Co-worker Undermining, Emotional Exhaustion and Organisational Commitment: The Moderating Role of Servant Leadership

Abstract

Purpose- Not much is known about the conditions under which the negative relationship between co-worker undermining and employee outcomes may wax or wane. This study seeks to address this issue by analysing the role of leadership in mitigating the negative impact of co-worker undermining on employee outcomes. Drawing on expectancy violation theory, the study proposes that servant leadership will alleviate the association between co-worker undermining, emotional exhaustion and consequently organisational commitment.

Design/methodology/approach- Two-wave time-lagged data were collected from a sample of 345 nurses working under 33 supervisors in a large public hospital in Malaysia. To account for the nested nature of the data, generalized multilevel structural equation modeling (GSEM) in STATA was used to test the hypotheses.

Findings- After controlling for transformational leadership, co-worker undermining was indirectly related to organisational commitment via emotional exhaustion, and this indirect relationship was weaker when servant leadership was high.

Practical implications- Organisations need to invest in interventions that help reduce co-worker undermining and put emphasis on promoting servant leadership.

Originality/value- The study extends the literature by introducing expectancy violation theory as a new theoretical lens to analyse the consequences of co-worker undermining on employee outcomes. The study also addresses calls for research on the role of leadership in ameliorating the negative consequences of co-worker undermining.

Keywords: Co-worker undermining; Servant leadership; Emotional exhaustion; Organisational commitment; Expectancy violation theory

Paper type: Research paper

Introduction

Mistreatment at work is viewed as a paramount issue in today's global work context (Mostafa, 2022). Research shows that interpersonal mistreatment at work has undesirable consequences for employees' well-being and other affective and attitudinal outcomes (Yang *et al.*, 2014). As ensuring employee well-being continues to be a contemporary theme for organisations, it has become increasingly important for organisations to actively curb the myriad facets of workplace mistreatment to operate effectively in complex work environments (Wood *et al.,* 2013). Acknowledging that co-workers are a significant source of mistreatment in the workplace (Robinson *et al.*, 2014), this study focuses on deviant or dysfunctional co-worker behaviours, particularly co-worker social undermining. Co-worker undermining is a type of workplace mistreatment that hinders an employee from establishing and maintaining high quality interpersonal relationships, achieving work-related success and forming a good reputation over time (Duffy *et al.*, 2002). While there is now cumulative evidence on the negative link between co-worker undermining and employee well-being and work attitudes (Hershcovis and Barling, 2010; Yoo and Frankwick, 2013; Mostafa *et al.*, 2021), relatively little is known about the conditions under which this relationship may wax or wane (Jang and Kim, 2021; Chiaburu and Harrison, 2008). This study seeks to address this issue by analysing the role of leadership in mitigating the negative impact of co-worker undermining on employee outcomes.

Since co-worker undermining reflects disregard and disrespect of colleagues, it negatively violates expectations of communication behaviour and norms of interpersonal exchanges (Mostafa *et al.*, 2021). Accordingly, the theoretical framework of the study is based on expectancy violation theory (EVT), which assesses the role of nonverbal communication behaviours through the lens of "expectancies" (Burgoon and Hale, 1988). EVT argues that individuals hold prescriptive expectancies about appropriate conduct and

behaviour based on social norms (e.g. civil and balanced co-worker interactions). These expectancies then guide their response to interaction violations by judging its valence (positive or negative) and the degree to which the person initiating the interaction is deemed rewarding to interact with by the recipient of the behaviour (Burgoon and Hale, 1988). Drawing on EVT, this study builds on previous research that has investigated the link between co-worker undermining and employee well-being and work attitudes (e.g. Hershcovis and Barling, 2010; Yoo and Frankwick, 2013) to propose that servant leadership will alleviate the association between co-worker undermining, emotional exhaustion, and organisational commitment. Servant leadership is a holistic leadership approach in which leaders care about their followers and prioritise their needs and interests (Eva *et al.*, 2019) - an aspect that co-worker undermining disregards. The commitment of servant leaders towards employees fulfils followers' expectancies about the appropriate leader behaviour and positions them as highly 'rewarding and valenced' organisational agents. The intense focus of such leaders on employee needs makes up for the unexpected (negatively valenced violating) interpersonal behaviour from co-workers because servant leaders are salient and possess higher reward valence than co-workers (Burgoon, 2015). Through positive interactions with their followers, servant leaders can weaken the relationship between co-worker undermining, employees' exhaustion and consequently commitment.

Increased emotional exhaustion and reduced organisational commitment are common consequences of undermining in organisations (Hershcovis and Barling, 2010; Robinson *et al.*, 2014). They are important indicators of the employee-organisation relationship, and widely used by scholars to operationalize workers expected norms of interpersonal exchange relationships with their employers (Cropanzano *et al.*, 2003; Tourigny *et al.*, 2013). Exhaustion, which is commonly used to describe workers experience of well-being, signals a violation of the anticipated organisational care and attention (Cropanzano *et al.*, 2003) and

symbolizes imbalance of the exchange relationship between an employee and their organisation (Tourigny *et al.*, 2013). Organisational commitment, on the other hand, is an attitudinal indicator of the degree to which workers perceive themselves to be in high-quality exchange relationships with the employing organisations (Corporanzo *et al.,* 2003). In line with the tenets of EVT (Burgoon and Hale, 1988), this study proposes that since emotional exhaustion is associated with perceptions of unmet expectations of organisational care and fairness, it depletes employees' emotional resources and prevents the formation of a positive relationship with the organisation. This, in turn, will engender a reduction in employee commitment to the organisation (Tourigny *et al.*, 2013).

Overall, this study contributes to the literature by introducing a novel values-driven framework to explicate and manage negatively valenced interpersonal interactions amongst co-workers for better employee outcomes. While EVT has been used to analyse interpersonal relationships, political situations, and online communication behaviour, its application in analysing organisational behaviour has been sparse. Our study is amongst the few (e.g. Liu *et al.,* 2020) which extend this theory's application to the organisational behaviour literature, and the literature on co-worker mistreatment more specifically. Additionally, by adopting EVT, this study offers new insights into the role of leadership on the relationship between co-worker undermining and employee outcomes. Recently, there have been calls for research on the role of leadership in alleviating the negative consequences of co-worker undermining (Jang and Kim, 2021). The study extends the literature by proposing that servant leadership could buffer the relationship between co-worker undermining, emotional exhaustion and consequently organisational commitment. By so doing, the study responds also to recent calls for more research on the boundary conditions of the relationship between organisational interpersonal stressors (especially interpersonal mistreatment), emotional exhaustion, and the consequences of exhaustion (Al-Hawari *et al.*, 2020). The proposed relationships are tested

using time-lagged data from a sample of nurses in a large public hospital in Malaysia.

Concerns about co-worker undermining and well-being are very common in the healthcare

sector, especially among nurses, and can have catastrophic effects, not only on the victimised

nurses, but also on patients and the whole organisation (Granstra, 2015; Wood *et al.,* 2013).

Theoretical background and hypotheses

EVT posits that within specific contexts, individuals establish expectations (i.e. expectancies)

about others' behaviour and respond to violations of interaction expectations based on the

extent to which the violation is judged as positive or negative (violation valence). The more a

violation departs from the expectancy, the larger the effect, with negative violations exerting

greater effects than positive ones (Bettencourt and Manning, 2016). Additionally,

expectancies are shaped by valences that individuals attach to communicators'

characteristics, encapsulated as communicator reward valence in EVT, which determines

whether the interaction with the communicator is deemed useful and rewarding or not

(Burgoon and Hale,1988). The rewardingness of the communicator influences perceptions of

what constitutes a violation and to what extent (Burgoon, 2015). The conceptual foundation

of EVT provides useful insight for understanding employee responses to co-worker

undermining.

Co-worker undermining, emotional exhaustion, and organisational commitment

Usually, negatively valenced interactions are more influential than positive ones (Baumeister

et al., 2001). Therefore, the effect of misbehaving colleagues on an employee is more likely

to be stronger than that of well-behaving ones (Robinson *et al.*, 2014). Co-worker

undermining includes behaviours such as giving the silent treatment, hurting feelings, not

giving help and support when needed, and giving misleading information (Duffy *et al.*,

2002). Such behaviours not only challenge victimised employees, by negatively violating

their anticipated norms of co-worker interaction, but also threaten the organisation as a whole

(Robinson *et al.*, 2014; Jang and Kim, 2021). Employees hold expectations about the nature of the exchange with their employing organisation and its obligations towards them. They expect gains that are equivalent or comparable to their investments (Tourigny *et al.*, 2013). The expectations relate to issues such as dignity at work, esteem, support from colleagues, security and care, and opportunity for fair interpersonal exchange. Balance and equity are the main outcomes that employees seek in their relationship with their organisation. If that is compromised, workers will try to readjust their offering in the exchange and their outcomes will be suboptimal. EVT predicts that when individuals' experiences disconfirm their expectations negatively, they perceive a negative violation valence due to which their emotional arousal response is intensified, which in turn is more likely to deplete their emotional resources and elicit negative emotional reactions and attitudes (Hu *et al.,* 2021). Thus, when employees' high expectations, such as collegiality at work, diverge from the reality, they develop emotional exhaustion.

Undermining from co-workers strongly affects an employee, because work colleagues are valuable and rewarding organisational stakeholders who have a big influence on an individual's workplace reputation, relationships, and work success (Duffy *et al.*, 2002). From an EVT perspective, co-worker relationships are guided by established social rules and expectations, such as helping a colleague when asked and not criticising a co-worker publicly (Henderson and Argyle, 1986). Co-worker undermining is a "form of rule-breaking behaviour" in which work colleagues or co-workers intentionally violate these expected rules of typical behaviour and the established norms of interpersonal exchange (Mostafa *et al.*, 2021, p. 359). Therefore, according to EVT, employees experiencing co-worker undermining will perceive unmet expectancies about civility and fair exchange amongst co-workers (negative violation valence), rendering employees to feel that they are putting much more into the relationship with colleagues than they receive. This imbalanced exchange

relationship and unexpected (violating) behaviour are likely to be associated with reduced well-being and result in emotional exhaustion (Mostafa *et al.*, 2021).

Scholars argue that emotional exhaustion hinders the development of positive interactions or exchange relationships, which, in turn, lowers organisational commitment (Cropanzano *et al.*, 2003). Emotional exhaustion is generally viewed by individuals as costly and unjustified. As such, emotionally exhausted individuals feel emotionally over-extended, fatigued, and psychologically drained of emotional energy (Wright and Cropanzano 1998), signifying an uneven and atypical organisational exchange. For such individuals, emotional exhaustion signifies a 'violated assumption' of organisational care and attention and is a cost that exceeds any benefits they get from their organisation (Cropanzano *et al.*, 2003). This makes them resent their employer and perceive the relationship with their organisation as unfair (Cropanzano *et al.*, 2003). As a result, they will adjust their emotional investment in the organisation and will lower their levels of commitment (Tourigny *et al.*, 2013). EVT supports that negative expectancy violation, such as co-worker undermining and emotional exhaustion, play an important role in determining individuals' responses to the violating organisation (e.g. retracting organisational commitment) because such violations result from an organisation's failure to meet individuals' high expectations (Burgoon 1993; Hu *et al.*, 2021). Prior research findings provide support for these assumptions (e.g. Cropanzano *et al.*, 2003; Tourigny *et al.*, 2013). Accordingly, the following is hypothesised:

> *Hypothesis 1: Emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between co-worker*
> *undermining and organisational commitment.*

The moderating role of servant leadership

Eva *et al.* (2019) have defined servant leadership as "an other-oriented approach to leadership manifested through one-on-one prioritizing of follower individual needs and interests, and outward reorienting of their concern for self towards concern for others within the

organization and the larger community" (p. 114). Servant leadership differs from value-based leadership styles such as transformational, ethical, and authentic leadership (Lee *et al.,* 2020). Compared to transformational leadership, in which the focus is on achieving the goals of the organisation through motivated employees, servant leadership gives more attention to followers and their needs. For transformational leaders, followers are "a means to an end", whereas for servant leaders, the development of followers and fulfilling their needs is "an end in itself" (Sendjaya and Cooper, 2011, p. 417). In relation to both ethical and authentic leadership, servant leadership puts more emphasis on the development of followers and promoting their interests, besides the interests of the wider society (van Dierendonck, 2011). In general, compared to other leadership approaches, servant leadership is "in a unique position" (van Dierendonck, 2011, p. 1238) and clearly focuses on the development of followers in different areas such as their mental well-being and emotional growth (Eva *et al.*, 2019). This study argues that such employee-focused characteristics make servant leaders valuable and rewarding organisational agents who, according to EVT, possess high 'communicator reward valence' which is needed to maintain meaningful interactions and, by extension, work-related well-being, and attitudes.

The formation of balanced and fair relationships at work that conform to anticipated social norms is vital for employees' well-being, and helps reduce emotional exhaustion (Schaufeli, 2006). From employees' perspective, servant leaders are attractive authority figures who establish mutually beneficial exchange relationships - meeting the implicit expectations that followers assign to the leadership role. Such leaders are generally viewed as ethical, fair, and trustworthy (Eva *et al.*, 2019). They show respect for employees, acknowledge their contributions, and most importantly display genuine concern to their needs (Lamprinou *et al.*, 2021). They value and support followers and provide them with all the resources required to cope with the demands of their jobs (van Dierendonck, 2011). Indeed,

prior empirical research and meta-analyses have shown that servant leaders care about their followers' well-being and help reduce their levels of emotional exhaustion (e.g. Rivkin *et al.*, 2014). This suggests that servant leadership can help weaken the relationship between co-worker undermining and employees' emotional exhaustion.

Since leaders or supervisors are the "most salient" people in the work environment (Stordeur *et al.*, 2001, p. 535), they have more power and status than co-workers (i.e. higher reward valence) and are presumed to be accountable for the implementation of organisational plans and strategies (Ng and Sorensen, 2008). Specifically, leaders are often viewed as 'valenced' organisational representatives who are the ultimate line of defence when dysfunctional behaviours, such as co-worker undermining, occur within an organisation. Favourable interactions with leaders, specifically in such situations, are more valuable than interactions with co-workers because the responsibility of mitigating dysfunctional behaviours within the workplace resides with the organisation's managers and/or supervisors. Therefore, supervisors' actions (including support) and their capacity in valencing violations are of bigger influence on employees and their well-being than the actions of co-workers (including undermining behaviours) (Ng and Sorensen, 2008; Wood *et al.*, 2013). EVT posits that interpretations of violation valence are affected by violators' reward valence such that communicators with high status and power have been appraised as delivering more meaningful interactions simply because of those characteristics (Burgoon, 2015). Accordingly, the strong interpersonal relationships developed with servant leaders can help boost followers' self-esteem and enable them cognitively to reframe their negative exchanges with co-workers by influencing their violation interpretation-evaluation process and manage the related negative emotions that emerge from problematic relationships (Fiori *et al.*, 2013). Such positive interactions between employees and highly valenced servant leaders, in line with EVT, can help weaken the extent of the negative violation valence of the relationship

between negative social interactions with co-workers and employees' emotional exhaustion. Accordingly, the following is hypothesised:

Hypothesis 2: Servant leadership moderates the relationship between co-worker undermining and emotional exhaustion, such that the positive relationship between co-worker undermining and exhaustion will be weaker when servant leadership is high compared to low.

Based on hypotheses 1 and 2, and following the logic of moderated mediation, it is proposed that when servant leadership is high, the mediated relationship between co-worker undermining and organisational commitment via emotional exhaustion will be weaker.

Hypothesis 3: Servant leadership moderates the indirect relationship between co-worker undermining and organisational commitment via emotional exhaustion, such that the mediated relationship will be weaker under high than low servant leadership.

Method

Participants and procedure

Data were collected using a paper and pen survey from a sample of nurses in a large (314 beds) public (not-for-profit) hospital in Malaysia. The hospital provides general medicine and a wide range of speciality services. To reduce common method bias, data were collected at two points in time at an interval of 4 weeks (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2012). At Time 1, nurses rated co-worker undermining, servant leadership, and the control variables (i.e. transformational leadership, gender, age, education and hospital tenure). At Time 2, they rated emotional exhaustion and organisational commitment. Participants were informed that their involvement in the study was voluntary and were assured confidentiality. A fieldworker assigned unique ID numbers to each participating nurse, which were used to match their data at each time point. All questionnaires were pre-coded with the designated IDs. Nurses collected and returned the completed questionnaires in sealed envelopes directly to a survey

counter. Fieldworkers dropped the questionnaires to the departments of some nurses who were working night shifts.

The survey was distributed to 396 nurses at Time 1, and 350 responses were received (88.4% response rate). At Time 2, 345 nurses completed the survey (99% response rate). A token of appreciation was given to nurses upon completion of each wave of the survey to encourage a high response rate. Most of the nurses in the final sample were female (93%), were aged 40 or below (82%), had completed college (80%), and had 10 years or less of tenure with the hospital (59%).

Measures

Using Brislin's (1970) back-translation procedure, the questionnaire was translated by a bilingual researcher into Malay and then back-translated into English. All items were assessed using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Co-worker undermining was assessed with Duffy *et al.*'s (2002) 13-item measure. A sample item is "My co-workers insult me". Cronbach's alpha was 0.962.

Servant leadership was assessed with Liden *et al.*'s (2008) 28-item measure. In this measure, four items assess each of the seven dimensions of servant leadership (i.e. putting subordinates first, emotional healing, empowering, creating value for the community, helping subordinates grow and succeed, behaving ethically, and conceptual skills). A sample item is "My supervisor cares about my personal well-being". Cronbach's alpha for the seven dimensions ranged between 0.770 and 0.939. Servant leadership was measured as a composite score across its seven dimensions. Cronbach's alpha for the overall servant leadership scale was 0.972.

Exhaustion was measured with the eight items of the exhaustion subscale of the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (Demerouti and Bakker, 2008). A sample item is "During my work, I often feel emotionally drained". Cronbach's alpha was 0.886.

Organisational commitment was assessed with Allen and Meyer's (1990) 8-item affective commitment measure. A sample item is "I feel a strong sense of belonging to my hospital". Cronbach's alpha was 0.842.

Controls. Research has shown that transformational leadership is the most dominant leadership style on which a majority of leadership styles, including servant leadership, are based (Hoch *et al.,* 2018; Lee *et al.,* 2020). Hence, in line with the recommendation of Antonakis (2017), transformational leadership was controlled for to lessen omitted variable bias and evaluate the incremental validity of servant leadership. Transformational leadership was measured with four items developed by Podsakoff et al. (1990). The items assess the four dimensions of transformational leadership: inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, idealised influence, and individualised consideration (Bass, 1985). Cronbach's alpha was 0.878.

Besides transformational leadership, employees' gender, age, education and organisational tenure were also considered as potential controls. Prior research and meta-analyses have shown that these variables are antecedents of exhaustion and organisational commitment (e.g. Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Mostafa, 2022b). To identify which of these to use, the recommendations of Becker (2005) and Bernerth and Aguinis (2016) were followed and only the variables that were significantly related to exhaustion and/or commitment were included in the analysis. Accordingly, age and tenure were also controlled for.

Confirmatory factor analysis

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to check the validity and reliability of the study measures. Because of the relatively small sample size, and to help maintain a feasible indicator-to-sample size ratio, item parcels were used as indicators of the latent variables in the analysis (Little e*t al.*, 2013). Compared to individual items, parcels have more

commonality and reliability, and help reduce parameter estimates and the big number of degrees of freedom that could cause estimation problems (Little *et al.*, 2013).

Consistent with previous servant leadership research (e.g. Mostafa and Abed El-Motalib, 2019; Mostafa, 2022), seven parcels were formed by averaging the items measuring each dimension of the construct. The parcels of co-worker undermining, emotional exhaustion, organisational commitment, and transformational leadership were created by sequentially averaging the items with the lowest and highest factor loadings. The five-factor measurement model demonstrated an adequate fit (χ^2 (df = 242) = 745.898, $p < 0.01$, CFI = 0.932, TLI = 0.916, RMSEA = 0.078). For the five constructs, the average variance extracted (AVE) was above 0.5 and the composite reliability was above 0.8, which shows that the constructs possessed high internal consistency. The AVE square root for the five constructs was also larger than the intercorrelations between them (see Table 1), which provides evidence of discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

-Please Insert Table 1 Here-

Common method bias was assessed using the common method factor approach, which involves the estimation of a measurement model in which items load on their theoretical construct and a common factor (Chang *et al.,* 2010). The average variance explained by the common factor was 0.21, which is much less than the 0.50 criterion proposed by Fornell & Larcker (1981) as indicative of a substantive construct. Therefore, common method bias is not a concern.

Analytical strategy

To account for the nested nature of the data (i.e., 345 nurses working under 33 supervisors), generalized multilevel structural equation modelling (GSEM) in STATA was used to test the

hypotheses, and a two-level mixed-effects model in which nurses (i.e., the first-level observations) were nested within supervisors (i.e., the second-level groups) was estimated. In the model, the mediator variable, emotional exhaustion, was regressed on co-worker undermining, servant leadership, and their interaction term (i.e. co-worker undermining $\times$ servant leadership), whereas organisational commitment, the outcome variable, was regressed on the control variables, emotional exhaustion, co-worker undermining, servant leadership and their interaction term. Composite scores were used in the analysis and the variables were grand mean-centred.

Hypotheses testing results

Table 2 presents the results of the moderated mediation model. Co-worker undermining was positively related to emotional exhaustion ($\beta = 0.138$, $p < 0.01$) which, in turn, was negatively related to organisational commitment ($\beta = -0.469$, $p < 0.01$). In addition, the indirect effect of co-worker undermining on commitment via exhaustion was significant ($\beta = -0.065$, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI $= -0.112$ to -0.017). Together, these results provide support for Hypothesis 1.

-Please Insert Table 2 Here-

The interaction term of co-worker undermining and servant leadership was significant and negative ($\beta = -0.085$, $p < 0.05$)[1]. Using Aiken and West's (1991) procedure, the simple slope plot for this interaction is presented in Figure 2. The relationship between co-worker undermining and exhaustion was non-significant when servant leadership perceptions were

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[1] We tested a moderated mediation model in which servant leadership was a control and transformational leadership was a moderator. The results exhibited that transformational leadership had a non-significant association with exhaustion and commitment. Likewise, the interaction effect of co-worker undermining $\times$ transformation leadership on exhaustion was also non-significant. This confirms that servant leadership explains more variance above and beyond transformational leadership.

high (β = -0.249, SE = 0.182, t = -1.37, *p* = .170), but was significant when servant leadership perceptions were low (β = 0.525, SE = 0.182, t = 2.89, *p* < 0.01). Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

-Please Insert Figure 1 Here-

Finally, as Table 2 shows, the indirect relationship between co-worker undermining and organisational commitment via emotional exhaustion was significant and negative when servant leadership was low (β = −0.106, *p* < 0.01, 95% CI = −0.168 to −0.044) but was non-significant when servant leadership was high (β = −0.023, *p* = 0.435, 95% CI = −0.082 to 0.035). Hypothesis 3 was therefore also supported.

Discussion

Drawing on EVT, this study sought to provide insights on the role of servant leadership in mitigating the negative impact of co-worker undermining on employee outcomes. As hypothesised, co-worker undermining is related to organisational commitment via emotional exhaustion. Moreover, this relationship was weaker when servant leadership was high.

The study findings are in line with prior research that has shown that mistreatment from colleagues triggers negative affective and attitudinal outcomes (Robinson *et al.*, 2014). This is consistent with EVT and confirms that when individuals experience mistreatment by co-workers, they will perceive this as a negative violation of the social rules and expected norms of interaction with other employees and the organisation. This, in turn, will result in an intensified emotional response and depletion of emotional resources (i.e. emotional exhaustion). As emotional exhaustion itself signifies a 'violated assumption' of organisational care and attention towards employees (Burgoon 1993; Hu *et al.,* 2021), it will lead to the adjustment of the emotional investment in the organisation by reducing

organisational commitment (Mostafa *et al.*, 2021; Tourigny *et al.*, 2013). It is important to note that the association between co-worker undermining and emotional exhaustion was not strong ($\beta = 0.138$). Besides co-worker undermining, healthcare employees usually deal with other types of interpersonal mistreatment such as abusive supervision and customer mistreatment (Al-Hawari *et al.*, 2020; Mostafa, 2022). Therefore, in combination with these types of mistreatment, the effect of co-worker mistreatment on exhaustion will be more considerable.

The study extends the literature on the moderators of the relationship between co-worker undermining and employee outcomes. The findings revealed that servant leadership helps reduce the negative consequences of co-worker mistreatment on exhaustion and consequently organisational commitment. Servant leaders are salient authority figures who enjoy a high reward valence for employees due to their explicit focus on employee needs and development. Additionally, on comparison, interactions with servant leaders carry more value for employees than interactions with co-workers as the relative reward valence of a leader is arguably higher than that of a co-worker. From EVT prespective, this suggests that positive interactions between employees and servant leaders compensate to help employees cognitively reframe their negative exchanges with co-workers, and manage the related negative emotions that emerge from problematic relationships. Very few studies have analysed the role of leadership in alleviating the negative consequences of co-worker undermining (Jang and Kim, 2021). This study focused on servant leadership because of its emphasis on followers and the promotion of their needs and interests (Eva *et al.*, 2019), which co-worker undermining disregards. Future research can consider the role of other leadership styles in influencing the effects of co-worker mistreatment on other types of employee outcomes such as withdrawal behaviours, job search behaviour, or helping behaviours.

Co-worker undermining and well-being concerns are very common in healthcare organisations and are attributed to factors such as emotional labour, budget cuts, under staffing, and increased job demands (Carter *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, it has been argued that leaders in healthcare organisations need the support of organisational level initiatives to effectively deal with mistreatment and distress (Mostafa *et al.*, 2021). Future research could assess how organisational initiatives to combat undermining could assist leaders in alleviating the impact of mistreatment on employee outcomes.

Practical Implications

Organisations need to invest in interventions that could reduce co-worker undermining. For instance, excessive work pressures should be avoided as these undermine employees' perceived psychological capital and initiate co-worker undermining (Jang and Kim, 2021). Likewise, mentoring, including peer mentoring, could be used to integrate employees and limit dysfunctional personnel situations. Harmonious work environments could also be strengthened by introducing programmes aimed at advancing and nurturing a culture of civility at work. This could involve building an infrastructure based on robust codes of ethics and professional conduct, formal procedures for dealing with complaints, formal monitoring of the social work environment, and disciplinary measures against cases of workplace misbehaviours (Einarsen *et al.*, 2017). Equally importantly, employees should also condition co-worker relations by being friendly to others. They should engage in positive behaviours to enhance peer consciousness of their actions (Song and Zhao, 2022). Specifically, high-performing employees should indulge in prosocial behaviour and share strategies for good practice (e.g., good patient care). Organisations should refrain from emphasising competition for rewards to buttress healthy relationships amongst co-workers.

Although co-worker undermining could sometimes be beyond the control of the leader because there are multiple factors that contribute towards its occurrence (Mostafa *et*

al., 2021), servant leadership helps reduce the negative effects of co-worker undermining. Therefore, organisations need to put emphasis on promoting servant leadership (Lee *et al.,* 2020). This could be via strategies such as hiring managers or supervisors based on qualities like integrity and altruism. Training programs for managers or supervisors could also emphasize the development of servant leadership behaviours by including elements such as satisfying the work needs of subordinates, enhancing their career growth, and caring for them. Moreover, when designing performance evaluations for managers or supervisors, the different attributes of servant leadership could be considered (Mostafa, 2022).

Limitations

First, despite the time-lagged nature of the study data, causal interpretations cannot be made. Longitudinal or experimental studies can help better establish causality. Second, the study data were gathered from the same respondents and self-report measures were used. Therefore, the findings are vulnerable to single source bias. However, the temporal separation of measurements helps give confidence in the results. Future research combining subjective and objective measures, or using data from different sources can help further reduce common method bias concerns. Third, co-worker undermining was assessed as a general phenomenon reflecting how much co-workers engage in undermining. This masks whether co-worker undermining is a unit-level or an individual-level problem, which requires different interventions from servant leaders. Future studies may utilise variance analysis or network analysis to establish whether the outcomes of co-worker undermining differ when undermining is instigated by all co-workers in a unit versus a few individuals. Fourth, nurses' job involves enduring emotional labour and patient mistreatment which may induce emotional exhaustion (Carter *et al.,* 2013; Mostafa, 2022). This aspect can also be explored in future studies. Finally, the studys' data were collected from a single hospital in Malaysia,

which limits the generalisability of the results. The study needs to be replicated in other contexts and countries.

Despite the limitations, the study advances knowledge by using EVT as a lens to explicate "why" co-worker undermining relates negatively to employee outcomes and emphasise the role of servant leadership in ameliorating such negative consequences.

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Table 1

Intercorrelations, Reliability Estimates and Descriptive Statistics

Construct	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Age							
2. Tenure	0.731***						
3. Transformational Leadership	0.044	-0.020	0.891, (0.884)				
4. Co-worker Undermining	-0.122**	- 0.116**	- 0.069	0.902, (0.968)			
5. Servant Leadership	0.026	0.003	0.783***	- 0.164***	0.835, (0.941)		
6. Emotional Exhaustion	- 0.203***	- 0.224***	-0.101	0.207***	-0.201***	0.814, (0.887)	
7. Organisational Commitment	0.183***	0.133**	0.147***	-0.055	0.202***	-0.539***	0.767, (0.850)
Mean	1.90	2.42	4.51	2.46	4.54	3.68	4.45
Standard Deviation	0.76	1.04	1.18	1.07	1.03	1.01	0.91

Note. Sub-diagonal entries are the inter-correlations. The first entry on the diagonal is the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) and the second (in parentheses) is the composite reliability

$**p < 0.05$; $***p < 0.01$

Table 2

Results of Moderated Mediation Model

	Exhaustion				Organisational Commitment			
	β (SE)	t	LL	UL	β (SE)	t	LL	UL
Control Variables								
Age	-.110 (0.101)	-1.08	-0.308	0.089	0.157 (0.084)	1.87	-0.008	0.322
Hospital Tenure	-.141 (0.073)	-1.94	-0.283	0.001	-0.060 (0.060)	-1.02	-0.178	0.056
Transformational Leadership	.099 (0.071)	1.40	-0.039	0.238	0.019 (0.058)	0.33	- 0.095	0.133
Predictor Variable								
Co-worker Undermining	0.138 (0.050)	2.74***	0.039	0.236	0.063 (0.041)	1.54	- 0.017	0.144
Moderator Variable								
Servant Leadership	-0.253 (0.082)	-3.10***	- 0.413	-0.093	0.074 (0.068)	1.10	- 0.058	0.207
Mediator Variable								
Exhaustion					-0.469 (0.045)	-10.44***	-0.557	-0.381
Interaction Effect								
Co-worker Undermining × Servant Leadership	-0.085 (0.038)	-2.22**	-0.161	-0.010	0.014 (0.032)	0.43	- 0.049	0.076
Indirect effect								
Co-worker Undermining ⟶ Exhaustion ⟶ Commitment	-	-	-	-	-0.065 (0.024)	-2.65***	-0.112	-0.017
Conditional Indirect Effect								
Low Servant Leadership	-	-	-	-	-0.106 (0.032)	-3.34***	- 0.168	- 0.044
Mean Servant Leadership	-	-	-	-	-0.065 (0.024)	-2.65***	- 0.112	- 0.017
High Servant Leadership	-	-	-	-	-0.023 (0.030)	-0.78	- 0.082	0.035

Note. SE = Standard error; 95% Confidence interval lower limit = LL; 95% Confidence interval upper limit = UL

`**$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$

Figure 1

The Moderating Role of Servant Leadership in the Relationship between Co-Worker Undermining and Exhaustion