee health.

In addition, the Chinese sample used in the current study may limit the generalizability of the current findings. Although no existing research suggests that the examined relationships should be expected to vary across different countries or cultures, it is well known that Chinese society is characterized by collectivistic values. Therefore, Chinese employees may be more likely to engage in social sharing when facing customer mistreatment. As such, our estimate of the relationship between customer mistreatment and social sharing might be higher than it would be if the sample were from a society characterized by individualistic values. To address this potential concern of generalizability, future studies should try to replicate and extend our findings in samples from different countries.

Note

1. Although we did not hypothesize moderated mediation effects, we did test the moderation effects of emotional labor variables on the indirect effects of customer mistreatment → cognitive rumination/social sharing → outcome variables. Specifically, we found that surface acting did not moderate those indirect effects. In addition, deep acting significantly moderated the negative effects of customer mistreatment on well-being and job performance via cognitive rumination such that these negative indirect effects were significantly stronger when deep acting was low versus high. Deep acting also significantly moderated the positive effects of customer mistreatment on emotional exhaustion and customer-directed sabotage via cognitive rumination such that these positive indirect effects were significantly stronger when deep acting was low versus high. Deep acting did not moderate the indirect effects of customer mistreatment via social sharing on well-being, customer-directed sabotage, and job performance. However, deep acting significantly moderated the positive effect of customer mistreatment on emotional exhaustion via cognitive rumination such that this positive effect was significantly stronger when deep acting was low versus high. All these findings suggest that deep acting can protect employees from the harmful processes of rumination and possibly social sharing. Interested readers may contact the corresponding author for detailed results.

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