

# The Effect of Customer Verbal Aggression on Burnout in Frontline Employees in Hotels and Travel Agencies: The Moderating Role of Perceived Supervisor Support

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This study aimed to assess the effect of customer verbal aggression (CVA) on job burnout (JB) in frontline employee in both hotels and travel agencies, trying to reveal if there is a difference between both sectors in this context. The study additionally tested the moderation role of perceived supervisor support (PSS) in the relation between customer verbal aggression and burnout in hotels and travel agencies. Two versions of the questionnaire were distributed online. The first among hotels employees and the second was addressed to travel agencies employees; 613 were retrieved and analyzed using the version of Spss 23.0. The results showed a significant difference among the level of customer verbal aggression, job burnout, and perceived supervisor support in hotels and travel agencies. Although there was a significant relation between customer verbal aggression and job burnout among frontline employees in both settings, this relationship was moderated by PSS in hotels but not in travel agencies. Eventually, the study concludes with recommendations and practical managerial implications in this regard and it can be considered as a first step for helping practitioners to efficiently manage such a phenomenon.

*Keywords:* customer verbal aggression (CVA), job burnout (JB), perceived supervisor support (PSS), travel agencies, hotels, frontline employees

## Introduction

Frontline employees in tourism and hospitality industry have frequent intense face-to-face or voice-to-voice interactions with customers as a salient characteristic of the service process (Choi, Kim, Lee, & Lee, 2014; Karatape, 2011); they are more likely to experience more incivility from customers than those who work in the back of house (Fu, 2016). Meanwhile, employees are required to tackle the customer deviance in a service minded way (Fu, 2016; Choi, Cheong, & Feinberg, 2012; Kim, Paek, Choi, & Lee, 2012). This imbalance in the exchange forces oblige frontline employees to suppress their true emotion while responding to customers' rude behaviors or requests which leads to the depletion of their emotional resources (Kim et al., 2012; Grandey, Dickter, & Sin, 2004; Jun, Moon, & Hur, 2016; Sunny, Hu, & King, 2017). Consequently, such employees are prone to high levels of stressful and demanding situations (Karatepe, Yorganci, & Haktanir, 2009b). Therefore, frontline employees are in need to job resources such as supervisor support to be able to

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cope with problems emerging from customer verbal aggression (CVA) and their own job burnout (JB). In this regard, perceived supervisor support (PSS) could moderate the relation between customer verbal aggression and burnout (Han, Bonn, & Cho, 2016).

With this in mind, the study objectives are to compare the levels of CVA and JB among frontline employees in both hotels and travel agencies in Egypt, the relationship between CVA and JB in hotels and travel agencies, and to find out if the PSS plays a moderating role between CVA and JB in hotels and travel agencies.

By investigating the previously mentioned relationships this study contributes to the hospitality and tourism literature in four ways: First, due to their job nature frontline employees are confronted with several forms of customer aggression; however, the relationship between CVA and JB was not tested empirically in an Egyptian context. Moreover, supervisor support was not investigated as a moderator in. Second, previous studies investigated only the relationship between customer aggression and burnout in hotels and tourism organization without emphasizing the differences between both of them in this context. Third, it is aimed to fill the void in empirical research on the relation between customer verbal aggression and burnout in the tourism and hotels literature in Egypt. Fourth, by highlighting CVA consequences and its relevant coping facets the current study can be considered as a first step for practitioners to efficiently manage such a phenomenon.

## **Literature Review**

### **Customer Verbal Aggression**

Customer aggression is an inappropriate customer behavior, distinct from other negative behaviors in the service encounter, such as asking legitimate complaints or transferring to another company (Sunny et al., 2017). Customer verbal aggression is defined as a situation when the customer causes discomfort and hurt to a service supplier through disrespectful, devaluing, impatient, and rude verbal expressions that violates frontline employees' social norms. These behaviors are exhibited when the customer complains without valid reason, argues with the service supplier, and makes excessive demands. It varies in manner, degree, and frequency and could be in the form of swearing, yelling, threatening, or shouting (Li & Zhou, 2013; Dormann & Zapf, 2004; Karatepe, Yorganci, & Haktanir, 2009a; Kim et al., 2012; Dursun & Aytec, 2014; Karatape & Ehsani, 2012).

This verbal aggression is becoming a daily burden on frontline employees in hotels and travel agencies; however, there might be a difference between hotels and travel agencies in terms of customer aggression degree and frequency, which will be tested in the study's first hypothesis:

H1: The level of CVA differs between hotels' and travel agencies' frontline employees.

Customer verbal aggression threatens the self-esteem and physical well-being of frontline employee and aggravates their emotional exhaustion. It was related to high turnover intentions, low recovery performance, low job satisfaction; in fact, it reduced job outcomes, job engagement, creativity and increased revenge motives and depression in frontline employees as it is typically accompanied by a negative emotion, like fear and anger which result in job burnout (Li & Zhou, 2013; Korczenski & Evans, 2013; Kashif, Braganca, Awang, & De Run, 2017; Yeh, 2015; Nwokori, 2016; Karatepe, 2011; Akkawanitcha, Patterson, Buranapin, & Kantabutra, 2015).

### **Burnout**

The concept of job burnout has been used to explain employees' chronic and cumulative job stress in the

workplace (Babakus, Yavas, & Ashill, 2009; Halbesleben, 2006); it appears as a result of employees' frequent and intense interactions with people who are encountered as a part of their job (Sunny et al., 2017). Accordingly, job burnout is considered to be a particular type of work stress (Han et al., 2016) reflected as a state of energy depletion, loss of commitment and motivation, failure, exhaustion, and loss of energy and power (Choi et al., 2012; Charoensukmongkol, Moqbel, & Wirsching, 2016; Sunny et al., 2017; Toprak, Serçek, Karakaş, & Serçek, 2015). In other terms, JB consists of three aspects: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and perceived lack of personal accomplishment (Maslach & Leiter, 2008; Charoensukmongkol et al., 2016; Han et al., 2016).

Definitely, burnout is most prevalent in tourism and hotels because service delivery involves interpersonal interactions between the service recipients and providers, which could lead to high levels of job burnout that cause a number of problems for the organization, including employee turnover, absenteeism, reduced organizational commitment, job satisfaction and productivity, as well as, poor service quality toward customers (Choi et al., 2012; Karatepe et al., 2009a; Choi et al., 2014; Karatepe, 2011; Han et al., 2016; Li & Zhou, 2013; Sun & Chiu, 2011). Indeed, studies have found that chronic experience of burnout tends to increase depression and other health-related problems (Tourigny, Baba, & Wang, 2010; Charoensukmongkol et al., 2016).

H2: The level of JB differs between hotels' and travel agencies' frontline employees.

### **Customer Verbal Aggression and Burnout**

Despite the fact that the literature that investigates the relation between customer aggression and burnout is limited, there are a good number of studies that link customer aggression with emotional exhaustion (the core component of burnout) among frontline employees in several service sectors (Li & Zhou, 2013; Durusun & Ayteç, 2014; Sliter, Pui, Sliter, & Jex, 2011; Ferguson, 2012; Jun et al., 2016; Kim, Ro, Hutchinson, & Kwun, 2014; Echeverri, Salomonson, & Åberg, 2012; Wu, 2015; Fu, 2016). In the case of hotels, restaurants, and travel agencies, many researchers found that the customer verbal aggression has been the main cause of emotional exhaustion (Karatepe et al., 2009b; Choi et al., 2014; Karatepe & Ehsani, 2012; Choi & Lee, 2010; Karatepe, 2011; Kim et al., 2012; Fu, 2016; Han et al., 2016; Sunny et al., 2017). Hence, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3: CVA has a positive impact on JB amongst hotels and travel agencies frontline employees.

H4: The impact of CVA on JB is stronger amongst the frontline employees of hotels than those of travel agencies.

### **Perceived Supervisor Support**

Supervisor support is a key social resource at work (Seiger & Wiese, 2009; Karatepe, 2011) due to its positive role in generating various positive organizational outcomes, such as enhancing organizational commitment, role clarity, increasing job satisfaction and job performance, reducing work-family conflict and regulating turnover intentions (Agarwala, Arizkuren-Eleta, Castillo, Muniz-Ferrer, & Gartzia, 2014; He, Lai, & Lu, 2011; Karatepe, 2014; Newman, Thanacoody, & Hui, 2011; Rathi & Lee, 2017; Kronboonying & Lin, 2015; Cheng, Jiang, Cheng, Riley, & Jen, 2015).

Perceived supervisor support refers to the employees' views regarding the degree to which supervisors provide work-related assistance to help them perform their service-specific tasks, duties, value their contributions, and care about their well-being (Kurtessis et al., 2017; Rathi & Lee, 2017; Liaw, Chi, & Chuang, 2010). Thereupon, the research proposes the fifth hypothesis as follows:

H5: The level of PSS differs between hotels' and travel agencies' frontline employees.

When compared to emotional strategies such as avoidance and denial, social support appears to be a more effective coping mechanism against customer aggression (Yagil, 2008). On this account, supervisor support mitigates the impacts of emotional exhaustion on life satisfaction and turnover intentions among employees; moreover, it alleviates the negative effects of customer aggression on emotional exhaustion and burnout (Mayo, Sanchez, Pastor, & Rodriguez, 2012; Sloan, 2012; Blanch & Aluja, 2012; Karatepe et al., 2009a; Karatape, 2011; Han et al., 2016). A contradictory result was discussed by Karatape (2011) who found in his study on Arab frontline hotels employees in Dubai that supervisor support does not moderate the impacts of customer aggression on emotional exhaustion, life satisfaction, or turnover intentions. Wherefore, the following hypotheses will be tested:

H6: The PPS moderates the relationship between CVA and JB.

H7: There is no difference between hotel and travel agencies frontline employees regarding PSS moderating role between CVA and JB.

## Methodology

### Measures & Sample

The current study is using a quantitative approach to test the hypotheses. The questionnaire used in the current study was composed of four sections: The first section contained questions for demographic information. The second section included five items assessing CVA encountered in hotel and travel agencies' employees; the third section consisted of 10 items assessing respondents' JB. The fourth section examined PSS in 10 items. For the second, third, and fourth sections, a 5-point Likert scale was used, from 1 (extremely disagree) to 5 (extremely agree). The study questionnaire was prepared in English in two versions: one for hotel frontline employees and the other for travel agencies'. Both versions were then tested with a pilot sample of 20 frontline employees. No problems were detected as a result of the pilot study regarding the clearness of the questions.

The current study depended on previous research in order to assess the study variables, as follows: Items assessing CVA and burnout were derived from Sunny et al. (2017), Karatepe et al. (2009a), Dormann and Zapf (2004), Jun et al. (2016), Karatepe (2011), and Li and Zhou (2013). Items assessing PSS were taken from Krongboonying and Lin (2015), Karatepe et al. (2009b), Pasamehmetoglu, Guchait, Tracey, Cunningham, and Lei (2017), and Karatepe (2011).

The reliability of the questionnaire was tested and Cronbach Alpha was between 0.800-0.924 that means that the questionnaire is reliable. Table 1 illustrates the reliability of each construct.

Table 1  
*Values of Cronbach Alpha for Questionnaire Constructs*

	Hotels	Travel agencies	All
Customer verbal aggression	0.800	0.902	0.854
Job burnout	0.918	0.927	0.924
Supervisor support	0.899	0.845	0.882
All questions	0.857	0.889	0.884

The total population for this study was frontline employees in Egyptian hotels and travel agencies. A Web-based survey was used to collect data. Questionnaires were sent to online groups of Egyptian tourism & hospitality employees; only responses of frontline staff were considered. From 673 responses, only 613 usable responses were retrieved, distributed between hotel (303) and travel agencies (310) were received; with a percentage of 49.4% and 50.6%, respectively. The age of the majority (75.9%) ranged between 23 and 38, while males constituted 70.6% of the sample.

## Results

The current study extends the literature on CVA by: (1) examining whether there is a difference between hotels and travel agencies frontline employees regarding the level of CVA they encounter, (2) testing the relation between CVA and JB among frontline employees in hotels and travel agencies, (3) examining the role of PSS as a moderator between CVA and JB, and (4) interpreting the variation between frontline employees in hotels and in travel agencies regarding PSS, if there is any.

Table 2

*Difference Between Hotels' and Travel Agencies' Frontline Employees Amongst Study Variables (Using One-Way ANOVA)*

	Customer verbal aggression (CVA)			Job burnout (JB)			Perceived supervisor support (PSS)		
	Mean	F	Sig.	Mean	F	Sig.	Mean	F	Sig.
Hotels	2.9220			2.951			3.379		
Travel agencies	2.671	12.254	0.000*	2.541	35.361	0.000*	3.012	42.898	0.000*
All	2.795			2.747			3.194		

Note. \*All correlations are significant at  $p < 0.05$ .

Table 2 illustrates the comparisons between frontline employees in hotels and in travel agencies using the one-way ANOVA test. Apparently, frontline employees in hotels encountered more CVA than in travel agencies, with mean values 2.922 and 2.671, respectively. Thus, there is a significant difference between hotels' and travel agencies' frontline employees regarding the level of CVA; ( $F = 12.254, p = 0.000$ ). Consequentially, H1 "The level of CVA differs between hotels' and travel agencies' frontline employees" can be supported.

The most noticeable variation between both groups' responses was depicted in the statement "customers get angry at us over minor things", meaning that hotel employees face more "angry irrational customer" situations than in travel agencies. In hotels frontline employees are traditionally blamed for back of the house mistakes. This doesn't come in agreement with Dursun and Aytac (2014) and Sunny et al. (2017) who suggest that frontline employees in railway, airlines, restaurants, and hotels were evenly exposed to customer verbal abuse. Grandey et al. (2004) explains how customers are frequently impatient, angry, and argumentative. Han et al. (2016) add that restaurants and hotels frontline employees have frequent contact with customers compared with other industries which make them more prone to guest incivility.

Table 2 also shows that hotel frontline employees recorded higher JB mean values than travel agencies employees, with means 2.956 and 2.541, respectively. Thereupon, there is a significant difference in JB between hotels and travel agencies ( $F = 35.361, p = 0.000$ ). Accordingly, H2 "The level of JB differs between hotels' and travel agencies' frontline employees" can be supported. In this context, the statements "I feel emotionally drained from work" and "I feel I am working too hard on my job" showed the most remarkable variation between hotels and travel agencies employees. On the other hand, Pang, Kucukusta, and Chan's (2015)

study found that travel agencies' work environment entails dealing with many systems, paperwork requirements and duties that staff would not encounter in other jobs, with which entry-level frontline staff would be required to become familiar. Accordingly, working in travel agencies involves high job pressure and a higher level of turnover. This finding doesn't agree with Toprak et al. (2015), as well, since he proposes that long working hours increase employees' tendency to display deep acting and burnout; therefore, travel agents working environment implies less potential burnout. In the same context, Dursun and Aytac (2014) and Sunny et al.'s (2017) research found a significant positive relationship between verbal abuse and emotional burnout. Fu (2016) suggests that the more aggressive the customer behavior was, the more employees felt stressed during these service encounters. It is assumed that the current economic dilemma in Egypt and its deep reflection on the hospitality industry, is also contributing to this sector's employees work stress and emotional exhaustion (Nassar, 2012).

Table 2 also shows that the mean values of PSS construct was higher in hotels (3.379) than in travel agencies (3.012); accordingly, there is a significant difference in PSS between hotels and travel agencies ( $F = 42.898, p = 0.000$ ). H5 "The level of PSS differs between hotels' and travel agencies' frontline employees" can be supported. The most noticeable difference between the two groups was depicted in the statement "My supervisor cares that I get the credit when I accomplish something". In this context, Karatepe (2011) found that hospitality employees with sufficient supervisory support can cope effectively with incompatible demands arising from their managers, coworkers, or customers, and thus experience less emotional exhaustion (Karatepe, 2011).

The effect of customer verbal aggression on job burnout and its levels in hotels and travel agencies was tested using regression analysis; the results, as shown in Table 3 and Figure 1, illustrate how CVA encountered in hotels and travel agencies frontline employees is increasing their JB ( $R \text{ square} = 0.606, \beta = 0.778, p = 0.000$ ).

Table 3

*Regression Analysis Measuring Correlation Between CVA and JB*

	R square	F	B	T	Sig.
Hotels	0.628	507.314	0.792	22.524	0.000*
Travel agencies	0.590	442.606	0.768	21.038	0.000*
All	0.606	937.891	0.778	30.625	0.000*

Note. \*All correlations are significant at  $p < 0.05$ .

As a result, H3 "CVA has a positive impact on JB amongst hotels and travel agencies frontline employees" can be supported. This contradicts with the study of Fu (2016) who implies that service employees performing their jobs with a low expectation of their customers unconsciously end up without too much disappointment. They are being more invulnerable so that customer-related work stress did not leave a footprint on their engagement and satisfaction at work. In addition, employees may be trained in how to do a problem focused coping; yet, there may be uncertainty in how to handle their internal emotions with customers because stressful and intense emotions can only be "bottled up" for a limited time (Grandey et al., 2004). Besides, emotional exhaustion and burnout symptoms occur as a result of the lack of tolerance that the frontline employees have for their coworkers and customers (Jun et al., 2016). In their research, Kim et al. (2014) and Charoensukmongkol et al. (2016) also related customer incivility to the employee's self-evaluation dimension, depersonalization, and burnout.

Moreover, general supervisory support including expressions of concern by the supervisor (i.e., emotional support) or tangible assistance by providing help or assistance in doing one’s job (i.e., instrumental support) was intended to enhance the well being of subordinates (Li & Zhou, 2013).

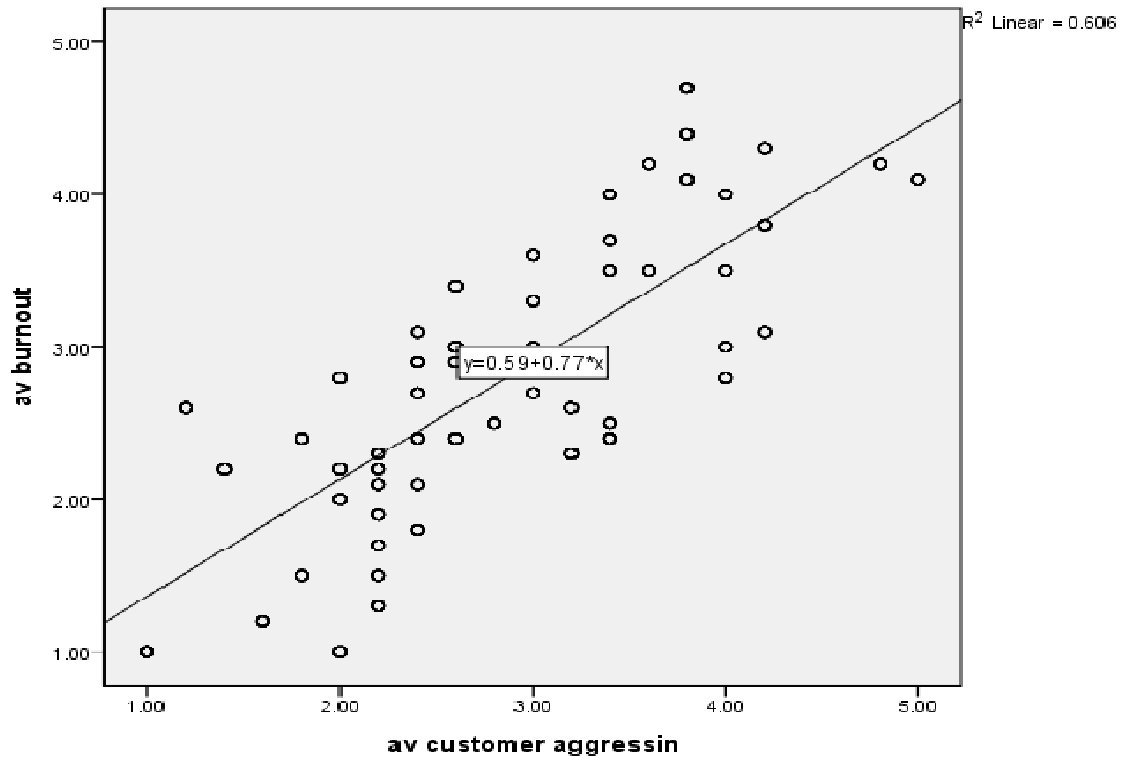


Figure 1.Scatter Plot for Correlation between Job Burnout and Customer Verbal Aggression

Interestingly, the impact of CVA on JB is stronger in hotels (R square = 0.628) than in travel agencies (R square = 0.590). Consequently, H4 “The impact of CVA on JB is stronger amongst the frontline employees of hotels than those of travel agencies” can be supported. This finding comes in agreement with Han et al. (2016), as they argue that customer incivility applied to the hospitality industry may result in psychological resource depletion which could be considered a leading factor to employee burnout. Their study extends that emotional burnout is a fundamental reason for frontline employees to terminate their jobs.

The moderating role of perceived supervisor support in the relation between CVA and JB was tested by using the Hayes model 1 for moderation (Hayes, 2017), the results of interaction effect are shown in Table 4.

Table 4

*Measuring the Moderation Effect of PSS Between CVA and JB by Andrew F. Hayes Model 1*

	LLCI	ULCI	Sig.
Int_1 travel agencies	-0.1655	0.0819	0.506
Int_1 hotels	0.0243	0.2080	0.013*
Int_1 all	0.0224	0.1372	0.006*

Notes. \*All correlations are significant at  $p < 0.05$ .

As for the moderating role of PSS, Table 4 shows that supervisor support as perceived by frontline employees in hotels and travel agencies plays a moderating role in the relation between CVA and JB. The

Interaction\_1 effect measured a significance of 0.006. Accordingly, H6 “The PSS moderates the relationship between CVA and JB” is supported.

According to Yagil (2008), Karatape (2011), and Fu (2016), supervisor support may buffer the effect of the customer aggression, as frontline employees consider it as a coping technique with the problems emerging from customer aggression and their own burnout.

In this regard, Pasamehmetoglu et al. (2017) argue that not all sources of support are equally relevant, especially for front-line staff in hospitality settings. As such, it is important to determine the unique effects that organizational and co-workers support may have on specific indices of service performance. Fu (2016) found that workplace social support as a moderator enhanced the effect of customer participation and buffered the effect of customer non-verbal complaint on employee engagement. Similarly, Han et al. (2016) found that supervisory support has an interactive effect upon the relationship between customer incivility and burnout, in a way that it significantly weakens the relationship between customer incivility and burnout. On the other hand, Charoensukmongkol et al. (2016) found that co-workers played a more significant moderating role than supervisors. Rafaeli et al. (2012) discussed the negative impact of lacking supervisor support; as employees may get angrier thinking about how, in previous encounters with aggressive customers, they did not receive the appropriate support from management.

However, PSS had no significant moderation effect in the relation between CVA and JB in travel agencies, as the Interaction\_1 effect measured a significance of 0.506. However, in hotels PSS was found to have a significant moderation effect in the relation between CVA and JB, with a significance of 0.013. As a result, H7 “There is no difference between hotel and travel agencies frontline employees regarding PSS moderating role between CVA and JB” cannot be supported.

In hotels supervisors are always on the spot monitoring the food or service delivery so that customer complaints can be brought to them immediately. In fact, customers may feel better when speaking to someone “in charge” and the pressure may be passed on to supervisors.

On the opposite side, travel agents and tour guides may lack workplace social support. This may be due to their isolated work environments (Fu, 2016). In his study on Hong Kong travel agencies, Pang et al. (2015) found that supervisor support did not play a role in changing work climate for frontline employees. It is assumed that individual consideration that supervisors demonstrate toward their subordinates, as well as, the extent to which they provide coaching can help them to better fulfill their job responsibilities (Rafaeli et al., 2012; Han et al., 2016).

All in all, perceptions of organizational support have very broad implications for a wide array of employee attitudes and behavior. Figure 2 presents a summary hypotheses test and the proposed relations among study variables.



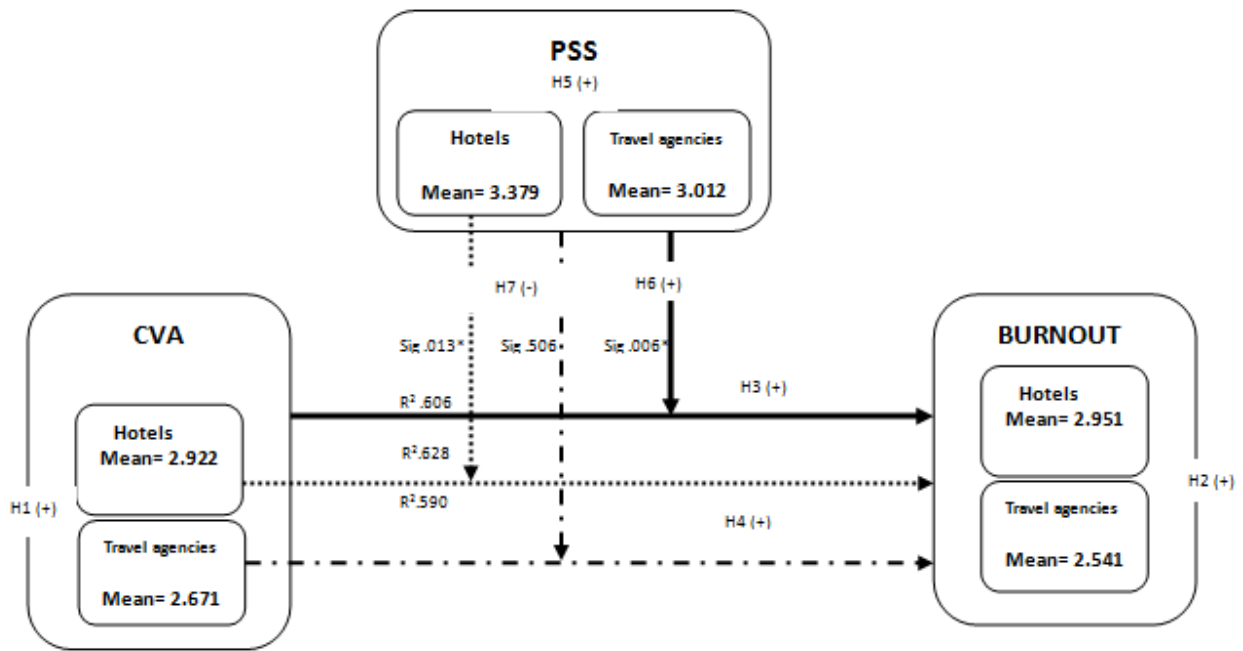


Figure 2. Proposed study model.

### Conclusion and Implications

Although employees in every sector are at risk of being exposed to aggressive behavior, the risk is much greater for employees in the service sector. CVA appears to be one of the inevitable aspects of frontline service jobs, including hotels’ and travel agents. Meanwhile, JB has been long established as a likely outcome for service employees, due to the boundary-spanning nature of the job tasks. It was also implied that PSS would significantly weaken the relationship between CVA and JB.

The current study main objective was to provide insights on CVA and its relation to frontline employees’ JB while examining PSS as a moderator. The study included frontline employees in hotels and travel agencies, in a first attempt to compare between both them in the context of the study variables. The study hypotheses were tested and the findings suggest that CVA is particularly related to the employees’ JB in both fields. As a result, the study can conclude that the relationship between CVA and JB becomes weaker as employees’ perceptions about supervisor support improve. PSS was found to be a significant moderator between CVA and employees’ JB, particularly in hotels but not in travel agencies. The current study provided a better understanding of the factors that underlie CVA consequences and its relevant coping facets and can be considered as a first step for practitioners to efficiently manage such a phenomenon.

Thus, management of hotels and travel agencies should consider that the recruiting and selecting of the appropriate individuals for frontline service jobs have to be based on the notion that there should be a fit between the demands and difficulties of the job and the employee. When the demands of the job are incongruent with employees’ abilities, definitely such employees will not be able to cope with difficulties stemming from customer verbal aggression.

Managers are also supposed to define a policy that is based on knowing customer rights consisting of specific information about cut-off points, minimums and maximums allowed while dealing with verbally aggressive customers, which should be accompanied by written procedures.

Empowerment appears to be an important weapon in managing such customers and sends powerful signals to employees that the management has trust in them. In this manner, empowerment training programs can be arranged according to how to deal with verbally aggressive customers. Supervisors are to take the role of mentors to help employees handle problems arising from emotional exhaustion. If gaps in support are found, formal or informal training programs may be designed and implemented to help both employees and supervisors to develop the necessary skills and abilities, eventually improve the workplace culture. More, employees' training can improve understanding of complaint behavior that may lead to working stress. This would help them avoid misinterpreting customer demands and balance their sensitivity with common sense and resilience so that they will not over-react to everyday interactions.

Finally, management and employees should audit complaints and record the incidents of customer verbal aggression and the corrective actions taken to deal with them and sort them out. Such incidences and actions could also be used as case studies in training programs to have long-term control and prevention plans.

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