

research article

The impact of customer misconduct on emotional exhaustion of fitness trainer: Role stress as mediating variable

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ABSTRACT

The economic advancement in China has significantly boosted the development of the fitness industry, resulting in increased demand for service and quality from fitness training institutions. While expectations for fitness trainers have risen, customer misconduct has become more evident, negatively impacting fitness trainer behaviors. This study aims to explore the factors influencing emotional exhaustion among fitness trainers, including customer misconduct and role stress. Using a quantitative approach, this study selected and surveyed 728 trainers from 364 fitness clubs in China, obtaining 672 valid samples to study the relationships among variables. The findings indicate that customer misconduct has a significant positive impact on both role stress and emotional exhaustion. Additionally, there is a positive correlation between role stress and emotional exhaustion, while role stress mediates the effects of customer misconduct on emotional exhaustion. This study highlights the importance of addressing the emotional health of fitness trainers in fitness clubs. It suggests the need for adequate recruitment and assessment training interventions to empower trainers to manage customer misconduct, release stress, and consequently improve trainers' psychological state. These measures aim to reduce the occurrence of misconduct and raise the overall service level of the industry. It is important to note that the sample of this study is limited to fitness clubs in major cities in China. Therefore, the conclusions may not be generally applicable to rural fitness club contexts.

Keywords: customer misconduct; fitness training; emotional exhaustion; role stress

1. Introduction

Health is a perpetual pursuit for humans and an essential foundation for personal growth and a happy life. The fitness and leisure industry significantly influences the promotion of public health, industrial upgrading, and the improvement of overall quality of life^[1]. Emotional exhaustion among fitness trainers presents a managerial challenge within fitness institutions because, as intermediaries between customers and fitness institutions, fitness trainers are directly influenced by customer behaviors^[2,3]. These interactions act as external stimuli that affect the trainers' emotions and behaviors. Without sufficient organization resources to cope with pressures from customers and misconduct, the depletion of individual resources may lead to various psychological responses, such as depression, distress, and anger^[4]. This, in the long run, can cause

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varying degrees of turnover of fitness trainers, which leads to a great loss to fitness institutions, customers, and the service industry.

Service products are characterized by intangibility, variability, and the inseparability of production and consumption^[5], necessitating interaction between fitness trainers and customers to deliver the service. Because of fierce competition among rivals, fitness institutions, such as clubs, often demand that fitness trainers adhere to the principle that “the customer is always right,” even when customers make unreasonable or cross-board demands and/or display disrespectful, demeaning, or offensive behaviors^[2]. In the field of organizational behavior, customer misconduct refers to low-quality interpersonal treatment from customers toward employees^[3]. The misconduct can elicit negative emotional responses in employees, such as anger, anxiety, fear, and disappointment, leading to direct or indirect losses for the enterprise^[5]. In the fitness industry, this also occurs to fitness trainers who are heavily affected by misconduct. Emotional exhaustion is the state of feeling psychologically and physically drained due to prolonged emotional stress, manifesting in symptoms such as negativity, depression, and a lack of confidence^[6-8]. Some studies have found that customer misconduct exacerbates emotional exhaustion in fitness trainers. However, most research has focused on emotional exhaustion as a mediating variable affecting employee attitudes and behaviors, leaving the mechanism by which customer misconduct influences emotional exhaustion yet inadequately explored^[7].

The formation and development of emotional exhaustion are related to stress caused by excessive workloads^[8,9]. Existing research primarily examines internal organizational stressors, such as role conflict, role ambiguity, and workload, as contributing factors. However, the impact of external stressors, particularly customer misconduct, on emotional exhaustion is less explored, neglecting the role of external organizational stressors. Understanding how customer misconduct contributes to emotional exhaustion can provide a more comprehensive view of the stressors affecting fitness trainers and inform strategies to mitigate these negative outcomes^[8]. According to role theory, fitness trainers straddle organizational boundaries to provide customer services, facing varying role expectations from external customers, internal supervisors, and colleagues. Customer misconduct can be viewed as an external social stressor^[10] that causes physical and mental stress, leading to role stress^[11]. For instance, misconduct, such as sexual harassment of female fitness trainers or sensitive contact during the coaching process, can be, to a large extent, inflicted on fitness trainers. In this regard, prolonged and intensive role stress can significantly harm psychological health, potentially resulting in emotional exhaustion^[9].

Theoretically, the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory posits that a lack of individual resources leads to emotional exhaustion because the COR predicts that employees are struggling to maintain their resources. If resources are at a loss, negative emotions are occurred ^[12]. This study contends that if fitness trainers are at a loss of emotional resources because of customer misconduct, the COR is applicable to explain why emotional exhaustion is subsequently followed. Job-demand Resource Theory (JD-R) has been proposed by Demerouti Bakker^[13]. This theory posits that all characteristics of a job can be categorized into resources and demands. Resources refer to all sources, such as organization support, employee care, and psychological or physical features, which are important to employees when dealing with varying degrees of demands. The present study posits that customer misconduct is the job demand end of the fitness trainer. These are basic theories of the present research, which his study tends to use as a cause-effect framework in developing hypotheses.

The objective of this study is to explore the factors influencing emotional exhaustion among fitness trainers due to customer misconduct. Additionally, this study also intends to investigate the transmitting effects of role stress from customer misconduct. Combined with research objectives, this study tends to

answer questions in the Chinese fitness training context: will customers' misconduct lead to fitness trainers' role stress? Will fitness trainers' role stress cause their emotional exhaustion? Is there any mediating effect of role stress between customers' misconduct and fitness trainers' emotional exhaustion? The study structure comprises five sections: the introduction, research materials and method, results, discussion, and conclusion of participants. By answering these research questions, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence emotional exhaustion in fitness trainers and to offer recommendations for mitigating these effects.

1.1. Customer misconduct and emotional exhaustion

According to the conservation of resources theory, individuals interact with their work environment to acquire and accumulate essential resources, which they then deploy to protect themselves when facing resource loss^[14,15]. If these resources cannot be replenished, a spiraling loss occurs, leading to an inability to regulate one's behavior due to insufficient resources. As a negative service interaction, customer misconduct hinders employees from acquiring resources, necessitating the expenditure of additional resources to manage interpersonal relationships with customers and adjust their emotional responses^[6]. This often involves using emotional labor to comply with service-oriented behaviors^[4]. This increases job demands, causing resource loss and necessitating further resource investment to compensate for these losses. This leads to a repeated cycle of resource depletion^[16], ultimately resulting in insufficient resources to regulate behavior. Research has found that the long-term accumulation of customer misconduct can lead to persistent lethargy and burnout^[17]. The simultaneity of service production and consumption means that frontline employees experience emotional contagion in customer interactions. People automatically mimic and synchronize others' facial expressions, voices, postures, and movements. Positive emotions displayed by service employees (such as smiling and welcoming) elicit positive responses from customers, while customers' negative emotions significantly influence their misconduct, leading to role stress for employees and unnecessary emotional labor^[18]. In this sense, customer misconduct can increase negative emotions in fitness trainers, depleting their psychological resources and leading to emotional exhaustion. Based on COR theory, the study proposes the following hypothesis:

H₁: Customer misconduct positively affects the emotional exhaustion of fitness trainers.

1.2. The mediating variable role stress

The primary role of a fitness trainer is to provide services that meet the needs of customers, a principle that has been emphasized in the Chinese fitness industry and is characterized by a highly competitive market^[2]. Confronted with customer misconduct, such as illegal contact and verbal fights, fitness institution trainers must balance delivering quality services with managing inappropriate customer behavior, necessitating increased emotional labor. The dual demands of coaching and customer care may drive fitness trainers to a point where they cannot fulfill multiple job role expectations, leading to role conflict^[19]. The role conflict introduces uncertainty, as fitness trainers may require more immediate guidance from managers who are often removed from the service context, resulting in role ambiguity^[20]. For frontline employees, such as trainers, customer misconduct also generates environmental stress. For instance, verbal offenses or occasional physical assaults by customers on airplanes significantly impact flight attendants. Handling such incidents often exceeds the control capabilities of frontline employees, causing feelings of insult and subsequent psychological stress^[3]. In the fitness industry, trainers are disciplined to take care of trainees' feelings and demands because clubs risk losing income if members suspend their membership. Therefore, the management of fitness institutions may pressure trainers to tolerate customer misconduct to some extent. However, studies have demonstrated negative outcomes of customer misconduct, such as reduced job

satisfaction, increased stress, service failures, high absenteeism, and turnover intentions^[5]. Confronting customer misconduct can cause severe physiological pressure, including increased heart rate, elevated blood pressure, and long-term effects like insomnia^[21]. Combined with COR theory, based on previous studies, the present work proposes the following hypothesis:

H₂: Customer misconduct positively affects the role stress of fitness trainers.

Existing research widely indicates that individuals under prolonged role stress are prone to excessive physical and mental energy depletion, resulting in symptoms of emotional exhaustion. Employees experiencing role ambiguity and conflict are particularly susceptible to negative emotions and anxiety at work. The cumulative effects of various role stresses have been shown to impact emotional states negatively^[22], which leads to emotional exhaustion^[23]. Based on this, the study proposes the following hypothesis:

H₃: Role stress positively affects the emotional exhaustion of fitness trainers.

Individuals working in stressful interpersonal environments for extended periods are likely to experience emotional exhaustion. In the ‘stressors-strain-outcome’ model, stress is posited to mediate the relationship between stressors and strain (such as emotional exhaustion)^[30]. Given that customer misconduct largely functions as a stressor, it can significantly deplete frontline employees’ psychological resources. For example, customer verbal offenses are substantial sources of stress^[24], with emotional exhaustion linked to role conflict, role overload, and extreme service demands. In certain service scenarios, managing customer complaints and ensuring satisfaction despite unfriendly customer behavior can lead to negative outcomes such as job stress, emotional exhaustion, and turnover intentions^[25]. Combined with hypotheses H₁, H₂, and H₃, this study suggests that fitness trainers encountering customer misconduct face increased job demands, increasing role stress and exacerbating emotional exhaustion, while role stress transmitted the effects of customers’ misconduct to emotional exhaustion. Therefore, the mediating variable of role stress in this study has been proposed H₄:

H₄: Role stress mediates the relationship between customer misconduct and emotional exhaustion.

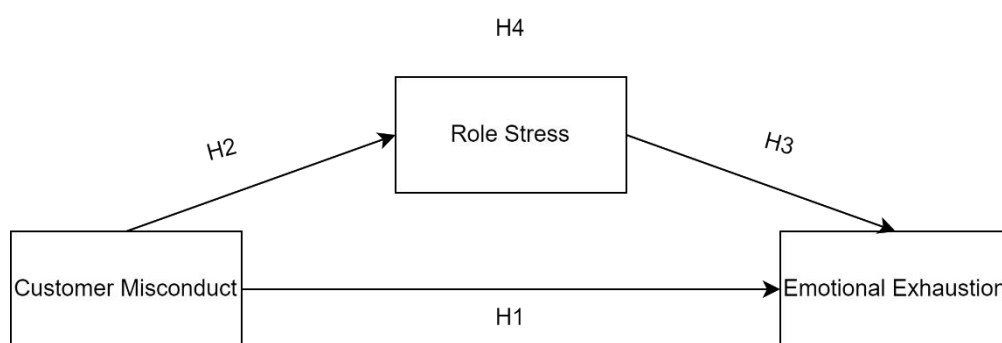


Figure 1. Hypothetical framework of variables.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Research samples

The subjects of this study are fitness trainers from 364 fitness clubs across Mainland China. A total of 728 questionnaires were distributed, with 672 valid responses obtained, resulting in an effective response rate of 92.3%. The sample includes trainers from various cities, encompassing both first-tier cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen, and second-tier cities including Nanjing, Wuxi, Suzhou, Jinan, Chengdu, Chongqing, Kunming, Lanzhou, Xi’an, Harbin, Shenyang, Tianjin, Changsha, Zhengzhou,

Taiyuan, Wuhan, Shijiazhuang, Datong, Anqing, Jining, Yuncheng, and Pingdingshan. This diverse geographic representation ensures a certain degree of representativeness for the study.

2.2. Research method and materials

This study involves three primary variables: customer misconduct, role stress, and emotional exhaustion. Each variable was measured using established scales, which provide high-level internal consistency when evaluating participants' responses. To ensure cultural and semantic accuracy, three PhD students in management translated the original English scales into Chinese. Subsequently, two university English professors back-translated the Chinese scales into English. Discrepancies of translations were discussed and resolved collaboratively among the PhD students and English professors, with reference to existing Chinese translations in the relevant literature. In addition, this study finalized scales with opinions from fitness experts investigated. All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Customer Misconduct was measured with 28 items based on the studies by Zhang et al.^[26] Moreover, Wilson and Holmvall^[27] mention 'Customers getting angry over trivial matters' and 'Customers complaining about slow service during busy times.' Before delivering the questionnaires, the research team consulted with professional experts to investigate the variations of question items in the fitness industry. This process has ensured that the questions have been extensively familiarized with research participants, which facilitates understanding and feedback during the collection process. Role Stress was measured with a 13-item scale developed by Peterson et al.^[28], including items like 'My job role is too burdensome.' Emotional Exhaustion: Measured with the emotional exhaustion subscale from the general burnout scale Schaufeli et al.^[29] developed, with five items like 'I feel physically and emotionally exhausted.' Control variables included gender, age, education level, years of experience, and professional background, and these variables were scored on a scale from 1 to 4 in ascending order to facilitate analyses.

2.3. Data analyses

Statistical analyses, including reliability, validity, exploratory factor analysis, and mediation effect analysis, were conducted using SPSS 23.0. SPSS is a widely used statistical software package in fields such as social sciences, health sciences, and business. It offers a user-friendly interface and a wide range of statistical procedures for data analysis, report generation, and result interpretation.

3. Results

The results of the present study are reported in Section 3. This section has been divided by subheadings. It should provide a concise and precise description of the experimental results, their interpretation, and the experimental conclusions that can be drawn.

3.1. Sample descriptive analysis

Of the 672 samples investigated, 478 males are male, and 194 are females, with a ratio of 5:2. The imbalanced gender ratio implies that the trainer gender distribution in fitness clubs is not even, which is consistent with characteristics of the Chinese fitness industry^[30]. In terms of age, there are 478 people aged 18-30 years old, with a percentage of 71.1 percent, which accounts for the largest proportion. The age distribution implies that the fitness trainers are mainly young. From an education attainment perspective, there are 286 undergraduates, accounting for 42.6%, followed by junior colleges, junior colleges or less, and postgraduates. One hundred ninety-six trainers joined this industry for 3-5 years, accounting for 29.2%, followed by 1-2 years, accounting for 24.4%, and less than one year, accounting for 23.5%. At present, most

trainers (77.1%) are not experienced because of their short-term training experience. This work experience distribution is consistent with the age distribution of investigated samples. In addition, it was found that all samples were from professional backgrounds, such as graduates from normal colleges, sports academies, and professional sports clubs.

3.2. Common method bias

As this study employed self-administered questionnaires for data collection, there is a potential for common method bias^[31]. Harman’s single-factor test was utilized to address this concern. An exploratory factor analysis of all items, conducted using SPSS 23.0, revealed that the first unrotated factor accounted for 32.746% of the variance, which is below the commonly accepted threshold of 40%^[32]. This indicates that common method bias is not a significant issue in this study.

3.3. Reliability and validity test

Reliability and validity tests were conducted using SPSS 23.0 and SPSSAU, with the results presented in **Table 1**. Customer Misconduct: The Cronbach’s alpha for customer misconduct is 0.956, indicating excellent internal consistency. The KMO value is 0.928 ($p < 0.001$), suggesting that the sample is adequate for factor analysis. The AVE (Average Variance Extracted) is 0.643, and the C.R. (Composite Reliability) is 0.943, demonstrating good convergent validity and composite reliability. Role Stress: The Cronbach’s alpha for role stress is 0.951, indicating excellent internal consistency. The KMO value is 0.860 ($p < 0.001$), indicating sample adequacy. The AVE is 0.603, and the C.R. is 0.833, reflecting good convergent validity and composite reliability. Emotional Exhaustion: The Cronbach’s alpha for emotional exhaustion is 0.935, indicating high internal consistency. The KMO value is 0.726 ($p < 0.001$), showing sample adequacy. The AVE is 0.635, and the C.R. is 0.839, confirming good convergent validity and composite reliability. The reliability and validity tests confirm that the scales used for measuring customer misconduct, role stress, and emotional exhaustion in this study are robust and suitable for further analysis. The high Cronbach’s alpha values indicate that the scales are internally consistent, and the satisfactory KMO, AVE, and C.R. values suggest that the scales have achieved good validity and reliability.

Table 1. Reliability and validity tests (N=672).

Research Variables	Cronbach’s α	KMO	AVE	CR
Customer Misconduct	0.956	0.928***	0.643	0.943
Role Stress	0.951	0.860***	0.603	0.833
Emotional Exhaustion	0.935	0.726***	0.635	0.839

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

The measurement items in the questionnaire were adopted from well-established scales that have been extensively used and validated in previous scientific studies, ensuring high content validity. Regarding construct validity, the exploratory factor analysis (EFA) results revealed that the KMO values for all variables were above 0.7, and Bartlett’s test of sphericity was significant ($p < 0.001$). The principal component analysis method was employed, and the extracted common factors for each variable aligned with expectations. Each variable’s initial factor loading matrices were rotated using the Kaiser normalization method with varimax rotation. All items had loadings greater than 0.5 on their corresponding factors and less than 0.4 on other factors, indicating that no items needed to be deleted. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)

revealed that the average variance extracted (AVE) values for each variable ranged from 0.603 to 0.643, exceeding the benchmark of 0.5. The composite reliability (C.R.) values ranged from 0.833 to 0.956, surpassing the standard of 0.7, indicating high convergent validity of the questionnaire. Furthermore, the square root of the AVE for each variable was greater than the correlation coefficients between that variable and others (please see **Table 2**), demonstrating good discriminant validity of the questionnaire. The results confirm that the scales used for measuring customer misconduct, role stress, and emotional exhaustion in this study possess high reliability and validity, making them suitable for further analysis.

Table 2. Correlation analysis (N=672).

Research Variable	Customer Misconduct	Role Stress	Emotional Exhaustion
Customer Misconduct	(0.802)		
Role Stress	0.404***	(0.776)	
Emotional Exhaustion	0.159**	0.557***	(0.797)

Note: *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001; the numbers in parentheses represent the square roots of the AVE values of the studied variables; other numbers represent correlation coefficients.

3.4. Variables descriptive statistical analysis

As shown in **Table 3**, the mean values of the variables range from 2.402 to 3.106, and the standard deviations range from 0.486 to 0.924. Combined with the data in **Table 2**, there is a significant positive correlation between customer misconduct, role stress, and emotional exhaustion. This correlation partially validates the theoretical model of this study and lays the groundwork for the next step of hypothesis testing.

Table 3. Descriptive statistical analysis and correlation analysis (N=672).

	Customer Misconduct	Role Stress	Emotional Exhaustion
Mean	2.402	2.786	2.761
Standard Deviation	0.691	0.486	0.825

3.5. Hypotheses Testing

All research variables were mean-centered (Please see **Table 3**), and a hierarchical regression model was established using SPSS 23.0. Control variables were first entered into the regression equation, followed by the variables related to each research hypothesis. This approach allows for the examination of the incremental explanatory power of the independent variables over and above the control variables, thereby providing a clearer understanding of the relationships between customer misconduct, role stress, and emotional exhaustion.

3.5.1. Main effects testing

Customer misconduct was used as the independent variable, while emotional exhaustion and role stress were used as dependent variables to construct Models 1 and 2, respectively. Role stress was then used as the independent variable, with emotional exhaustion as the dependent variable to construct Model 3. The regression analysis results are presented in Table 4. After controlling for factors such as gender, the coefficients of the independent variables in each model were positive, and the t-values were significant. The

variance inflation factor (VIF) was less than 2 in all models, indicating no serious multicollinearity issues. These results support hypotheses H1, H2, and H3.

3.5.2. Mediation effects testing

Emotional exhaustion was used as the dependent variable, and customer misconduct and role stress were used as independent variables to construct Model 3. The Bootstrap method was employed for 5000 bootstrap samples. The results are shown in **Table 4**. The regression coefficient for the mediator role stress was $\beta = 1.023$ ($p < 0.001$), with the Bootstrap 95% confidence interval not including 0, and the VIF was less than 2, indicating no serious multicollinearity issues. The mediation effect was significant. Compared with Model 1, after introducing role stress as a mediator, the regression coefficient of customer misconduct on emotional exhaustion decreased from 0.528 to 0.177, and the Bootstrap 95% confidence interval included 0. This non-significant regression coefficient suggests that role stress might have a full mediation effect. Hypothesis H4 was supported. The total effect of customer misconduct on emotional exhaustion was 0.528, the direct effect was 0.177, and the mediation effect of role stress was 0.351 ($0.343 * 1.023$), nearly twice the direct effect ($0.351/0.177$).

Table 4. Results of main effects and mediation effects testing (N=672).

Model (Dependent Variable)	Model 1 (Emotional Exhaustion)	Model 2 (Emotional Exhaustion)	Model 3 (Emotional Exhaustion)
Customer Conduct	$\beta=0.528^{***}$ $t=6.856$ [0.355, 0.693]		$\beta=0.177^*$ $t=2.46$ [-.0024, 0.343]
Role Stress		$\beta=1.128^{***}$ $t=13.274$ [0.911, 1.342]	$\beta=1.023^{***}$ $t=10.854$ [0.792, 1.271]
R2	0.234	0.456	0.477
$\Delta R2$	0.135 ^{***}	0.357 ^{***}	0.369 ^{***}
F	$\Delta F=47.005$ 9.415 ^{***}	$\Delta F=176.193$ 25.511 ^{***}	$\Delta F=92.809$ 24.004 ^{***}

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

4. Discussion

Both early marketing literature and more recent organizational behavior literature have pointed out that customer misconduct causes long-term psychological harm to employees. Grandey et al.^[24] were among the first to empirically demonstrate that customer verbal attacks significantly impact call center employees' emotional exhaustion, leading to decreased performance among employees. However, subsequent research mostly adopted this approach, focusing primarily on the effects of customer aggression on employees' psychology, attitudes, and behaviors. Given the widespread existence of customer misconduct, this study included both unreasonable demands and uncivil behaviors in its scope, discovering that these behaviors, like aggressive behaviors, significantly impact the emotional exhaustion of frontline employees. Moreover, through the mediation of role stress, unreasonable demands have an even greater impact on emotional exhaustion. Few studies have explicitly pointed out the relationship between these two types of customer misconduct and employee emotional exhaustion. The findings of the present study thus further expand on

existing research conclusions. Wang and Li^[33] found that customer unfairness is a cause of frontline employees' emotional exhaustion. Customers' unreasonable demands may be perceived by employees as unfair interactions, thus constituting misconduct. In this context, the relationship between unreasonable demands and emotional exhaustion verified in this study is similar to the conclusions of Wang and Li^[33]. Since general employees can also perceive uncivil behaviors from customers as unfair interactions, this study broadens the research on customer incivility to some extent. Thus, this study has enhanced our understanding of customers' impacts on trainers and provided empirical support for related theoretical perspectives.

The empirical analysis indicates that customer misconduct further influences employee emotional exhaustion through the mediating role of role stress. This study assumes that customer misconduct threatens emotional loss, so the results satisfy our expectations on COR theory, which can predict the relationship between customer misconduct and fitness trainers' emotional exhaustion. This mediating effect accounts for approximately half of the total effect of customer misconduct in the study sample, highlighting the significant role of stress in the emotional exhaustion of fitness trainers caused by customer misconduct. The theoretical hypotheses regarding the mediating effects of role stress in this study are mainly based on two theoretical sources. The first is the viewpoint of customer misconduct as a social stressor^[10]. Although this perspective is widely accepted, more research needs to be done on the stress perspective, especially starting from the impact mechanism of customer misconduct. The results help the theoretical explanation of customer misconduct from the social stress perspective. The second is the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R). Although this theory is widely applied in work stress research, most existing studies focus on internal organizational or job characteristic antecedents, overlooking how customer interactions, as external organizational factors, can alter job demands and resources, creating stress for employees^[7]. This study's findings resonate with research on customer involvement causing employee role stress^[34], further validating the theoretical viewpoint that customers can be a source of stress for frontline employees.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that customer misconduct and role stress impact the emotional exhaustion of fitness trainers in fitness institutions. Based on empirical tests, this study contends that large samples from fitness trainers supported our hypotheses. Regarding research questions, this study assumes that because core resource loss and job demand (role stress) from customers' misconduct are two important factors that cause trainers' role stress and emotional exhaustion, the positive relationships are confirmed between independent variables and dependent variables. In other words, this study could assume that customers' misconduct in the fitness club leads to the loss of trainers' resources, which consumes more emotional resources, which leads to increasing work demand and decreasing work sources. Consequently, emotional exhaustion has inescapably happened to fitness trainers if there is more emotional labor needed. This is in line with COR theory, which posits that chronic resource loss will lead to stress and other negative emotional responses from employees, whereas in the long term, this causes strain^[20].

This study aims to explore the impact of customer misconduct on the emotional exhaustion of fitness trainers, providing evidence for fitness center operators to appropriately handle customer misconduct and alleviate the role stress of fitness trainers. Based on research results, the following recommendations are made for fitness institutions. Firstly, fitness institution owners should acknowledge customer misconduct as a significant stressor. Customer misconduct is a major source of stress for fitness trainers, largely due to the power imbalance between customers and trainers, which highlights customers' services. Prolonged exposure to this imbalance may lead fitness trainers to feel powerless and demotivated, negatively affecting their work attitude and enthusiasm. Secondly, managers should actively engage in open communication with fitness

trainers. Managers should engage in regular conversations or conduct surveys with fitness trainers to understand the incidents of customer misconduct thoroughly. By summarizing the types and frequencies of such incidents and identifying the main factors triggering customer misconduct, managers can gain insights into the challenges faced by fitness trainers. In such cases, fitness institutions can implement corresponding strategies and tactics to help fitness trainers cope with various misconducts, such as recognizing misconduct.

Thirdly, despite the service characteristics of the fitness industry, the professional knowledge and authority of trainers should be complied with. Thus, fitness institutions should clearly define the authority of fitness trainers in handling customer misconduct. Managers should establish specific, measurable, and actionable policies that outline the responsibilities and authority of fitness trainers when dealing with such incidents. This clarity will enable trainers to understand their roles and perform their duties effectively. In addition, it is necessary to incorporate authority into Management Policies. The authority of fitness trainers to handle customer misconduct should be incorporated into the institution's management policies. This inclusion ensures that trainers have clear guidelines and support from the organization, empowering them to take appropriate actions when faced with challenging customer interactions. Fourthly, organizations should provide sufficient training and support. Fitness institutions should offer training programs to help trainers develop skills in managing customer misconduct and coping with role stress. Providing psychological support and stress management resources can also help mitigate the negative impact of customer misconduct on trainers' emotional well-being. By implementing these recommendations, fitness institutions can better support their trainers, reduce role stress, and improve the overall work environment, ultimately enhancing the quality of service provided to customers.

To effectively manage customer misconduct and support fitness trainers, fitness institutions should adopt supportive management practices and decrease the level of role stress from trainers. When customer misconduct occurs, managers should avoid publicly criticizing or blaming trainers and instead support their reasonable exercise of authority. If a trainer handles an issue inappropriately, managers should temporarily remove the trainer from the situation, handle the problem personally, and later provide guidance. Demonstrating trust and support for fitness trainers while maintaining necessary supervision and control is crucial. Promptly correcting issues and adjusting or replacing incompetent trainers can help maintain a positive work environment. Additionally, institutions should establish clear role specifications, delineate responsibilities, and clarify accountability to reduce role ambiguity. Effective and flexible work allocation based on job content and position requirements can further minimize role stress. Maintaining the mental health of fitness trainers is essential to reduce individual resource depletion and alleviate role stress and emotional exhaustion caused by customer misconduct. During recruitment, institutions should strengthen psychological assessments to select individuals with high self-emotional management abilities. Ongoing professional development opportunities can help trainers acquire new knowledge and skills, increasing customer satisfaction and confidence. Improving welfare benefits, implementing reward systems, and enhancing the work and living environment can boost trainers' sense of hope and well-being. Fitness trainers should also strive to improve their adaptability, communicate effectively with colleagues, enhance customer communication skills, and gain a sense of achievement. By reducing individual resource depletion, fitness trainers can better meet the demands of the fitness industry and handle customer misconduct more effectively.

Author contributions

The ideas, concepts, and design of the research, the concepts, instruments development, and data analysis, Z.S.; the data analysis and formatting article, L.B. Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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