

## **CUSTOMER OSTRACISM AND EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION AMONG FRONTLINE SERVICE EMPLOYEES**

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### **Abstract**

The present study examined customer ostracism and emotional exhaustion among frontline service employees in Kerala. Customer ostracism refers to customer behaviours such as ignoring, avoiding, remaining silent, refusing to acknowledge service efforts, and treating employees with indifference during service encounters. The study adopted a descriptive and analytical research design. Data were collected from 200 frontline service employees working in selected service sector organisations in Kerala. A structured questionnaire consisting of demographic information, Customer Ostracism Scale, and Emotional Exhaustion Scale was used for data collection. The collected data were analysed using EDUSTAT. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, simple linear regression, independent samples t test, and one-way ANOVA were used for analysis. The results revealed that customer ostracism and emotional exhaustion were experienced at a moderate level among the respondents. A significant positive relationship was found between customer ostracism and emotional exhaustion. The regression result showed that customer ostracism significantly predicted emotional exhaustion. The findings also revealed significant differences in customer ostracism and emotional exhaustion with respect to selected demographic and employment-related variables. The study concludes that customer ostracism is an important workplace stressor that affects the emotional well-being of frontline service employees.

**Keywords:** Customer ostracism; Emotional exhaustion; Frontline service employees

### **Introduction**

Frontline service employees occupy a central position in service organisations because they directly interact with customers and represent the organisation during service encounters. In sectors such as banking, retail, hospitality, healthcare, telecom, travel, tourism, and other customer-oriented services, the quality of employee-customer interaction influences not only customer satisfaction but also employee well-being. Frontline employees are expected to remain polite, responsive, emotionally balanced, and service-oriented even when customers behave indifferently or negatively. Such continuous emotional regulation makes frontline service work psychologically demanding.

In service encounters, customer behaviour does not always appear in the form of open complaints, verbal aggression, or direct misconduct. In many situations, customers may ignore employees, avoid eye contact, refuse to respond, remain silent, fail to acknowledge service efforts, or behave as if the employee is not important. Such behaviour may be understood as

customer ostracism. Ostracism refers to the experience of being ignored or excluded by others. In workplace literature, ostracism has been treated as a subtle but powerful form of negative social experience that can affect employee attitudes, well-being, and performance (Ferris et al., 2008). When this exclusionary behaviour comes from customers, it becomes especially relevant for frontline service employees because their work depends on active and respectful customer interaction.

Customer ostracism differs from direct customer incivility or verbal abuse because it is more silent, indirect, and socially dismissive. However, its effect may still be serious. A customer who ignores an employee, refuses to cooperate, or treats the employee as invisible may create feelings of rejection, helplessness, and emotional discomfort. For frontline employees, such experiences may be difficult to avoid because customer interaction is an essential part of their job. Therefore, customer ostracism can be considered an important customer-related social stressor in service organisations.

Emotional exhaustion is another important variable in the present study. It refers to the feeling of being emotionally drained and depleted because of work-related demands. Emotional exhaustion is considered a central component of burnout and is commonly studied in occupations that require continuous interaction with people (Maslach et al., 2001). Frontline service employees are especially vulnerable to emotional exhaustion because they have to handle customer expectations, complaints, impatience, silence, avoidance, and sometimes disrespectful behaviour while maintaining professional conduct.

The relationship between customer ostracism and emotional exhaustion can be understood through the Conservation of Resources theory. According to this theory, stress occurs when individuals lose valued emotional, psychological, or social resources, or when such resources are threatened (Hobfoll, 1989). In customer-facing work, respectful communication, acknowledgement, cooperation, and social recognition act as important interpersonal resources. When customers ignore or avoid employees, these resources are weakened. Repeated exposure to such behaviour may drain employees' emotional energy and lead to emotional exhaustion.

Previous studies on customer-related stressors and customer mistreatment have shown that negative customer behaviour can increase emotional exhaustion among service employees. Kim et al. (2012) found that customer-related social stressors were associated with emotional exhaustion among frontline service employees. Similarly, Karatepe (2014) reported that customer-related social stressors had important implications for emotional exhaustion and service-related outcomes. Studies on customer incivility have also shown that negative customer behaviour can increase emotional exhaustion, reduce job satisfaction, and affect work outcomes (Pu et al., 2024; Szczygieł & Bazińska, 2021). These findings indicate that customer behaviour has a direct psychological impact on employees who work in customer-contact positions.

In the context of Kerala, frontline service employees work in a rapidly expanding and competitive service environment. Employees in retail shops, banks, hospitals, hotels, telecom service centres, travel agencies, and similar organisations frequently interact with customers from diverse social and economic backgrounds. The pressure to provide quick, polite, and efficient service may increase the emotional demands of their work. In such a context, customer

ostracism becomes a meaningful issue because even silent forms of customer neglect can affect the emotional well-being of employees.

The present study therefore examines customer ostracism and emotional exhaustion among frontline service employees in Kerala. The study focuses on whether customer ostracism is significantly related to emotional exhaustion and whether it predicts emotional exhaustion. It also examines whether customer ostracism and emotional exhaustion differ based on selected demographic and employment-related variables. By focusing on customer ostracism, the study gives attention to a less visible but important form of customer-related stress in frontline service work.

### Background of the Study

The growth of the service sector has increased the importance of frontline employees in organisational success. Unlike production-oriented work, service work involves direct interaction between employees and customers. The employee's behaviour, tone, patience, emotional control, and responsiveness influence the customer's perception of service quality. However, the service interaction is not shaped by employees alone. Customers also influence the emotional climate of the encounter. When customers cooperate, communicate clearly, and acknowledge employees, service delivery becomes smoother. When customers ignore, avoid, or socially exclude employees, the interaction becomes emotionally demanding.

Customer ostracism is an important but comparatively under-discussed form of negative customer behaviour. Related research on customer ostracism has shown its negative implications for service relationships and employee outcomes (Benos et al., 2018; Zhao et al., 2023). It does not necessarily involve shouting, insulting, or complaining. Instead, it operates through silence, avoidance, non-recognition, and interpersonal exclusion. For example, a customer may refuse to respond to a greeting, avoid answering necessary questions, ignore the employee's explanation, or communicate with another person while excluding the employee who is responsible for service delivery. Though such behaviour may appear minor, repeated exposure to it can create emotional pressure among employees.

Ostracism research shows that being ignored or excluded can threaten basic psychological needs such as belongingness, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence. Ferris et al. (2008) developed and validated the Workplace Ostracism Scale and demonstrated that ostracism is meaningfully related to employee well-being, job attitudes, job performance, and withdrawal-related outcomes. Although their work focused on workplace ostracism in general, the concept is useful for understanding exclusionary experiences in customer-facing service settings as well.

The emotional burden created by customer ostracism can be explained through the nature of emotional labour. Emotional labour involves the regulation of feelings and emotional displays in accordance with organisational expectations (Hochschild, 1983; Grandey, 2000). Frontline employees are expected to display appropriate emotions even when their actual feelings are different. They may have to smile, remain calm, and respond politely even when customers ignore or dismiss them. Continuous emotional control under such conditions can gradually lead to emotional exhaustion. Maslach and Jackson (1981) and Maslach et al. (2001) described burnout as a response to chronic interpersonal stressors at work, with emotional exhaustion representing the feeling of emotional depletion. This makes emotional exhaustion

a suitable outcome variable for studying customer ostracism among frontline service employees.

The background literature also indicates that customer-related stressors are important predictors of employee strain. Kim et al. (2012) studied customer-related social stressors among frontline service employees and showed their relevance to emotional exhaustion and service recovery performance. Karatepe (2014) examined customer-related social stressors and emotional exhaustion and highlighted the mediating role of emotional exhaustion in service contexts. Recent studies on customer incivility also support the argument that negative customer behaviour creates emotional strain and may affect employee attitudes and work outcomes (Gustiawan et al., 2023; Pu et al., 2024; Shahzad et al., 2023).

The present study is positioned within this background. While customer incivility, customer mistreatment, and workplace ostracism have received attention in previous research, customer ostracism as a specific experience of frontline service employees requires further empirical focus. This is particularly relevant in Kerala, where a large number of employees work in customer-facing roles across diverse service sectors. Employees in such roles are often evaluated based on their ability to satisfy customers, but the emotional cost of unfavourable customer behaviour is not always recognised.

The study is therefore significant because it shifts attention from customer satisfaction alone to employee emotional well-being. It recognises that frontline service employees are not merely service providers but also emotional workers who are affected by the quality of customer interaction. If customer ostracism increases emotional exhaustion, service organisations need to develop support systems, training programmes, counselling mechanisms, and supervisory practices that protect employees from emotional depletion. Thus, the study has relevance for Commerce, human resource management, service management, and organisational behaviour.

#### Research Questions

RQ1: Is there any significant relationship between customer ostracism and emotional exhaustion among frontline service employees in Kerala?

RQ2: Does customer ostracism significantly predict emotional exhaustion among frontline service employees in Kerala?

RQ3: Is there any significant difference in customer ostracism among frontline service employees based on selected demographic and employment-related variables?

RQ4: Is there any significant difference in emotional exhaustion among frontline service employees based on selected demographic and employment-related variables?

#### Research Objectives

O1: To examine the relationship between customer ostracism and emotional exhaustion among frontline service employees in Kerala.

O2: To analyse the influence of customer ostracism on emotional exhaustion among frontline service employees in Kerala.

O3: To compare customer ostracism among frontline service employees based on selected demographic and employment-related variables.

O4: To compare emotional exhaustion among frontline service employees based on selected demographic and employment-related variables.

## Hypotheses

H1: There is a significant relationship between customer ostracism and emotional exhaustion among frontline service employees in Kerala.

H2: Customer ostracism significantly predicts emotional exhaustion among frontline service employees in Kerala.

H3: There is a significant difference in customer ostracism among frontline service employees based on selected demographic and employment-related variables.

H4: There is a significant difference in emotional exhaustion among frontline service employees based on selected demographic and employment-related variables.

## Methodology

The present study adopted a descriptive and analytical research design to examine customer ostracism and emotional exhaustion among frontline service employees in Kerala. The study was descriptive because it attempted to describe the level of customer ostracism and emotional exhaustion experienced by frontline service employees. It was also analytical because it examined the relationship between customer ostracism and emotional exhaustion and tested whether customer ostracism significantly predicted emotional exhaustion.

The population of the study consisted of frontline service employees working in selected service sector organisations in Kerala. Frontline service employees refer to employees who directly interact with customers as part of their regular job responsibilities. The population included employees working in sectors such as banking, retail, hospitality, healthcare, telecom, travel and tourism, and other customer service-oriented organisations.

The sample of the study consisted of 200 frontline service employees selected from different service sector organisations in Kerala. The respondents were selected from customer-facing job roles where direct and regular interaction with customers formed an essential part of work. Purposive sampling technique was adopted for the selection of the sample, as only employees who had regular exposure to customer interaction were considered suitable for the study.

Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of three sections. Section A collected demographic and employment-related information such as gender, age group, educational qualification, type of organisation, nature of employment, work experience, daily customer interaction, and monthly income. Section B measured customer ostracism through 18 Likert-scale statements. Section C measured emotional exhaustion through 18 Likert-scale statements. Both scales followed a five-point Likert response pattern ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree.

Participation in the study was voluntary, and the responses were treated confidentially. The data were used only for academic research purposes.

The Customer Ostracism Scale was used to measure the extent to which frontline service employees experienced ignoring, avoidance, lack of acknowledgement, silence, indifference, and exclusion from customers during service interactions. The Emotional Exhaustion Scale was used to measure the emotional tiredness, mental fatigue, stress, frustration, and emotional depletion experienced by employees as a result of customer-facing work. Higher scores on each scale indicated a higher level of the respective variable.

The collected data were coded, tabulated, and analysed using EDUSTAT. Descriptive statistics such as frequency, percentage, mean, median, mode, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis were used to describe the demographic profile and the main variables of the study. Pearson correlation was used to examine the relationship between customer ostracism and emotional exhaustion. Simple linear regression was used to determine the predictive effect of customer ostracism on emotional exhaustion. Independent samples t test, with Welch correction where required, and one-way ANOVA were used to examine differences in customer ostracism and emotional exhaustion based on selected demographic and employment-related variables. Scheffe post hoc test was used for variables in which ANOVA produced statistically significant differences.

The analysis was carried out in accordance with the objectives and hypotheses of the study. The results obtained through EDUSTAT were interpreted to determine whether customer ostracism was significantly related to emotional exhaustion and whether it acted as a significant predictor of emotional exhaustion among frontline service employees in Kerala. The demographic comparisons were also interpreted to identify the categories of employees who experienced comparatively higher levels of customer ostracism and emotional exhaustion.

#### Data Analysis and Interpretation

The data collected from 200 frontline service employees in Kerala were coded and analysed using EDUSTAT. Customer Ostracism was measured through 18 Likert-scale items, and Emotional Exhaustion was measured through 18 Likert-scale items. The total score of Customer Ostracism was obtained by adding the scores of CO1 to CO18, and the total score of Emotional Exhaustion was obtained by adding the scores of EE1 to EE18. Higher scores indicate higher levels of the respective variable. The hypotheses were tested using descriptive statistics, independent samples t test, one-way ANOVA, Scheffe post hoc test, Pearson correlation and simple linear regression.

#### Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Table 1

##### *Demographic Profile of the Respondents Based on Gender and Age Group*

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	91	45.50
Gender	Female	109	54.50
Age Group	Below 25 years	41	20.50
Age Group	25-35 years	90	45.00
Age Group	36-45 years	46	23.00
Age Group	Above 45 years	23	11.50

Table 1 shows the distribution of respondents based on gender and age group. Out of 200 respondents, 91 respondents were male and 109 respondents were female. Thus, female respondents formed a slightly higher proportion of the sample. With respect to age, the largest group belonged to the age category of 25-35 years, representing 45.00 per cent of the sample.

This indicates that a major portion of the respondents were young and middle-aged frontline service employees.

Table 2

*Demographic Profile of the Respondents Based on Educational Qualification and Type of Organisation*

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Educational Qualification	Higher Secondary	23	11.50
Educational Qualification	Diploma	31	15.50
Educational Qualification	Degree	107	53.50
Educational Qualification	Postgraduate	39	19.50
Type of Organisation	Banking	35	17.50
Type of Organisation	Retail	45	22.50
Type of Organisation	Hospitality	29	14.50
Type of Organisation	Healthcare	29	14.50
Type of Organisation	Telecom	26	13.00
Type of Organisation	Travel and Tourism	21	10.50
Type of Organisation	Other Service Sector	15	7.50

Table 2 presents the educational qualification and organisational background of the respondents. The majority of the respondents were degree holders, constituting 53.50 per cent of the sample. This shows that most of the frontline service employees included in the study had graduate-level education. Regarding type of organisation, the highest proportion of respondents belonged to the retail sector, followed by banking, hospitality, healthcare, telecom, travel and tourism, and other service sectors. Therefore, the sample represents different customer-facing service sectors in Kerala.

Table 3

*Demographic Profile of the Respondents Based on Nature of Employment and Work Experience*

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Nature of Employment	Permanent	95	47.50
Nature of Employment	Contract	64	32.00

Nature of Employment	Temporary	28	14.00
Nature of Employment	Part-time	13	6.50
Work Experience	Below 1 year	24	12.00
Work Experience	1-3 years	56	28.00
Work Experience	4-6 years	52	26.00
Work Experience	Above 6 years	68	34.00

Table 3 shows that 47.50 per cent of the respondents were permanent employees, while 32.00 per cent were contract employees. Temporary and part-time employees formed smaller proportions of the sample. With regard to work experience, the largest group consisted of employees with above 6 years of experience, followed by employees with 1-3 years of experience and 4-6 years of experience. This indicates that the sample included both relatively experienced and less experienced frontline service employees.

Table 4

*Demographic Profile of the Respondents Based on Daily Customer Interaction and Monthly Income*

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Daily Customer Interaction	Low	23	11.50
Daily Customer Interaction	Moderate	93	46.50
Daily Customer Interaction	High	84	42.00
Monthly Income	Below Rs. 15,000	33	16.50
Monthly Income	Rs. 15,001-25,000	60	30.00
Monthly Income	Rs. 25,001-35,000	67	33.50
Monthly Income	Above Rs. 35,000	40	20.00

Table 4 shows that 46.50 per cent of the respondents had moderate daily customer interaction and 42.00 per cent had high daily customer interaction. This indicates that most of the respondents were regularly exposed to customer-facing work. In terms of monthly income, the highest proportion of respondents belonged to the income category of Rs. 25,001-35,000, followed by Rs. 15,001-25,000. Hence, the sample mainly represents frontline service employees from lower-middle and middle-income categories.

## Descriptive Statistics of the Main Variables

Table 5

*Descriptive Statistics of Customer Ostracism and Emotional Exhaustion*

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Median	Mode	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Customer Ostracism	200	35.00	82.00	59.14	59.00	59.00	10.22	-0.052	-0.506
Emotional Exhaustion	200	33.00	83.00	58.08	58.00	64.00	11.35	0.080	-0.617

Table 5 presents the descriptive statistics of customer ostracism and emotional exhaustion. The mean score of customer ostracism is 59.14 with a standard deviation of 10.22. This indicates that the respondents experienced customer ostracism at a moderate level. The mean score of emotional exhaustion is 58.08 with a standard deviation of 11.35, showing that the respondents also experienced a moderate level of emotional exhaustion. The skewness values of both variables are close to zero, indicating that the distributions are approximately symmetrical. The kurtosis values are negative, indicating that the distributions are slightly flatter than the normal distribution.

## Relationship Between Customer Ostracism and Emotional Exhaustion

H1: There is a significant relationship between customer ostracism and emotional exhaustion among frontline service employees in Kerala.

Table 6

*Correlation Between Customer Ostracism and Emotional Exhaustion*

Variables	N	Pearson Correlation	p-value	Result
Customer Ostracism and Emotional Exhaustion	200	0.634	< .001	Significant

Table 6 shows the correlation between customer ostracism and emotional exhaustion. The Pearson correlation coefficient is 0.634, and the p-value is less than .001. This indicates a positive and statistically significant relationship between customer ostracism and emotional exhaustion. Therefore, when customer ostracism increases, emotional exhaustion also tends to increase among frontline service employees. Hence, H1 is accepted.

## Prediction of Emotional Exhaustion by Customer Ostracism

H2: Customer ostracism significantly predicts emotional exhaustion among frontline service employees in Kerala.

Table 7

### *Model Summary for Regression Analysis*

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	F	p-value
Customer Ostracism predicting Emotional Exhaustion	0.634	0.401	0.398	132.769	< .001

Table 7 shows the model summary of the simple linear regression analysis. The R value is 0.634, showing a positive association between customer ostracism and emotional exhaustion. The R Square value is 0.401, which indicates that customer ostracism explains 40.10 per cent of the variance in emotional exhaustion. The F value is 132.769, and the p-value is less than .001, indicating that the regression model is statistically significant.

Table 8

### *Regression Coefficients for Predicting Emotional Exhaustion*

Predictor	B	Standard Error	Beta	t-value	p-value
Constant	16.459	3.665	-	4.490	< .001
Customer Ostracism	0.704	0.061	0.634	11.523	< .001

Table 8 shows the regression coefficient of customer ostracism in predicting emotional exhaustion. The unstandardised regression coefficient is 0.704, which indicates that a one-unit increase in customer ostracism leads to an increase of 0.704 units in emotional exhaustion. The beta value is 0.634, showing a positive predictive effect. The t-value is 11.523 and the p-value is less than .001, indicating that customer ostracism is a significant positive predictor of emotional exhaustion. Hence, H2 is accepted.

The regression equation is: Emotional Exhaustion = 16.459 + 0.704(Customer Ostracism)

### *Difference in Customer Ostracism Based on Demographic Variables*

H3: There is a significant difference in customer ostracism among frontline service employees based on selected demographic and employment-related variables.

Table 9

### *Difference in Customer Ostracism Based on Demographic Variables*

Demographic Variable	Test Used	Statistic	df	p-value	Result
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Gender	Independent samples t test	t = -0.495	197.62	0.621	Not significant
Age Group	One-way ANOVA	F = 1.933	3, 196	0.126	Not significant
Educational Qualification	One-way ANOVA	F = 0.603	3, 196	0.614	Not significant
Type of Organisation	One-way ANOVA	F = 7.577	6, 193	< .001	Significant
Nature of Employment	One-way ANOVA	F = 3.758	3, 196	0.012	Significant
Work Experience	One-way ANOVA	F = 2.109	3, 196	0.100	Not significant
Daily Customer Interaction	One-way ANOVA	F = 96.793	2, 197	< .001	Significant
Monthly Income	One-way ANOVA	F = 1.724	3, 196	0.163	Not significant

Table 9 shows the results of t test and one-way ANOVA used to examine whether customer ostracism differs based on selected demographic and employment-related variables. The results show that customer ostracism differs significantly with respect to type of organisation, nature of employment, and daily customer interaction. However, no significant difference is found with respect to gender, age group, educational qualification, work experience, and monthly income. Therefore, H3 is partially accepted.

Table 10

*Mean Scores of Customer Ostracism for Significant Demographic Variables*

Variable	Category	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Type of Organisation	Banking	35	55.23	9.66
Type of Organisation	Retail	45	62.78	9.95
Type of Organisation	Hospitality	29	63.21	8.15
Type of Organisation	Healthcare	29	57.07	8.55

Type of Organisation	Telecom	26	63.46	9.09
Type of Organisation	Travel and Tourism	21	57.24	10.54
Type of Organisation	Other Service Sector	15	48.60	8.87
Nature of Employment	Permanent	95	56.69	9.76
Nature of Employment	Contract	64	61.66	10.24
Nature of Employment	Temporary	28	61.50	10.13
Nature of Employment	Part-time	13	59.46	10.52
Daily Customer Interaction	Low	23	47.61	7.52
Daily Customer Interaction	Moderate	93	54.72	7.14
Daily Customer Interaction	High	84	67.18	7.40

Table 10 shows the mean scores of customer ostracism for the demographic variables that produced significant differences. With regard to type of organisation, the highest mean score is found among employees in the telecom sector, followed by hospitality and retail. The lowest mean score is found among employees in other service sectors. In relation to nature of employment, contract and temporary employees reported higher levels of customer ostracism than permanent employees. With respect to daily customer interaction, employees with high customer interaction reported the highest level of customer ostracism. This shows that frequent customer-facing work increases the possibility of experiencing customer avoidance, neglect, or indifference.

#### Difference in Emotional Exhaustion Based on Demographic Variables

H4: There is a significant difference in emotional exhaustion among frontline service employees based on selected demographic and employment-related variables.

Table 11

#### *Difference in Emotional Exhaustion Based on Demographic Variables*

Demographic Variable	Test Used	Statistic	df	p-value	Result
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Gender	Independent samples t test	t = -0.917	192.54	0.360	Not significant
Age Group	One-way ANOVA	F = 5.135	3, 196	0.002	Significant
Educational Qualification	One-way ANOVA	F = 1.432	3, 196	0.235	Not significant
Type of Organisation	One-way ANOVA	F = 5.567	6, 193	< .001	Significant
Nature of Employment	One-way ANOVA	F = 8.286	3, 196	< .001	Significant
Work Experience	One-way ANOVA	F = 9.430	3, 196	< .001	Significant
Daily Customer Interaction	One-way ANOVA	F = 35.066	2, 197	< .001	Significant
Monthly Income	One-way ANOVA	F = 1.886	3, 196	0.133	Not significant

Table 11 presents the difference in emotional exhaustion based on selected demographic and employment-related variables. The results show that emotional exhaustion differs significantly with respect to age group, type of organisation, nature of employment, work experience, and daily customer interaction. However, emotional exhaustion does not differ significantly based on gender, educational qualification, and monthly income. Therefore, H4 is partially accepted.

Table 12

*Mean Scores of Emotional Exhaustion Based on Age Group, Work Experience and Daily Customer Interaction*

Variable	Category	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Age Group	Below 25 years	41	62.88	11.28
Age Group	25-35 years	90	58.27	10.86
Age Group	36-45 years	46	53.61	10.98
Age Group	Above 45 years	23	57.74	11.23
Work Experience	Below 1 year	24	64.79	10.93
Work Experience	1-3 years	56	61.93	10.67

Work Experience	4-6 years	52	56.19	10.93
Work Experience	Above 6 years	68	53.99	10.45
Daily Customer Interaction	Low	23	50.30	11.11
Daily Customer Interaction	Moderate	93	53.96	9.29
Daily Customer Interaction	High	84	64.77	9.97

Table 12 shows the mean scores of emotional exhaustion based on age group, work experience and daily customer interaction. Employees below 25 years reported the highest emotional exhaustion among age groups. In terms of work experience, employees with below 1 year of experience reported the highest emotional exhaustion, followed by those with 1-3 years of experience. Employees with above 6 years of experience reported the lowest emotional exhaustion. This indicates that less experienced employees may find customer-facing work more emotionally demanding. The table also shows that employees with high daily customer interaction reported the highest emotional exhaustion, confirming that frequent customer interaction is associated with greater emotional strain.

Table 13

*Mean Scores of Emotional Exhaustion Based on Type of Organisation and Nature of Employment*

Variable	Category	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Type of Organisation	Banking	35	52.40	8.91
Type of Organisation	Retail	45	62.02	12.21
Type of Organisation	Hospitality	29	59.79	12.77
Type of Organisation	Healthcare	29	57.79	8.63
Type of Organisation	Telecom	26	63.15	10.01
Type of Organisation	Travel and Tourism	21	57.19	9.76

Type of Organisation	Other Service Sector	15	49.20	10.55
Nature of Employment	Permanent	95	54.47	10.81
Nature of Employment	Contract	64	61.19	10.92
Nature of Employment	Temporary	28	64.04	10.43
Nature of Employment	Part-time	13	56.31	10.50

Table 13 shows the mean scores of emotional exhaustion based on type of organisation and nature of employment. Employees working in the telecom sector reported the highest emotional exhaustion, followed by employees in retail and hospitality. The lowest mean score was observed among employees in other service sectors. With regard to nature of employment, temporary employees reported the highest emotional exhaustion, followed by contract employees. Permanent employees reported comparatively lower emotional exhaustion. This suggests that job insecurity and unstable employment conditions may intensify emotional exhaustion among frontline service employees.

#### Post Hoc Analysis for Significant ANOVA Results

Since one-way ANOVA showed significant differences in customer ostracism and emotional exhaustion with respect to selected demographic and employment-related variables, Scheffe post hoc test was conducted to identify the specific group differences. Only statistically significant pairwise differences are presented in the following tables.

Table 14

#### *Scheffe Post Hoc Test for Customer Ostracism Based on Significant Variables*

Variable	Higher Mean Group	Lower Mean Group	Mean Difference	p-value	Result
Type of Organisation	Retail	Other Service Sector	14.18	< .001	Significant
Type of Organisation	Hospitality	Other Service Sector	14.61	< .001	Significant
Type of Organisation	Telecom	Other Service Sector	14.86	< .001	Significant
Nature of Employment	Contract	Permanent	4.96	.027	Significant

Daily Customer Interaction	High	Moderate	12.46	< .001	Significant
Daily Customer Interaction	High	Low	19.57	< .001	Significant
Daily Customer Interaction	Moderate	Low	7.11	< .001	Significant

Table 14 presents the Scheffe post hoc results for customer ostracism. With respect to type of organisation, employees working in retail, hospitality and telecom organisations reported significantly higher customer ostracism than employees working in other service sectors. This indicates that employees in high-contact service sectors are more likely to experience customer avoidance, silence, non-acknowledgement and indifferent behaviour. With regard to nature of employment, contract employees reported significantly higher customer ostracism than permanent employees. This suggests that employees in contract positions may be more exposed to customer-related neglect or may have less authority and recognition in customer-facing situations. In the case of daily customer interaction, employees with high customer interaction reported significantly higher customer ostracism than employees with moderate and low customer interaction. Employees with moderate customer interaction also reported significantly higher customer ostracism than employees with low customer interaction. Thus, the experience of customer ostracism increases as the level of daily customer interaction increases.

Table 15

*Scheffe Post Hoc Test for Emotional Exhaustion Based on Age Group, Work Experience and Daily Customer Interaction*

Variable	Higher Mean Group	Lower Mean Group	Mean Difference	p-value	Result
Age Group	Below 25 years	36-45 years	9.27	.002	Significant
Work Experience	Below 1 year	Above 6 years	10.81	.001	Significant
Work Experience	1-3 years	Above 6 years	7.94	.001	Significant
Work Experience	Below 1 year	4-6 years	8.60	.016	Significant

Daily Customer Interaction	High	Moderate	10.82	< .001	Significant
Daily Customer Interaction	High	Low	14.47	< .001	Significant

Table 15 presents the Scheffe post hoc results for emotional exhaustion based on age group, work experience and daily customer interaction. With respect to age group, employees below 25 years reported significantly higher emotional exhaustion than employees in the 36-45 years age group. This indicates that younger frontline service employees may experience greater emotional strain in customer-facing jobs. In relation to work experience, employees with below 1 year of experience reported significantly higher emotional exhaustion than employees with above 6 years of experience and those with 4-6 years of experience. Employees with 1-3 years of experience also reported significantly higher emotional exhaustion than employees with above 6 years of experience. This shows that less experienced employees are more vulnerable to emotional exhaustion, whereas experienced employees may have better coping ability, emotional control and customer-handling confidence. With respect to daily customer interaction, employees with high customer interaction reported significantly higher emotional exhaustion than employees with moderate and low customer interaction. This confirms that frequent customer contact increases emotional demands and contributes to emotional exhaustion among frontline service employees.

Table 16

*Scheffe Post Hoc Test for Emotional Exhaustion Based on Type of Organisation and Nature of Employment*

Variable	Higher Mean Group	Lower Mean Group	Mean Difference	p-value	Result
Type of Organisation	Telecom	Other Service Sector	13.95	.015	Significant
Type of Organisation	Retail	Other Service Sector	12.82	.015	Significant
Type of Organisation	Retail	Banking	9.62	.016	Significant
Type of Organisation	Telecom	Banking	10.75	.022	Significant
Nature of Employment	Temporary	Permanent	9.56	.001	Significant
Nature of Employment	Contract	Permanent	6.71	.002	Significant

Table 16 presents the Scheffe post hoc results for emotional exhaustion based on type of organisation and nature of employment. With respect to type of organisation, employees working in telecom and retail organisations reported significantly higher emotional exhaustion than employees working in banking and other service sectors. This indicates that telecom and retail employees may experience greater emotional strain because of frequent complaints, continuous public interaction, customer impatience and high service pressure. With regard to nature of employment, temporary and contract employees reported significantly higher emotional exhaustion than permanent employees. This suggests that employees in less secure forms of employment may experience higher emotional burden. Job insecurity, limited authority, lower organisational support and continuous customer-facing pressure may contribute to higher emotional exhaustion among temporary and contract employees.

The post hoc analysis provides a clearer understanding of the significant ANOVA results. In the case of customer ostracism, the major differences are found between high-contact service sectors and other service sectors, between contract and permanent employees, and among different levels of daily customer interaction. In the case of emotional exhaustion, younger employees, less experienced employees, employees with high customer interaction, employees working in telecom and retail sectors, and employees in temporary or contract employment report significantly higher emotional exhaustion. Therefore, the post hoc results confirm that customer ostracism and emotional exhaustion are not equally experienced across all groups. They are more severe among employees who have higher customer exposure, lower employment stability and relatively lower work experience.

#### Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Table 17

#### *Summary of Hypothesis Testing*

Hypothesis	Result	Decision
H1: There is a significant relationship between customer ostracism and emotional exhaustion among frontline service employees in Kerala.	A positive and significant relationship was found.	Accepted
H2: Customer ostracism significantly predicts emotional exhaustion among frontline service employees in Kerala.	Customer ostracism significantly predicted emotional exhaustion.	Accepted
H3: There is a significant difference in customer ostracism among frontline service employees based on selected demographic and	Significant differences were found only with respect to type of organisation, nature of employment and daily customer interaction.	Partially accepted

employment-related variables.		
H4: There is a significant difference in emotional exhaustion among frontline service employees based on selected demographic and employment-related variables.	Significant differences were found only with respect to age group, type of organisation, nature of employment, work experience and daily customer interaction.	Partially accepted

Table 17 summarises the results of hypothesis testing. The findings show that customer ostracism has a significant positive relationship with emotional exhaustion and also significantly predicts emotional exhaustion among frontline service employees. Therefore, customer ostracism can be considered an important workplace stressor in customer-facing service jobs. The demographic and employment-related analysis shows that all variables do not produce significant differences. Customer ostracism differs mainly according to type of organisation, nature of employment and daily customer interaction, whereas emotional exhaustion differs according to age group, type of organisation, nature of employment, work experience and daily customer interaction.

The results of the study clearly indicate that customer ostracism is significantly associated with emotional exhaustion among frontline service employees in Kerala. Employees who experience higher levels of customer neglect, avoidance, silence, lack of acknowledgement, and indifferent behaviour tend to experience greater emotional exhaustion. The regression result further confirms that customer ostracism is a significant predictor of emotional exhaustion. This means that customer-related social exclusion is not merely an unpleasant service experience, but a meaningful source of emotional strain for frontline employees.

The results also show that employees with high customer interaction report higher customer ostracism and emotional exhaustion. This indicates that the frequency and intensity of customer contact play an important role in shaping employees' emotional experience at work. The findings further suggest that less experienced employees and employees in temporary or contract positions may be more vulnerable to emotional exhaustion. Hence, service organisations should give greater attention to employee support systems, customer-handling training, emotional regulation strategies, grievance support, and stress-management practices for frontline service employees.

#### Discussion of the Results

The results of the study show that frontline service employees in Kerala experience customer ostracism and emotional exhaustion at a moderate level. This indicates that customer ostracism is not an isolated or rare experience in customer-facing jobs. Many employees experience customer indifference, silence, avoidance, lack of acknowledgement, and non-responsive behaviour during service interactions. Such experiences may appear less aggressive than direct verbal abuse or customer incivility, but they still create emotional pressure because

frontline employees are expected to remain polite, responsive, and service-oriented even when customers ignore or socially exclude them.

The finding that emotional exhaustion is also at a moderate level suggests that frontline service employees experience considerable emotional strain in their work. Emotional exhaustion is widely considered a core dimension of burnout and is closely associated with the feeling of being emotionally overextended by one's work demands. The burnout framework treats emotional exhaustion as a major component of burnout, especially in human service and customer-facing occupations where interpersonal demands are high (Maslach et al., 2001). The present finding is consistent with this view, as employees who constantly interact with customers may be required to manage their emotions repeatedly during the workday.

The correlation result revealed a positive and significant relationship between customer ostracism and emotional exhaustion. This means that employees who experience higher levels of customer ostracism also tend to report higher levels of emotional exhaustion. The result supports the assumption that social exclusion from customers can function as a workplace stressor. When customers avoid eye contact, ignore greetings, refuse to respond, or behave as if the employee is unimportant, the employee may experience emotional discomfort, frustration, and loss of psychological energy. This finding is in line with previous service-sector research showing that customer-related social stressors are associated with emotional exhaustion among frontline service employees (Kim et al., 2012; Karatepe, 2014).

The regression result further strengthens the relationship between the two variables. Customer ostracism was found to be a significant positive predictor of emotional exhaustion and explained 40.10 per cent of the variance in emotional exhaustion. This is a meaningful result because it shows that customer ostracism is not merely related to emotional exhaustion but also has predictive value. In practical terms, employees who are repeatedly ignored, avoided, or treated with indifference by customers are more likely to experience emotional fatigue. This supports the argument that customer behaviour plays an important role in shaping the emotional well-being of frontline service employees.

The result is also consistent with studies on customer incivility and workplace ostracism. Although customer ostracism is different from overt incivility, both involve negative interpersonal treatment. Customer incivility studies have shown that disrespectful or inconsiderate customer behaviour increases emotional exhaustion among frontline employees (Pu et al., 2024; Szczygieł & Bazińska, 2021). Similarly, workplace ostracism research has shown that exclusionary behaviour can weaken employee well-being through emotional exhaustion (Ferris et al., 2008; Williams, 2007). Therefore, the present study adds to the existing understanding by showing that even silent or indirect forms of customer mistreatment can produce emotional consequences among frontline service employees.

The demographic analysis showed that customer ostracism differed significantly based on type of organisation, nature of employment, and daily customer interaction. Employees working in sectors such as telecom, hospitality, and retail reported comparatively higher levels of customer ostracism. These sectors involve frequent, direct, and often time-sensitive interaction with customers. Customers may be impatient, distracted, demanding, or unwilling to cooperate during service delivery. Therefore, employees in such sectors may be more exposed to customer avoidance and non-acknowledgement. The higher mean score among

employees with high daily customer interaction also supports this interpretation. Greater contact with customers increases the possibility of experiencing both positive and negative customer behaviour.

The significant difference in customer ostracism based on nature of employment also deserves attention. Contract and temporary employees reported higher customer ostracism than permanent employees. This may be because employees in less secure employment positions often occupy lower-level or high-contact roles and may receive less organisational authority during service interactions. Customers may also give less importance to employees who appear to have limited decision-making power. As a result, non-permanent employees may become more vulnerable to dismissive or indifferent customer behaviour.

In the case of emotional exhaustion, significant differences were found based on age group, type of organisation, nature of employment, work experience, and daily customer interaction. Younger employees and less experienced employees reported higher emotional exhaustion. This suggests that employees at the early stage of their career may have less experience in handling difficult customer interactions and regulating their emotional responses. Employees with more work experience may have developed better coping strategies, emotional control, and service-handling confidence. Hence, experience appears to reduce vulnerability to emotional exhaustion.

The finding that emotional exhaustion is higher among employees with high daily customer interaction is highly relevant to service organisations. Customer-facing work requires continuous emotional regulation. Employees are expected to remain patient, helpful, and respectful even when customers are indifferent or uncooperative. Previous studies on service employees have also shown that customer mistreatment and customer-related social stressors increase emotional exhaustion and can negatively affect service performance (Kim et al., 2012; Karatepe, 2014).

The significant difference in emotional exhaustion based on type of organisation indicates that emotional demands are not uniform across all service sectors. Telecom, retail, and hospitality employees reported higher exhaustion, possibly because these sectors involve frequent complaints, service delays, customer impatience, and continuous public interaction. Banking and other service-sector employees reported comparatively lower mean scores, which may be due to more structured service procedures, clearer role boundaries, or relatively formal customer interaction patterns.

The finding that temporary and contract employees reported higher emotional exhaustion than permanent employees suggests that job security and employment stability may influence emotional well-being. Employees in unstable positions may experience customer pressure and employment-related insecurity at the same time. This combined pressure can increase emotional tiredness. Therefore, emotional exhaustion among frontline service employees cannot be understood only as a result of customer behaviour; it is also shaped by employment conditions and organisational support.

No significant difference was found in customer ostracism and emotional exhaustion based on gender and educational qualification. This suggests that customer ostracism and emotional exhaustion are more strongly connected with work exposure and service conditions than with personal demographic characteristics. Similarly, monthly income did not produce significant

differences, indicating that emotional strain in frontline service work may not be fully explained by income level alone. The results point more strongly toward interaction intensity, employment type, experience, and sectoral work conditions.

Overall, the findings show that customer ostracism is an important emotional stressor among frontline service employees in Kerala. The study establishes that customer ostracism is positively related to emotional exhaustion and significantly predicts it. The findings also show that employees with high customer interaction, lower experience, and less stable employment status are more vulnerable to emotional exhaustion. Therefore, service organisations should treat customer ostracism as a serious workplace issue. Employee support systems, customer-handling training, emotional regulation training, counselling support, and supervisor support may help reduce the emotional burden experienced by frontline service employees.

#### Implications of the Study

The findings of the study have important implications for service sector organisations in Kerala. The study shows that customer ostracism is significantly related to emotional exhaustion among frontline service employees. This indicates that customer behaviour is not only a matter of service quality or customer satisfaction, but also a factor that directly influences the emotional well-being of employees. Organisations therefore need to recognise customer ostracism as a workplace stressor. Even when customers do not openly abuse or insult employees, behaviours such as ignoring, avoiding, remaining silent, refusing to acknowledge service efforts, and treating employees as unimportant can create emotional strain.

The study has practical implications for human resource management in service organisations. Frontline service employees are the direct link between the organisation and its customers. When these employees frequently experience customer indifference or exclusion, they may become emotionally tired, less enthusiastic, and less confident in handling customers. Therefore, service organisations should not focus only on productivity, sales targets, customer ratings, and complaint reduction. They should also give attention to the emotional condition of frontline employees. Regular monitoring of employee stress, emotional exhaustion, and customer-related difficulties can help organisations identify problems before they affect performance and employee retention.

The findings also imply the need for customer-handling training for frontline service employees. Since customer ostracism significantly predicts emotional exhaustion, employees should be trained to manage situations where customers ignore, avoid, or respond indifferently to them. Such training may include communication skills, emotional regulation, conflict management, stress management, and methods of maintaining professional confidence during difficult service interactions. Employees, especially those with lower work experience, may benefit from practical training sessions based on real service situations.

The study also highlights the importance of organisational support. Employees who face negative or indifferent customer behaviour should feel that the organisation supports them. Supervisors and managers should create a work environment where employees can report difficult customer experiences without fear of blame. Supportive supervision, team discussion, counselling assistance, and proper grievance-handling mechanisms can reduce the emotional burden experienced by frontline employees. When employees feel that the organisation understands their difficulties, the negative impact of customer ostracism may be reduced.

The results have specific implications for sectors such as retail, telecom, hospitality, and other high-contact service industries. Employees in these sectors reported comparatively higher levels of customer ostracism and emotional exhaustion. This suggests that organisations with frequent customer interaction should introduce stronger employee support practices. Work schedules, break periods, job rotation, and workload distribution should be planned in such a way that employees are not continuously exposed to emotionally demanding customer interactions without recovery time.

The finding that emotional exhaustion differs based on work experience also has managerial relevance. Less experienced employees reported higher emotional exhaustion than more experienced employees. This implies that new employees require special attention during the early phase of their service career. Induction programmes should include not only job procedures but also emotional preparedness for customer-facing roles. Mentoring by experienced employees may help new employees understand customer behaviour more realistically and develop confidence in handling unpleasant interactions.

The study also implies that employment stability may influence employee well-being. Contract and temporary employees reported higher levels of customer ostracism and emotional exhaustion than permanent employees. This suggests that insecure employment conditions may intensify the emotional impact of difficult customer interactions. Organisations should therefore ensure fair treatment, adequate role clarity, proper training, and access to support systems for all categories of employees, irrespective of their employment status.

The results are also useful for improving service quality. Emotionally exhausted employees may find it difficult to maintain patience, politeness, attentiveness, and service commitment. If customer ostracism is ignored, it may gradually affect employee morale and the overall customer service climate. Therefore, reducing emotional exhaustion is not only beneficial for employees but also important for maintaining consistent service quality. Organisations that protect employee well-being are more likely to maintain better customer relationships in the long run.

The study has implications for policy and workplace welfare practices in the service sector. Service organisations in Kerala may consider developing employee welfare policies that specifically address customer-related emotional stress. Periodic employee feedback, workplace counselling, stress management programmes, supervisor sensitivity training, and mental well-being initiatives can be included as part of organisational policy. Such measures are particularly relevant in service jobs where employees are expected to maintain emotional control even under difficult customer conditions.

The findings also contribute to academic understanding in Commerce and service management. The study shows that customer ostracism is a meaningful variable in understanding employee outcomes in the service sector. Most discussions on customer behaviour focus on customer satisfaction, loyalty, and service experience. The present study shifts attention to the employee side of the service encounter and shows that customer behaviour can influence employee emotional health. This provides scope for further studies on customer mistreatment, emotional labour, burnout, job satisfaction, service performance, and employee turnover intention among frontline service employees.

Overall, the study implies that customer ostracism should be treated as a serious organisational concern. Frontline service employees should not be expected to silently absorb all forms of negative customer behaviour. Service organisations need to create systems that protect employee dignity, reduce emotional strain, and support employees in handling difficult customer interactions. By addressing customer ostracism and emotional exhaustion, organisations can improve both employee well-being and service effectiveness.

### Conclusion

The study concludes that customer ostracism is an important factor influencing emotional exhaustion among frontline service employees in Kerala. The findings show that employees who experience higher levels of customer indifference, avoidance, silence, lack of acknowledgement, and exclusion during service encounters also experience higher emotional exhaustion. Customer ostracism was found to have a significant positive relationship with emotional exhaustion and also emerged as a significant predictor of emotional exhaustion. The study further revealed that customer ostracism and emotional exhaustion vary across certain employment-related and demographic factors, especially type of organisation, nature of employment, work experience, and level of daily customer interaction. These results indicate that frontline service employees working in high-contact service environments are more vulnerable to emotional strain. Hence, service organisations should recognise customer ostracism as a serious workplace stressor and provide proper training, supervisory support, counselling, emotional regulation strategies, and employee welfare measures to reduce emotional exhaustion and improve employee well-being and service effectiveness.

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