ANTECEDENTS AND OUTCOMES OF CUSTOMER PERCEIVED ETHICALITY IN INDIAN HOTELS: A MODERATING ROLE OF ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

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Purpose- This study aims to propose a comprehensive causal model to explain the relationship between unethical culture (UEC), employee's unethical behaviour (EUB), ethical leadership (EL), customer perceived ethicality (CPE), customer trust (CT) and customer loyalty (CL) in hotel industry.

Design/methodology/approach- Current study collects data from employee and customers residing in Delhi/NCR. The data was collected based on non-probability convenience sampling technique and proposed hypothesis was tested by using PLS algorithm along with bootstrapping approach.

Findings- UEC has positive and significant effect on EUB. UEC and EUB significantly influence CPE. Further, EL moderates on relationship between UEC, EUB and CPE. CPE exerted significant influence CT which in turn influence CL.

Originality/value- This study makes a twofold contribution. Initially, the authors highlight the previously overlooked impact of UEC and EUB on shaping CPE. Additionally, the study establishes the moderating influence of EL in the connection between UEC, EUB, and CPE.

1. Introduction

The Indian hotel industry has witnessed a period of modest growth in recent years, and it exhibits substantial potential to sustain this trajectory in the future, as indicated in the India Hotel Market Report for 2023.This growth has led to increased competition in hotels industry, due to this, it is essential for hotels to build CL (Nyagadza et al. 2022). Ru and Jantan (2023) stated that developing CL is important as the cost of attracting new customer is high as compare to retaining existing ones. However, hotels have occasionally engaged in unethical behaviour (Chen and Liu, 2022). This has evolved into a pressing issue that demands a resolution. Ethical issues in hotels such as employee unethical behaviour and unethical culture (Hoang et al. 2023), which may affect CPE which in turn diminishes CT and CL. Scholars suggest that these ethical issues can be addressed by applying EL (Mkheimer et al. 2022; Garba et al. 2022) which can cultivate ethical culture and employee ethical behaviour, so that customers can be treated with respect, fairness and creditability (Brown et al. 2005). Research indicated that EL deserves special attention in hotel industries (Hoang et al. 2023), which minimize ethical issues, cultivate ethical culture and promote employee ethical behaviour which in turn effect CPE, and builds CT and

CL. Therefore, it is essential to conduct a study how hotel industries can cultivate ethical culture and promote employee ethical behaviour through applying EL which in turn effect CPE, and builds CT and CL. Furthermore, results shown in this study guide hotels in the formulation of effective strategy towards building CL.

Due to the increasing demand for ethical standards in a competitive business landscape, EL has garnered significant attention, as noted by Al Halbusi et al. in 2021.Rabie and Malek (2020) stated that EL improve ethical culture and avoid EUB, however, despite of having ethical practices, still employees are engaged in unethical behaviour at workplace. Schwepker Jr and Dimitriou (2021) found that hotel's employees faces heavy workloads, resulting in unethical behaviour. Therefore, it is urgent need to clarify the prevention strategies that avoid EUC and unethical behaviour of hotel employees (Chen and Liu, 2022). Beside this, UEC and EUB can have a significant effect on CPE, and it led to erode trust, reputation damage and loyalty damage. Therefore, this study offer more details to better explore the influence mechanism of UEC and EUB on CPE, so that hotels can restore CT and CL.

Previous studies on EL are linked with employee's innovation behaviour (Ye et al. 2023), employee performance (Halvorsen et al. 2022), innovative work behaviour (Liu et al. 2023); knowledge sharing and knowledge creation (Goswami and Agrawal, 2023); employee ethical behaviour (Al Halbusi et al. 2022); sustainable performance (Dey et al. 2022) and ethical climate (Yang et al. 2023). However, the interaction of UEC, EUB and EL with CPE in the context of hotel industries has overlooked in previous studies. Accordingly, this study aims to examine the relationships between UEC, EUB and EL with CPE that build CT and CL. Furthermore, based on underpinning theory, this study tries to build a theoretical model between UEC, EUB, EL, CPE, CT and CL and explore strategies for cultivating EC and avoidance of EEB by verifying the moderating role of EL on relationship between UEC, EUB and CPE. Moreover, the following research questions were addressed: (1) Can UEC influence EUB? (2) Does UEC and EUB significantly influence CPE? (3) Does EL moderates on relationship between UEC, EUB and CPE (4) Can CPE influence CT? (5) Can CT influence CL? Furthermore, the framework proposed in this study can assist hotel industries, hotel managers and policymakers in improving CL based on UEC, EUB, EL, CPE and CT and provides a reference for managers on how to improve EC to prevent EUB while achieving CL.

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1 Underpinning theories

2.2 Unethical culture and employee unethical behaviour

Ethical conduct is an important component of doing business, as company's ethics help to shape employee behaviour (Erdilek Karabay et al. 2018). Unethical behaviour refers to behaviour that violate moral and social standard (Zhao and Qu, 2022). Kopicko (2018) concluded that unethical behaviour could be harmful to organization in terms of financial and non-financial term. In stronger ethical culture EUB is rarely observed (Silveira, 2023). Sudsakorn and Rattanawiboonsoom (2018) revealed that organizational culture has substantial influence on ethical decision making and behaviour. Biggerstaff et al. (2013) suggested that UEC originates from the action and attitude of top CEOs. The study of Erdilek Karabay et al. (2018) in the context of insurance industry found that EUC and EUB are positively correlated. Therefore, we hypothesize that

H1. Unethical culture has positive and significant effect on employee unethical behaviour

2.3 Unethical culture and customer perceived ethicality

Many researchers have suggested that it is important for brand to be perceived ethicality (Fatma and Rahman, 2017). In the contemporary era, the surge in ethical consumerism has prompted brands to adopt ethical behavior and project an ethical corporate image, as emphasized by Markovic et al. in 2018. Consequently, brands must demonstrate their social and ethical dedication consistently at every customer interaction point, as highlighted by Batool et al. in 2023.CSR practices and organization culture are the two powerful ways that firms can demonstrate their commitment to social and ethical values. It is equally important for organizations to communicate ethical values to their stakeholders (Fatma and Rahman, 2017). Thomas and Kumar (2016) found that hotels who have seriously focused on social and ethical values have experienced growth, profit and retention. In same vein the study of Nicolaides (2019) found that hotels who build ethical culture are likely to experience positive outcomes. An unethical organizational culture exerts a detrimental influence on how customers perceive the ethicality of a company. When customer perceive unethical culture can led to trust erosion, reputation damage and drop-in retention rate. Therefore, we hypothesize that

H2. Unethical culture has negative and significant effect on customer perceived ethicality

2.4 Employee unethical behaviour and customer perceived ethicality

Recently, EUB has gained significant attention in hotel industry among researchers (Chen and Liu, 2022). Trevino et al. (2006) define EUB as a behaviour carried out by employees that violate business ethics and ethical standards, and has a negative influence on CPE and organization outcomes. Roman (2012) found that in competitive environment customer-oriented is not enough, contact employees need to perceived ethical by the customers. In the context of service industry Keung (2000) found that customer satisfaction is influenced by the interactions with the service personnel. If an employee behaviour is perceived as unethical, it downgrades the assessment of service received (Keung, 2000) which in turn effect CL ((Mulki and Jaramillo, 2011). Similarly, the study of Ferrel et al. (2019) found that EUB erode customer satisfaction, brand image, sales performance and CL. Therefore, we hypothesize that

H3. Employee unethical behaviour has negative and significant effect on customer perceived ethicality

2.5 Ethical leadership moderates on relationship between unethical culture and customer perceived ethicality

Kim (2021) stated the EL has been considered as a central source for ethical guidance for employees. Kolthoff et al. (2010) and Ardichvili et al. (2012) revealed that EL is a strong predictor to establish EC and offset the negative effect of UEC. In same vein the study of Ishak et al. (2019) found that ethical leaders shape the EC by maintaining integrity and ethical standards. Cho and Lee (2018) stated that ethical leaders influence followers by exhibiting honest and trustworthy behaviour. Slavec Gomezel and Stritar (2023) emphasized that EL enhance firm growth and pays off for entrepreneurs to be ethical leaders. Aloustani et al. (2020) revealed that ethical leaders plays a crucial role in establishing ethical climate by mitigating the effect of UEC, instilling confidence in customers that the company remains committed to ethical conduct. Therefore, we hypothesize that

H4. Ethical leadership moderates on relationship between unethical culture and customer perceived ethicality

2.6 Ethical leadership moderates on relationship between employee unethical behaviour and customer perceived ethicality

Metwally et al. (2019) stated that ethical leaders have distinct characteristics that affect employees' attitude and behaviour. Wadei et al. (2020) found that EL is an asset for firms that promote and improve

performance of employees. The study of Antunez et al. (2023) found that EL prevent EEB by reducing the unethical climate. In organisations where unethical behaviour is on rise, ethical leaders mitigate the negative effect of unethical behaviour (Kim, 2021). By doing so they establish an ethical climate that upholds ethical behaviour of employees, assuring customers towards the commitment of firm towards ethical conduct. Therefore, we hypothesize that

H5. Ethical leadership moderates on relationship between employee unethical behaviour and customer perceived ethicality

2.7 Customer perceived ethicality and customer trust

In a competitive environment trust is important for the company's survival (Batool et al. 2023). Brunk (2012) introduced CPE and defines CPE as an ethical perception of customer about a product or services. Through this ethical perception customers make purchases and committed to brand (Singh et al. 2012). Mohr and Webb (2005) revealed that companies that behave ethically have loyal customer base. The empirical study of Kanwal and Siddiqui (2021) found that CPE directly influence CT. Similarly, the findings of Batool et al. (2023) and Singh et al. (2012) revealed that CPE contributes to brand trust. The study of Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Aleman (2005) implies that trust is related positive outcome of CPE. Therefore, we hypothesize that

H6. Customer perceived ethicality has a positive and significant effect on customer trust

2.8 Customer trust and customer loyalty

Batool et al. (2023) concluded that trust and loyalty is important for company's survival and successful relationships with customer. Matzler et al. (2008) revealed that trust developed between firm and customer generates positive outcomes such as CL. The empirical study of Utami (2015) found that level of trust contributes to CL. In the context of banking sector Tabrani et al. (2018) found that CT is a predictor of CL. Similarly the study of Tran et al. (2023) in the hospitality sector concluded that CL is affected by CT. Likewise, the study of Muflih et al. (2023) in banking sector concluded that green trust significantly affects green loyalty. Therefore, we hypothesize that

H7. Customer trust has a positive and significant effect on customer loyalty

3. Research methodology

3.1 Sample, sample size and sampling technique

To test the research framework as shown in Figure 1, data were collected from the employees working in hotels and customers of hotels located in Delhi/NCR. To collect the quantitative data non-probability convenience sampling technique has been used. This sampling technique was used due to the unavailability of list of employees and customers of hotels. The study data were collected from January 2023 to April 2023. Questionnaires were self-administrated to the 639 customers and 554 employees, out of which 419 responses from customers and 428 responses from employees were returned resulting in a response rate of 65.5% and 77.2%. After scrutiny, 22 responses from customers and 31 responses from employees were rejected due to missing information resulting in a sample size of 397 customers and 397 employees which is appropriate from the assumption of Krejcie and Morgan (1970) to represent sample population. The demographics of respondents is shown in Table 1.
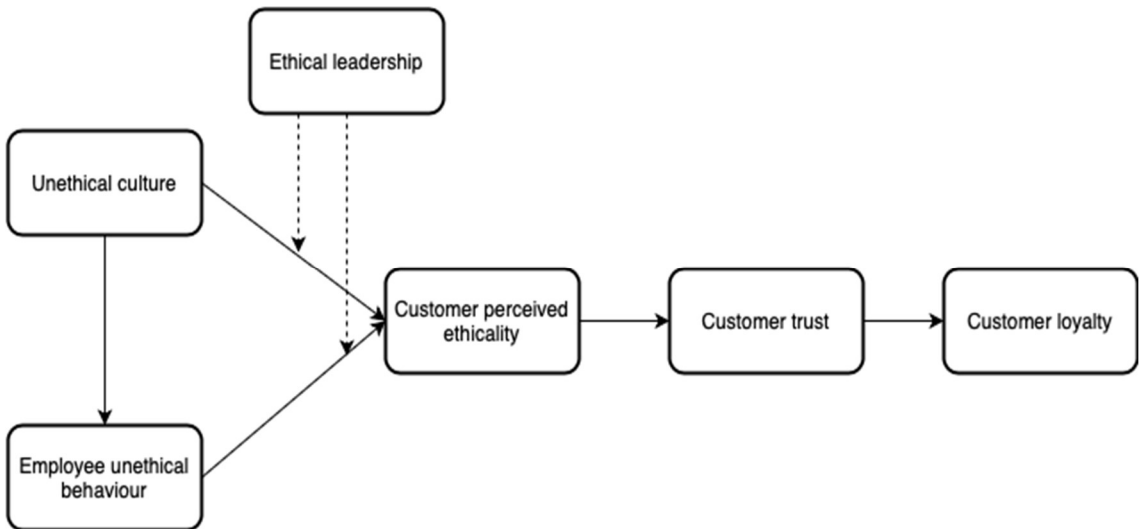
Figure 1. Conceptual framework

Table 1. Demographic summary of customers

	Frequency	%
Gender		
Male	229	57.68
Female	168	42.32
Age		
25-30	167	42.07
30-35	129	32.49
Above 35 years	101	25.44
Educational level		
Bachelor	171	43.07
Masters	142	35.77
Doctorate	84	21.16

Based on the Table 1, 57.68% respondents are male and 42.32% respondents are female. On the basis of age, majority of respondents (42.07%) belongs to 25-30 years. Based on educational level, majority of respondents (43.07%) are bachelor.

Table 2. Demographic summary of employees

	Frequency	%

Gender		
Male	312	78.59
Female	85	21.41
Age		
25-30	173	43.58
30-35	142	35.77
Above 35 years	82	20.65
Educational level		
Bachelor	196	49.37
Masters	110	27.71
Doctorate	91	22.92

3.2 Research instrument

To construct research instrument, all items to measure UEC, EUB, EL, CPE, CT and CL were adopted from the previous literature. Further, all the responses were based on five point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

Ethical leadership was measured by adopting ten-item scale from Brown et al. (2005). The sample item includes "My manager sets an example of how to do things the right way in terms of ethics".

Employee unethical behaviour was measured by adopting seventeen-item scale from Dove (1988). The sample item includes "I never use company services for personal use".

Unethical culture was measured by adopting seven-item scale from Eketu (2014). The sample item includes "Inflation of bills and charges".

Perceived customer ethicality was assessed using a six-item scale drawn from Brunk (2012) and Walsh and Beatty (2007), which included items such as "This hotel appears to exhibit environmental responsibility. Customer trust was gauged with a five-item scale adapted from Morgan and Hunt (1994) and Sirdeshmukh et al. (2002), featuring statements like "I have confidence in the quality of this hotel. Customer loyalty was evaluated using a three-item scale adapted from Dagger et al. (2011), with a sample statement being "I maintain my loyalty to the hotel."

3.3 Data analysis technique

The collected data was analyzed using SPSS software version 26. Model 1 analyze the impact of UEC on EUB. Model 2 analyze the impact of UEC on CPE. Model 3 analyze the impact of EUB on CPE. Model 4 analyze the moderating effect of EL on relationship between UEC and CPE. Model 5 analyze the moderating effect of EL on relationship between EUB and CPE. Model 6 analyze the impact of CPE on CT and model 7 analyze the impact of CT on CL. These relationship were analysed using linear regression and PROCESS MACRO for SPSS.

4. Hypotheses testing

To meet the assumptions for data analysis, multi-collinearity and normality was accessed. The obtained score of multi-collinearity ranged from 1.121 to 2.238 (< 10) indicating the absence of multi-collinearity. Moreover, the data is normally distributed since skewness of all the constructs are within ± 2 (-.509 to .169) and kurtosis values are within ± 3 (-.561 to .254) (see Table 3). Furthermore, the reported values of Cronbach's alpha was greater than 0.7 which means the scale is reliable. Further, using SPSS Harman's one-factor (or single-factor) test was applied to reduce the risk common method bias (CMB) and the total variance estimated of all the used independent variables were below the cut-off point of 50% (35.62%). Table 4 represents the results of linear regression for model 1, 2, 3 and 4.

From Table 4, it is observed that UEC has a positive and significant influence on EUB ($\beta = 0.646, t = 16.839, p < 0.05$). This implies that in UES, EUB is on rise. Thus, H1 is supported. Model 2 depicts that UEC has a negative and significant impact on CPE ($\beta = -0.343, t = 7.118, p < 0.05$). This implies that UEC contribute to CPE. Thus, H2 is supported. Model 3 depicts that EUB has a negative and significant impact on CPE ($\beta = -0.227, t = 5.139, p < 0.05$). Thus, H3 is supported. This implies that EUB erode CPE.

Table 3. Descriptive and normality analysis

	M	SD	α	VIF	Skewness	Kurtosis
Ethical leadership	3.19	1.185	0.791	1.121	-.229	-.561
Unethical culture	3.37	1.097	0.762	1.428	-.272	-.343
Employee unethical behaviour	3.32	1.019	0.842	2.238	-.392	.254
Customer perceived ethicality	3.36	1.077	0.794	1.787	.169	.237
Customer trust	3.41	1.069	0.813	1.818	-.509	.610
Customer loyalty	3.76	1.042	0.787	2.021	-.287	-.412

Note: M= mean; SD = standard deviation; α = Cronbach's alpha; VIF= Variance inflation factor

Table 4. Results of linear regression (model 1, 2 and 3)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	β	t	β	t	β	t
UEC	.646	16.839*				
UEC			-.343	7.118*		
EUB					-0.227	5.139*
R^2	0.418		0.531		0.367	

Table 5. Moderation analysis of ethical leadership on unethical culture to Customer perceived ethicality

<div align="center">95% CI</div>

	Estimate	t	Lower bounds (LB)	Upper bounds (UB)
EL* UEC → CPE	0.691	5.143*	.4271	.9555
R^2	0.332			

Table 6. Moderation analysis of ethical leadership on employee unethical behaviour to Customer perceived ethicality

			95% CI	
	Estimate	t	Lower bounds (LB)	Upper bounds (UB)
EL* EUB → CPE	0.536	4.731*	.3136	.7595
R^2	0.420			

Table 7. Results of linear regression (model 6 and 7)

	Model 6		Model 7	
	β	t	β	t
CPE	0.231	3.629*		
CT			0.463	10.372*
R^2	0.367		0.614	

Beside this, Table 5 shows the results of moderation analysis of EL on UEC to CPE. It is seen that EL moderates on the relationship between EL and UEC ($\beta = 0.691, t = 5.143, p < 0.05, 95\% \ CI = [.427\ .955]$). Further, results shown in Table 6 confirms the moderation analysis of EL on EUB to CPE ($\beta = 0.536, t = 4.731, p < 0.05, 95\% \ CI = [.313\ .759]$). Based on the regression results of model 6 and model 7 confirms the significant influence of CPE on CT (CPE ($\beta = 0.231, t = 3.629, p < 0.05$) and CT on CL ($\beta = 0.463, t = 10.372, p < 0.05$).

5. Discussion

This study aims to examine the antecedents and outcomes of CPE in Indian hotels. The result of hypothesis 1 confirms that UEC contributes to EUB (hypothesis H1). This finding is aligned with the study of Karabay et al. (2018). In UEC, employees are indulged in UEB which can produce negative effect such as decreased reputation, productivity etc. Therefore hotels need to cultivate ethical culture and promote ethical behaviour among employees. In this regard, the study of Kaptein (2011) found a negative association between ethical culture and UEB among employees. The result of hypothesis 2 confirms that UEC negatively contributes to CPE (hypothesis H2). This implies that UEC as perceived by customer leads to influence CPE negatively. In service industry, customers expect integrity, honesty and transparency from business. When they perceive UEC it erodes their trust which in turn effect CL and word-of-mouth. The result of hypothesis 3 confirms that EUB negatively contributes

to CPE (hypothesis H3). In service industry, frontline employees are the one who interact with customers (Batool et al. 2023), if employee exhibit unethical behaviour in the treatment of customers during service, it leads to negative consequence on CPE which in turn erode their trust with business.

The result of hypothesis 4 confirms the moderating effect of EL on relationship between UEC and CPE. Kolthoff et al. (2010) and Ardichvili et al. (2012) concluded that EL mitigates the negative effect of UEC. In same vein Aloustani et al. (2020) revealed that ethical leaders play a crucial role in establishing ethical climate by mitigating the effect of UEC, instilling confidence in customers that the company remains committed to ethical conduct. The result of hypothesis 5 confirms the moderating effect of EL on relationship between EUB and CPE. Metwally et al. (2019) stated that ethical leaders have distinct characteristics that affect employees' attitude and behaviour. The study of Antunez et al. (2023) found that EL prevent EEB by reducing the unethical climate. In organisations where unethical behaviour is on rise, ethical leaders mitigate the negative effect of unethical behaviour (Kim, 2021) and restore the CT.

The result of hypothesis 6 confirms the positive influence of CPE on CT. Previous empirical studies are aligned with this finding (Kanwal and Siddiqui, 2021; Batool et al. 2023 and Singh et al. 2012; Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Aleman, 2005). This implies that when customers perceive ethical behaviour and ethical culture, it leads to increase trust with brand.

The result of hypothesis 7 confirms the positive influence of CT on CL. The finding of this study is consistent with the study of Utami (2015); Tabrani et al. (2018); Tran et al. (2023) and Muflih et al. (2023). Further, the positive influence of CT on CL suggests that when customer develops trust on the basis of ethical perception with the brand it becomes loyal.

6. Theoretical contribution

The present study makes several theorical contributions. First, there is a limited research on impact of UEC, EUB on CPE in hotel industries. Previous studies on EL are linked with employee's innovation behaviour (Ye et al. 2023), employee performance (Halvorsen et al. 2022), innovative work behaviour (Liu et al. 2023); knowledge sharing and knowledge creation (Goswami and Agrawal, 2023); employee ethical behaviour (Al Halbusi et al. 2022); sustainable performance (Dey et al. 2022) and ethical climate (Yang et al. 2023).

Second, this study contributes to show the moderating effect of EL on relationship between UEC, EUB and CPE. As mentioned earlier EL is an important asset of company which can offset the negative effect of UEC and cultivate EUB which leads to enhance performance fair treatment of customers during service. Third, this study also showed the direct effect of UEC on EUB. In UEC, unethical practices are encouraged lead to employees to engage in unethical conduct. Employees may feel less responsible for their own activities if they see that unethical behavior is tolerated or even rewarded. This may result in a climate of impunity where people feel free to act unethically without fear of repercussions. The present study also showed the direct effect of CPE on CT and CT on CL. Past research suggest that on the basis of customer's ethical perception customer trust the brand. Therefore, hotel industry must act ethically in their service to generate trust and develop CL.

7. Managerial implications

This study also has a managerial implication for hotel industries, hotel managers and policymakers. First, hotel industries develop a comprehensive and clear ethics code that outline expected behaviour. in addition, hotel

managers communicate ethical guidelines through trainings, meetings and internal communications. Second, hotel managers must conduct training that emphasize the importance of ethical conduct in delivering services to customers. Third, hotels demonstrate ethical behaviour at all touch point during the interaction with customers. This includes fair pricing and honest communication. In addition, hotel managers must create mechanism for customers to provide feedback on their perception towards ethical practices, so that they can make improvement. Fourth, hotels must deliver high quality service to meet the customer expectations which can influence customer to stay in hotel which can builds trust and loyalty.

8. Limitation and future research direction

The current study has several limitations. First. the sample population of current study is limited to Delhi/NCR which does not represent the entire population of India. To deal with this issue future study can be conducted across different locations of India. Second, this study is based on cross-sectional research design, future study can be conducted by incorporating longitudinal research design. Finally, it would be interesting if future research incorporates other outcomes of CPE such as customer commitment and customer experience.

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