



## How Does Pandemic Simultaneously Alleviate and Aggravate the Effects of Workplace Incivility?

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**Abstract:** Workplace incivility encountered by service employees often aggravate negative outcomes, an assertion well advocated in extant literature. However, the unexpected nuance behaviors and stress responses of employees amid pandemic remain largely underexplored. Hence, by employing conservation of resource and individual adaptability theories, this study is among the few that uniquely illuminates both the adverse and beneficial effects of COVID-19 on workplace outcomes, particularly on employee well-being. The research underwent quantitative analysis using 258 responses from service employees across six major international airports of Pakistan based on passenger traffic. Smart-PLS 4 was employed to assess scale's reliability before establishing validity of the measurement model and testing the hypothesized mediation and moderation effects. Results revealed that customer incivility and abusive supervision significantly increased employees' stress (30% and 40%, respectively), leading to higher quitting intentions and disrupted work-life balance (both approximately 46%). However, COVID-related anxiety substantially diminishes the effects of stress on turnover intentions, possibly due to employees valuing job stability amid the pandemic. Conversely, COVID intensified job stress's negative impact on work-life balance, further deteriorating personal and professional boundaries. These findings suggest that managerial interventions to address workplace incivility and retain employees must consider contextual factors such as collectivism, the pandemic, and family orientation.

**Keywords:** Workplace incivility, job stress, work-life imbalance, turnover intentions, COVID driven anxiety.

### Introduction

Unfavorable work conditions and associated stress are a leading cause of employees leaving their organizations (Mauno et al., 2014). Stress arises due

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to the discrepancy between perceived job demands and the worker's capacity to meet them (Williams et al., 2010). The situation worsens when this mismatch becomes a persistent occurrence (Tziner et al., 2015). Over time, this environment results in employees' perception of dysfunction at workplace (Wong et al., 2021) which significantly leads to employees' turnover intentions. This assertion is supported by Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll, 1989) which implies that stress occurs when individuals perceive or experience the loss of personal resources, prompting preventive behaviors such as intention to quit.

This intention is usually an immediate precursor of the employee actual turnover (Wong & Cheng, 2020) – a situation in which an employee deliberately ceases to be a member of an organization. Understandably, high turnover rates are disruptive and require considerable investments in hiring (Wandelt & Wang, 2024) and training new staff (Chen et al., 2011). This substantial expense also serves as a crucial metric for assessing performance of human resource management function (Li et al., 2022), accentuating the importance of understanding its antecedents.

Leaning on the COR theory further, the negative outcomes described above are exacerbated for night and shift work employees, potentially leading to desynchronization with social and biological rhythms essential for rest, sleep, and social participation (Boivin et al., 2021). Thus, hindering employees' ability to keep a balance between work obligations and personal pursuits (Jung Choi & Tae Kim, 2012). This imbalance occurs when an employee feels that work responsibilities impede the time and energy available for maintaining personal or family life (Brough et al., 2020). In this context, literature indicates that employees (whether parents or otherwise), prioritize achieving balance between their work and non-work activities (Kalliath & Brough, 2008) underscoring the significance of further exploration in this area.

Adding to this challenge are the inherent job demands faced by frontline employees, such as dealing with customer incivility (Bamfo et al., 2018) along with long and irregular work hours (Zhao et al., 2014). Interchangeably used as 'abusive customer behavior', 'dysfunctional customer conduct', 'deviant customer behavior', 'aberrant customer behavior' and 'jay-customer behavior', 'customer incivility' is a deliberate act on behalf of customers that violates the commonly accepted norms of mutual respect and courtesy in a working environment (Kim & Qu, 2019). This behavior places additional

stress on frontline employees (FLEs) in the hospitality industry overall (Al-Hawari et al., 2020) and the aviation sector specifically, where such customers (passengers) present safety and brand reputation challenges for airlines (Hu et al., 2017). Fanning the flame further, FLEs are often closely monitored and evaluated by their supervisors, making them vulnerable to uncivil behavior from these supervisors (Shin et al., 2022). Supervisors are responsible for training, coaching, and overseeing their subordinates. Consequently, their uncivil behavior – such as losing temper, intimidation, coldness, arrogance, and insensitivity to others—is particularly detrimental (Jawahar & Schreurs, 2018), leading to the depletion of employees' personal resources (Hobfoll & Freedy, 2017) and creating a stressful working environment.

FLEs are considered as the face of service organizations, often serving as the their first and the only point of contact with customers (Maria Stock et al., 2017). They play a critical role of in ensuring high quality passenger service (Shah et al., 2020). But, even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was scant research addressing the FLEs working at airports (Tuchen et al., 2020). Studies primarily focused on airport security personnel (Chung et al., 2017) or airline crew members (Kim et al., 2022). Given these circumstances, airport employees could be perceived as ‘forgotten frontline employees’, despite their direct interaction with the general public. Unlike first responders or healthcare professionals, airport FLEs were not widely recognized for their frontline role during health crises, yet their exposure to international travelers placed them at significant risk (Voorhees et al., 2020a). Their unique position at the international front lines during the pandemic underscores the need for focused research on their safety behaviors, psychological well-being, and operational challenges. Given the ongoing concerns regarding global health security and future pandemics (Seckin et al., 2024), studying airport FLEs is not only relevant but also critical for shaping policies that ensure their protection and preparedness in similar crises (Nieuwborg et al., 2024).

Some may argue that COVID-19 is no longer a pressing issue and question its continued relevance in academic research. While it is true that the immediate crisis has subsided, dismissing its impact would overlook critical insights into workforce behavior and resilience during global health emergencies. This study remains highly relevant for several reasons.

First, the research was conducted during May to July 2020 which was the peak of the pandemic in Pakistan (Noreen et al., 2020), capturing real-time employee responses to extreme uncertainty. Ignoring COVID-19 as a contextual factor would mean disregarding a significant determinant of frontline employee stress, decision-making, and adaptive behaviors during a worldwide crisis. Second, COVID-19 was not an isolated event but part of a broader historical pattern of global health threats. The Ebola outbreak (2014–2016), H1N1 influenza pandemic (2009), SARS epidemic (2002–2004), and recurring avian influenza outbreaks all serve as stark reminders that infectious diseases have long disrupted workplaces and economies. Even common respiratory illnesses, such as seasonal influenza, place a significant burden on frontline workers, contributing to absenteeism, reduced productivity, and occupational burnout (Batra et al., 2022). Third, the World Health Organization (WHO) continues to warn of future pandemics, highlighting factors such as climate change, globalization, and zoonotic spillovers as key contributors to emerging infectious threats (WHO, 2023). Recent outbreaks after COVID, including H5N1 bird flu (2020), Nipah virus infections (2021) and monkeypox (2022), reinforce the reality that frontline employees remain at risk and must continuously adapt to health-related crises. By examining the moderating effects of COVID-19, this research extends beyond a single pandemic, offering critical insights into workforce resilience, crisis management, and the ongoing challenges faced by frontline employees in high-risk environments like an airport (Foster et al., 2025). As future outbreaks remain a looming possibility, airport employees who provide direct services to passengers remain on the frontline of exposure to infectious diseases (Tuchen et al., 2023), making their adaptability and response to health crises a critical area of study.

Obviously, a generally defining feature of this pandemic is the pervasive uncertainty (Ruffolo et al., 2021) as it has precipitated anxiety among employees regarding their present and future (Bhowmik et al., 2022). Advocating this notion, extant literature mainly inclined towards reporting the negative behavioral outcomes for FLEs associated with aviation industry (Hong et al., 2022; Lai et al., 2022) and adverse business outcomes for airlines (Amankwah-Amoah, 2020; Kökény et al., 2022). This leaves ample room to study some unexpected effects that COVID may pose on employee behaviors and ultimately on the organizational outcomes. This assertion is corroborated

by employing Individual Adaptability Theory (I-ADAPT) (Ployhart & Bliese, 2006) which conceptualizes that individual adaptability encompasses the ability, skill, willingness, disposition, and motivation to adjust to uncertain situations. In the face of uncertainty, frontline employees demonstrate interpersonal, social and organizational adaptability (Chatterjee et al., 2022). Hence, this study seeks to answer whether COVID-19 has introduced unexpected influences on frontline employees' behavior. The results will contribute to existing literature by validating established effects and revealing new insights into the uncertainties associated with this pandemic.

### **Theoretical Underpinning and Hypotheses**

#### **Workplace Incivility Leading Employee Turnover**

Workplace incivility, distinct from more overtly aggressive behaviors, is marked by low-intensity deviant actions with ambiguous intent to harm the target (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), thereby violating workplace norms of mutual respect (Hershcovis & Barling, 2010). It is often perceived as a daily hassle and a frequently encountered low-intensity phenomenon (Sliter et al., 2010). Despite its subtlety, workplace incivility can accumulate over time, leading to significant adverse effects on employees' behavioral outcomes (Kern & Grandey, 2009). In this context, supervisory abuse and customer incivility are two primary interpersonal stressors that have been studied in both organizational behavior and marketing literature (Avey et al., 2015; Zhou, 2016).

Abusive supervisory behaviors include actions such as making disparaging remarks about employees exhibiting rudeness, or ridiculing them in front of others (Caesens et al., 2019). While abusive supervision is regarded by high-intensity negative behavior, it shares similarities with incivility due to its potentially ambiguous intent to harm. For example, a supervisor may engage in abusive behaviors ostensibly to correct or motivate employees, rather than with the explicit intention of causing harm (Leblanc & Barling, 2005). Akin to abusive supervision is customer incivility, distinguished by the fact that the perpetrator is an external source (customer) exhibiting uncivil behaviors such as rudeness or abusive language (Walker et al., 2014). FLEs interactions with customers differ from those with supervisors. Customer interactions are often more impersonal, anonymous, variable and adhere to the principal that 'the customer is always right' (Ben-Zur & Yagil, 2005). Whereas supervisor interactions tend to be more consistent and relational (Grandey et al., 2007).

Moreover, supervisors wield considerable hierarchical power and control over resources, significantly influencing crucial employee outcomes such as promotions, salary increases, and performance feedback, thereby amplifying the impact of their behavior on employees (Al-Hawari et al., 2020). Consequently, both forms of abusive behaviors which are rarely studied together (Arasli et al., 2018), contribute variably to employee stress that requires further investigation.

Drawing on the Conservation of Resource (COR) Theory, supervisory mistreatment can lead employees to perceive themselves as vulnerable, stressed, and deficient in the necessary mental, individual, or social resources to cope with their job demands (Zhang et al., 2019). The situation is further exaggerated for service employees who also frequently encounter customer incivility, necessitating the activation of defense mechanisms to safeguard their personal resources. This continual resource depletion often results in significant stress (S. J. Han et al., 2016) leading them to actively seek ways to retain their psychological resources (Hobfoll & Freedy, 1993). In response to this stress, employees may pursue new employer and leave the existing one (Rahman, 2023). The situation allows the employees to assess the ‘potential pie of individual resources’, and subsequently triggers awareness of resource conservation through turnover intention (Naeem et al., 2020). If sources of stress, such as customer and supervisor incivility, persist without resolution and are beyond employees' control, this can further increase their quitting intentions (Park et al., 2020). Based on these ascertains, following hypotheses are proposed:

*H<sub>1</sub>: Employee job stress mediates the relationship between customer incivility and employee turnover intentions.*

*H<sub>2</sub>: Employee job stress mediates the relationship between abusive supervision and employee turnover intentions.*

### **Workplace Incivility Causing Work-life Imbalance**

Employees continuously strive to juggle their professional and personal lives. The interplay and interference between these domains often result in positive or negative spillover. Literature suggests that work-family conflict is unavoidable in modern life (Mauno et al., 2006). A plausible explanation for the escalating work-life challenges faced by employees globally is the increasing level of job stress (Bell et al., 2012).

Adding to this stress is workplace incivility that not only permeates the workgroup climate but also indirectly poses harmful effects on others in close proximity to its targets (Lim et al., 2008). Although numerous studies have investigated the impact of work-life (im)balance on employee job stress (Holden & Sunindijo, 2018; Kelly et al., 2020; Paramita & Supartha, 2022) across industries including aviation (Aijaz et al., 2020), less attention has been devoted to the reverse causality (Eby et al., 2005). Consistent with the role stress perspective on work-family relationships, it is possible that stress experienced in the work domain may spill over into the family domain, negatively impacting the worker's ability to attend to personal or family needs (Goodman et al., 2009). The equilibrium between work and personal life is further compromised when the job demands involve extended working hours and substantial work pressures (Major et al., 2002) which is inherent for aviation industry employees (Tourigny et al., 2010). Thus, following hypotheses are coined to empirically test the negative work-family spillover of workplace stressors (customer incivility and abusive supervision):

*H<sub>3</sub>: Employee job stress mediates the relationship between customer incivility and work-life imbalance.*

*H<sub>4</sub>: Employee job stress mediates the relationship between abusive supervision and work-life imbalance.*

### **COVID Driven Anxiety and Behavioral Response**

COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly disrupted global interactions, leading to increased fear, frustration, exhaustion, and strain on individuals and organizations (Northington et al., 2021a). The aviation industry has been significantly impacted by this crisis, experiencing a sudden decrease in capacity that has heightened stress, anxiety, and reduced motivation and alertness among personnel. Employees fear the potential loss of their livelihoods due to these unprecedented challenges (Cahill et al., 2021). This paradigm shift has particularly impacted the services sector, where customers and frontline employees (FLEs) navigate new and evolving norms, exacerbating pre-existing stressors (Chen & Eyoun, 2021). For example, uncooperative customer conduct during the pandemic hindered collective efforts and negatively affect FLEs behavioral outcomes (Sumner & Kinsella, 2021). Conversely, some FLEs reported that positive gestures and behavior by consumers alleviated their feelings of neglect, instilled a renewed sense of pride, and imparted new meaning to their role (Voorhees et al., 2020b). This

disparity in behavioral response can be explained through the lens of Individual Adaptability Theory (I-ADAPT). The theory has been extended in the present study to broaden its applicability. Here, the adaptability of frontline employees (FLEs) is redefined to include responses to workplace stressors, quitting intentions, and maintaining work-life balance. Adaptability is understood as an FLE's ability to adjust to the changing circumstances brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic (Al-Jubari et al., 2022). Common to various views of adaptability is the idea that people react differently to changes and unpredictable situations based on their personal capabilities and resources. The change driven by natural crises (such as COVID-19), is inevitable (Martin et al., 2012).

In this context, recent scholarly attention has highlighted the significant concern among frontline employees during COVID-19 pandemic regarding the risk of contracting the virus and potentially transmitting it to their families (Pang et al., 2021). However, existing literature predominantly concentrates on healthcare (Chang, 2020; Nabe-Nielsen et al., 2021) and hotel (Agarwal, 2021; Stergiou & Farmaki, 2021) industries, largely overlooking the experiences of airport service employees (Voorhees et al., 2020b). This fear of infection sometimes takes a backseat to concerns about job security (Chen et al., 2022) compelling employees to accept challenging work environments. Furthermore, the economic uncertainty (LeNoble et al., 2023) and job insecurity (Vo-Thanh et al., 2022) stemming from COVID-19 may compel frontline employees to continue working despite fears of infection. This behavioral response may be driven by their motive to support their families amid pandemic. So, the following hypotheses are proposed to elucidate the effects of these factors in the current uncertain environment:

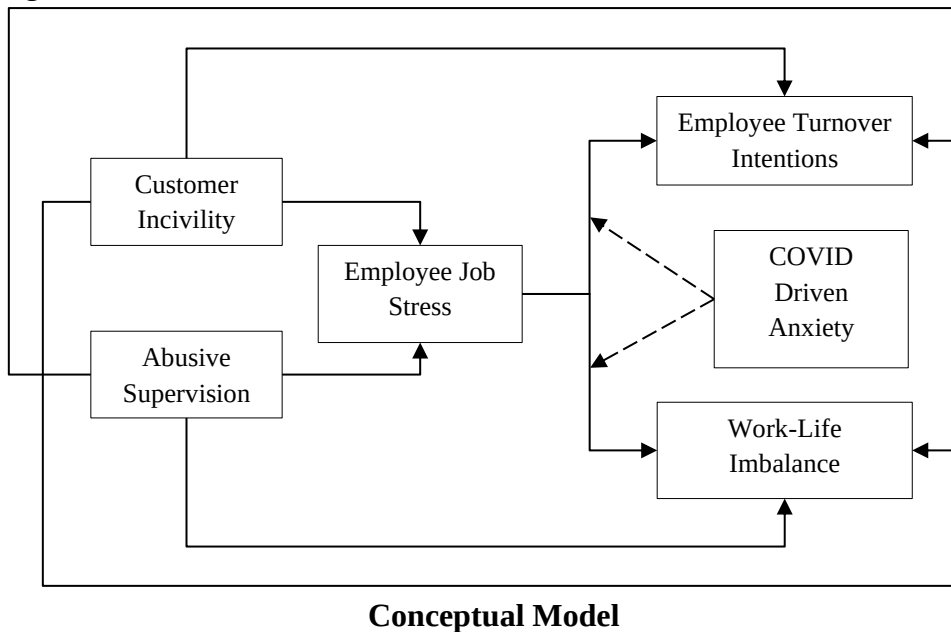
*H<sub>5</sub>: The impact of job stress on work-life imbalance is moderated by COVID driven anxiety among airport service employees.*

*H<sub>6</sub>: The impact of employee job stress on employee turnover intentions is moderated by COVID driven anxiety.*

Based on the hypotheses (H<sub>1</sub> to H<sub>6</sub>) proposed above, a model is proposed (see Figure 1) to empirically test the associated assertions.



Figure 1



## Methodology

### Sampling and Data Gathering

Due to security concerns, airlines, ground handling companies, and airport authorities were unwilling to provide employee data, making random sampling impractical. Consequently, Convenience sampling was utilized as it allows for the recruitment of respondents based on accessibility and willingness to participate (Clark et al., 1998). This method is widely employed in psychological research (Hultsch et al., 2002). A self-administered questionnaire was distributed to 324 employees working in passenger handling capacity. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, their right to withdraw, and confidentiality of their responses. After initial screening, 258 valid responses (that include 67% males, 33% females (33%), having at least a graduate degree and aged between 24 to 50) were retained for analysis. To mitigate selection bias inherent in non-probability sampling (Buelens et al., 2018), responses were gathered from six major international airports: 39 (15%) from Allama Iqbal International Airport, 92 (35%) from Islamabad International Airport, 30 (12%) from Jinnah International Airport, 47 (18%) from Multan International Airport, 30 (12%) from Faisalabad International Airport, and 20 (8%) from Sialkot International

Airport. Furthermore, all participants had a minimum of one year of experience working under the same supervisor. This criterion was established to ensure that respondents had sufficient exposure to their supervisor's behavior, allowing for a more accurate assessment of any supervisory abuse.

### **Survey Instrument**

For this research, appropriate scales were adopted from existing literature to warrant high validity and reliability. In accordance to the number of constructs proposed in the model, the final questionnaire (See Appendix A) was separated into following segments:

*Customer Incivility (CUSI)*. The scale (Cronbach  $\alpha = 0.942$ ) was borrowed from (Shin et al., 2021) and comprised of ten questions. Each question was anchored to 'within the past one month, how often passengers...' and a sample item was '... used an inappropriate manner of addressing you (e.g., Hey you!)'. The responses were taken on five-point Likert scale where 1 equals 'never' and 5 equals 'very often'.

*Abusive Supervision (ASUP)*. Likewise, five-item scale (Cronbach  $\alpha = 0.910$ ) of (Shin et al., 2021) was employed to measure supervisor's incivility faced by frontline employees. A sample statement was 'my immediate supervisor ridicules me'. The responses were registered on a seven-point agreement scale.

*COVID Driven Anxiety (CDAN)*. For this scale, seven major stressors faced by frontline employees amid COVID-19 were extracted from a recent study by (Northington et al., 2021b). This scale was selected for its appropriate length and specific focus, in contrast to other scales which are often too lengthy (Kujawa et al., 2020) or measure fear of pandemic in more general sense (Ahorsu et al., 2022). The items were framed with the prompt 'How concerned are you about...' and the sample item was '...bringing COVID-19 home to someone in your family from work'. Responses were gauged on a five-point scale, from 1 (causes me no concern) to 5 (causes me great concern). Following confirmatory factor analysis, two items were removed due to factor loadings below 0.7. The final scale comprised five items and showed good internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.899$ ).

*Work-life Imbalance (WLIB)*. Seven out of ten items devised by (Dex & Bond, 2005) were employed to measure work life disbalance (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.899$ ). Three excluded items were irrelevant to study population. Respondents were

asked to report their level of agreement with each item on three-point scale and a sample question was ‘my family is missing out on my input, either because I don’t see enough of them or I am too tired’.

*Employee Job Stress (EJST)*. Here, nine items scale was adopted from (Jamal & Baba, 1992) with the sample question ‘my job gets to me more than it should’. Participants provided their responses using a seven-point agreement scale. After employing CFA, eight items were finally included in the analysis resulting a Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  coefficient of 0.921.

*Employee Turnover Intentions (ETOI)*. The quitting intent of frontline employees was measured through four questions adopted from (Jung et al., 2021). Here, ‘I sometimes feel compelled to quit my job in my current workplace’ was a sample question and the responses were gauged on a seven-point Likert scale where 1 equal ‘strongly disagree’ and 7 equals ‘strongly agree’.

### **Measurement Model**

While values of Cronbach’s alpha ( $\alpha$ ) stated above are considered to be conservative, composite reliability ( $\rho_c$ ) may tend to be overly liberal (Dijkstra, 2010, 2014; Dijkstra & Henseler, 2015). As an alternative, values of reliability coefficient ( $\rho_a$ ) were also reported that appeared between the  $\alpha$  and  $\rho_c$ , thus indicating acceptable internal consistency (Hair Jr et al., 2021). Moving forward, average variance extracted (AVE) for each variable surpasses 0.5 threshold level and the square root of AVE for these constructs exceeded their correlation values. Hence, advocating for convergent (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988) and discriminant (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) validity respectively. Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratios that were below the threshold of 0.90, further substantiated the distinctiveness among the study variables (Henseler et al., 2015). Additionally, values of determination coefficient ( $R^2$ ), Stone-Geisser’s  $Q^2$  and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) were also presented in Table 1 to report explanatory power, predictive relevance and model fitting (Dijkstra & Henseler, 2015; Hair Jr et al., 2021; L. Hu & Bentler, 1999). Lastly, the analysis also confirmed that the model is free from Common Method Bias (CBM) as the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values of inner model were all less than the acceptable limit of 3.33 (Kock, 2015).

**Table 1**

Validity, Reliability, Correlations &amp; Model Summary

|                                      | Heterotrait-Momotrait Ratio |       |       |       |       |   | Fornell Larcker Criterion |              |              |              |              |              | Composite Reliability |       | AVE   |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|---|---------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|-----------------------|-------|-------|
|                                      | 1                           | 2     | 3     | 4     | 5     | 6 | 1                         | 2            | 3            | 4            | 5            | 6            | rho_a                 | rho_c |       |
| 1                                    | -                           |       |       |       |       |   | <i>0.811</i>              |              |              |              |              |              | 0.946                 | 0.951 | 0.658 |
| 2                                    | 0.182                       | -     |       |       |       |   | 0.177                     | <i>0.814</i> |              |              |              |              | 0.921                 | 0.932 | 0.663 |
| 3                                    | 0.604                       | 0.369 | -     |       |       |   | 0.574                     | 0.341        | <i>0.803</i> |              |              |              | 0.924                 | 0.936 | 0.645 |
| 4                                    | 0.252                       | 0.156 | 0.539 | -     |       |   | 0.237                     | 0.097        | 0.494        | <i>0.834</i> |              |              | 0.878                 | 0.901 | 0.695 |
| 5                                    | 0.106                       | 0.428 | 0.080 | 0.187 | -     |   | 0.044                     | 0.409        | 0.032        | -0.062       | <i>0.845</i> |              | 0.931                 | 0.925 | 0.713 |
| 6                                    | 0.716                       | 0.154 | 0.641 | 0.325 | 0.135 | - | 0.671                     | 0.082        | 0.610        | 0.326        | -0.066       | <i>0.857</i> | 0.946                 | 0.932 | 0.735 |
| R <sup>2</sup>                       | -                           | 0.331 | 0.421 | 0.299 | -     | - |                           |              |              |              |              |              |                       |       |       |
| Q <sup>2</sup>                       | -                           | 0.181 | 0.409 | 0.118 | -     | - |                           |              |              |              |              |              |                       |       |       |
| SRMR = 0.074 ( $\chi^2 = 2029.636$ ) |                             |       |       |       |       |   |                           |              |              |              |              |              |                       |       |       |

**Note:** (1) Customer Incivility (CUSI), (2) Work-life Imbalance (WLBI), (3) Employee Job Stress (EJST), (4) Employee Turnover Intentions (ETOI), (5) COVID Driven Anxiety (CDAN), (6) Abusive Supervision (ASUP), Coefficient of Determination (R<sup>2</sup>), Predictive Relevance (Q<sup>2</sup>), Standardized Root Mean Squared Residual (SRMR), Diagonal boldface italic data represents square root of AVE for each latent variable.

### Path Summary

To further understand the proposed model, all direct paths were tested to determine the significance of their relationships. As expected, customer incivility ( $\beta = 0.300$ ,  $t = 4.635$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and abusive supervision ( $\beta = 0.409$ ,  $t = 6.509$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) adds up significantly to the overall stress of frontline employees. This further leads to the increased turnover intentions ( $\beta = 0.459$ ,  $t = 5.811$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and disturb their work-life balance ( $\beta = 0.457$ ,  $t = 5.887$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Interestingly, CUSI exerted a significant negative effect ETOI ( $\beta = -0.126$ ,  $t = 1.707$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and an insignificant positive effect on WLDB ( $\beta = 0.055$ ,  $t = 0.670$ ,  $p = 0.251$ ). Similar irregularity was recorded while

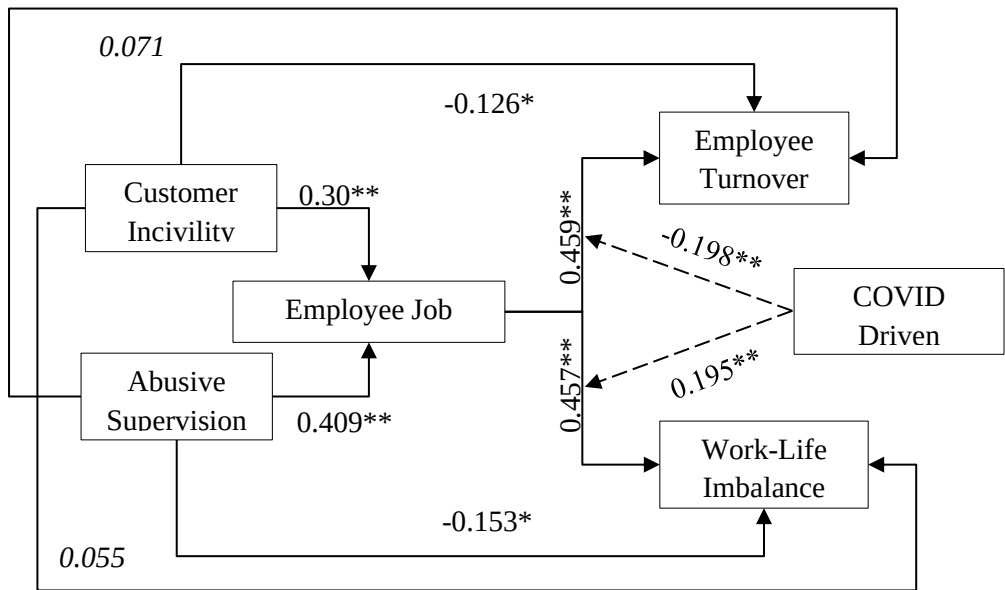
analyzing the effect of ASUP on ETOI ( $\beta = -0.071$ ,  $t = 0.709$ ,  $p = 0.239$ ) and WLDB ( $\beta = -0.153$ ,  $t = 1.717$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). On the same course, COVID related stress was (insignificantly) associated with lower turnover intentions ( $\beta = -0.107$ ,  $t = 1.610$ ,  $p = 0.054$ ) but significantly disrupted the work-life balance ( $\beta = 0.422$ ,  $t = 7.274$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). These results are summarized in Table 2 and Figure 2 along with the lower and upper level (bias corrected) confidence intervals at 10,000 bootstrapping to validate the significant relations (Hayes, 2022).

**Table 2**

Direct Paths

| Paths                   | $\beta$ | Mean   | SD    | t-stat | Sig.  | CI [5%, 95%]     |
|-------------------------|---------|--------|-------|--------|-------|------------------|
| CUSI $\rightarrow$ WLDB | 0.055   | 0.058  | 0.082 | 0.670  | 0.251 | [-0.080, 0.189]  |
| CUSI $\rightarrow$ EJST | 0.300   | 0.303  | 0.065 | 4.635  | 0.000 | [0.184, 0.399]   |
| CUSI $\rightarrow$ ETOI | -0.126  | -0.128 | 0.074 | 1.707  | 0.044 | [-0.253, -0.008] |
| EJST $\rightarrow$ WLDB | 0.457   | 0.458  | 0.078 | 5.887  | 0.000 | [0.315, 0.571]   |
| EJST $\rightarrow$ ETOI | 0.459   | 0.464  | 0.079 | 5.811  | 0.000 | [0.321, 0.581]   |
| CDAN $\rightarrow$ WLDB | 0.422   | 0.428  | 0.058 | 7.274  | 0.000 | [0.319, 0.509]   |
| CDAN $\rightarrow$ ETOI | -0.107  | -0.106 | 0.066 | 1.610  | 0.054 | [-0.211, 0.008]  |
| ASUP $\rightarrow$ WLDB | -0.153  | -0.153 | 0.089 | 1.717  | 0.043 | [-0.296, -0.002] |
| ASUP $\rightarrow$ EJST | 0.409   | 0.409  | 0.063 | 6.509  | 0.000 | [0.305, 0.514]   |
| ASUP $\rightarrow$ ETOI | 0.071   | 0.069  | 0.099 | 0.709  | 0.239 | [-0.086, 0.238]  |

**Note:** Customer Incivility (CUSI), Work-life Imbalance (WLDB), Employee Job Stress (EJST), Employee Turnover Intentions (ETOI), COVID Driven Anxiety (CDAN), Abusive Supervision (ASUP), Impact ( $\beta$ ), Standard Deviation (SD), Confidence Interval (CI).

**Figure 2****Path Summary**

\*Significant at 0.05, \*\*Significant at 0.001, *Italic* (Not Significant), Dashed Arrow (Moderating Effect), Solid Arrow (Direct Effect)

**Mediation Analysis**

Following the procedure recommend by (Zhao et al. 2010), the effect of customer incivility on work-life imbalance mediated by job stress was examined (H<sub>3</sub>). The results (See Table 3) demonstrated an insignificant direct ( $\beta = 0.055$ ,  $t = 0.670$ ,  $p = 0.251$ ) but a significant indirect ( $\beta = 0.137$ ,  $t = 3.929$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) effect, thus indicating a full mediation. Similar process was employed to test H<sub>1</sub> that yielded a negative direct ( $\beta = -0.126$ ,  $t = 1.707$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and a positive indirect ( $\beta = 0.138$ ,  $t = 3.662$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) effects, suggesting a competitive-partial mediating role of EJST between CUSI and ETOI. H<sub>4</sub> generated same result as abusive supervision was negatively associated with WLDB ( $\beta = -0.153$ ,  $t = 1.717$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) but the inclusion of mediator (EJST), the indirect effect becomes positive ( $\beta = 0.187$ ,  $t = 4.243$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Lastly, H<sub>2</sub> resulted a full mediation as indicated by the insignificant direct ( $\beta = 0.071$ ,  $t = 0.709$ ,  $p = 0.239$ ) but a significant indirect effect ( $\beta = 0.188$ ,  $t = 3.955$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) of ASUP on ETOI through EJST. In Table 3, the total effects for H<sub>1</sub> and H<sub>4</sub> are insignificant, indicating the presence of a suppression effect. This suggests that employee job stress plays a crucial

mediating role in the relationship between customer incivility, abusive supervision, turnover intentions, and work-life imbalance. Without considering job stress, these relationships appear weak or even contradictory. However, when stress is included as a mediator, the true impact of customer incivility and abusive supervision on employee outcomes becomes evident, reinforcing the critical role of workplace stress in shaping employee experiences.

**Table 3**

## Mediation Analysis

| Total Effect                        |         |       | Direct Effect |         |       | Indirect Effect |       |         |       |                | Mediation Decision |
|-------------------------------------|---------|-------|---------------|---------|-------|-----------------|-------|---------|-------|----------------|--------------------|
| $\beta$                             | t-value | Sig.  | $\beta$       | t-value | Sig.  | $\beta$         | SE    | t-value | Sig.  | CI [5%, 95%]   |                    |
| H <sub>1</sub> : CUSI → EJST → ETOI |         |       |               |         |       |                 |       |         |       |                |                    |
| 0.011                               | 0.129   | 0.449 | -0.126        | 1.707   | 0.044 | 0.138           | 0.038 | 3.662   | 0.000 | [0.082, 0.206] | Partial            |
| H <sub>2</sub> : ASUP → EJST → ETOI |         |       |               |         |       |                 |       |         |       |                |                    |
| 0.258                               | 2.994   | 0.001 | 0.071         | 0.709   | 0.239 | 0.188           | 0.047 | 3.955   | 0.000 | [0.117, 0.272] | Full               |
| H <sub>3</sub> : CUSI → EJST → WLIB |         |       |               |         |       |                 |       |         |       |                |                    |
| 0.192                               | 2.325   | 0.010 | 0.055         | 0.670   | 0.251 | 0.137           | 0.035 | 3.929   | 0.000 | [0.083, 0.197] | Full               |
| H <sub>4</sub> : ASUP → EJST → WLIB |         |       |               |         |       |                 |       |         |       |                |                    |
| 0.034                               | 0.398   | 0.345 | -0.153        | 1.717   | 0.043 | 0.187           | 0.044 | 4.243   | 0.000 | [0.120, 0.264] | Partial            |

**Note:** Customer Incivility (CUSI), Work-life Imbalance (WLIB), Employee Job Stress (EJST), Employee Turnover Intentions (ETOI), COVID Related Stress at Workplace (CRSW), Abusive Supervision (ASUP), Impact ( $\beta$ ), Standard Error (SE), Confidence Interval (CI).



### Moderation Analysis

In examining (H<sub>5</sub>), analysis revealed that COVID driven anxiety (positively and significantly) moderated the relationship between employee overall job stress and disrupt their work-life balance ( $\beta = 0.195$ ,  $t = 3.650$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). On the other hand, (H<sub>6</sub>) CDAN posed a negative effect on the association between EJST and ETOI ( $\beta = -0.198$ ,  $t = 4.007$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Although, in both cases, the moderation was significant yet the effect size was relatively small as shown by the f-square values (Cohen, 1988). Moreover, R<sup>2</sup> values for both the outcome variables improved following the inclusion of moderator. See Table 4 for the summarized results.

**Table 4**

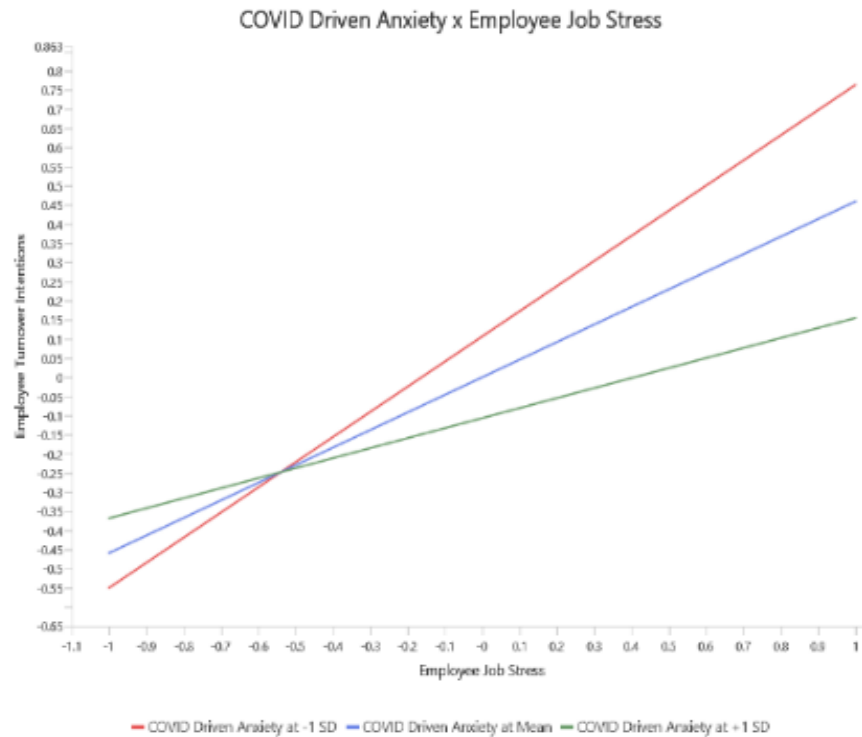
Moderation Analysis

| R <sup>2</sup> With Moderator       | R <sup>2</sup> Without Moderator | f-stat | $\beta$ | SE    | t-stat | Sig.  | CI [5%, 95%]     |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------|---------|-------|--------|-------|------------------|
| H <sub>5</sub> : CDAN x EJST → WLIB |                                  |        |         |       |        |       |                  |
| 0.331                               | 0.148                            | 0.062  | 0.195   | 0.054 | 3.650  | 0.000 | [0.108, 0.284]   |
| H <sub>6</sub> : CDAN x EJST → ETOI |                                  |        |         |       |        |       |                  |
| 0.299                               | 0.251                            | 0.061  | -0.198  | 0.049 | 4.007  | 0.000 | [-0.276, -0.113] |

COVID Driven Anxiety (CDAN), EJST (Employee Job Stress), Work-life Imbalance (WLIB), Employee Turnover Intentions (ETOI), Impact ( $\beta$ ), Standard Error (SE), Confidence Interval (CI).

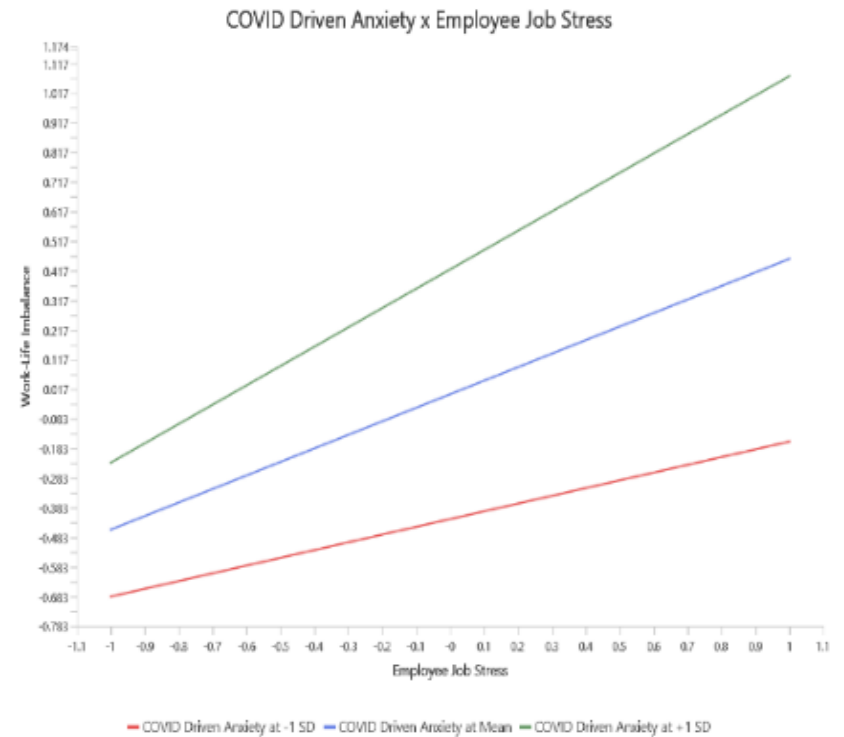
Slop analysis presented in Figure 3 further help in understanding the nature of these moderating effects. With relation to H<sub>5</sub>, the line is much steeper for high as compare to low levels of CDAN. On contrary, for H<sub>6</sub>, the slop is steeper for low as compare to high levels of CDAN.

**Figure 3**



Slop Analysis

**Figure 4**



Slop Analysis

## **Discussion**

Study findings offered significant insights into dynamics of workplace stressors and some unanticipated results that requires further explaining within specific context of pandemic in Pakistan. Consistent with existing literature (Han et al., 2022), customer incivility and abusive supervision were found to be significantly adding to the overall stress of service employees (i.e., 30% and 40% respectively) which subsequently led to the increased in their quitting intentions and disrupted their work-life balance i.e., about 46% in both cases (See Table 2). This too is aligned with the well-established earlier work on the subject (Aruldoss et al., 2021; Chung et al., 2021). However, results also revealed that customer incivility led to the decreased turnover intentions. This is principally diverged from the anticipated outcome and contradictory to the extant literature as well (Pu et al., 2022).

The country's cultural context, economy and pandemic may help explain these deviations. Firstly, collectivist culture of Pakistan (Ali et al., 2018) may force employees to have a sense of loyalty with their employers. Thus, acting as a buffer between these two variables but it needs to be empirically tested. Secondly, the economic pressure and rising unemployment in Pakistan (Hasan & Zaheer, 2022) likely compel employees to tolerate higher incivility without thinking to quit their jobs. This assertion is supported by earlier research that linked job insecurity during economic downturns with the reduced turnover intentions (Huffman et al., 2022). Thirdly, amid pandemic and the associated health uncertainty, employees may have perceived their current employment as crucial for their stability. Thus, dampening their turnover intentions. On the other hand, pandemic amplified the negative impact of job stress on work-life balance. This reflects a coping mechanism where increased job demand associated with COVID related precautions (Falco et al., 2021) may lead to work-life imbalance (Begum et al., 2022). Another probable reason for these anomalies can be the mass vaccination till the second half of 2022 that may have reduced the fear of COVID (Sun et al., 2022). On the other hand, the reduced passenger flights during peak times of pandemic (Shrestha et al., 2020) may have eased frontline employees' workload in terms of passenger check-in and boarding.

## **Practical and Theoretical Implications**

Many employers are struggling to retain the right talent and the pandemic further aggravated this matter (Bhowmik et al., 2022) due to the associated

uncertainties. Thus, findings of this study asked for the comprehensive interventions on behalf of organizations aimed at reducing employee stress. Training programs may be devised to equip frontline employees with the conflict resolution during service encounters (Beitler et al., 2016), provide access to mental health counselling, and foster culture of respect among all levels of staff (Friedman, 2021). Beside this, study provides empirical evidence that supervisory abusive behavior significantly contributes (40%) to employee job stress, highlighting specific areas of the workplace environment that require improvement. To this end, instigating strict policies against abusive behavior of supervisors and training them to be empathetic can alleviate the negative workplace outcomes. Similarly, implementing safety protocols such as wearing masks and gloves, limiting the number of customers served and employee temperature checks, will not only dampen the pandemic related stress among service employees but also increased customer confidence (Chi et al., 2022).

From a theoretical standpoint, this study integrates I-ADAPT and COR Theory to illustrate that frontline employees' adaptability is not solely an inherent trait but is shaped by external crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings extend I-ADAPT beyond routine workplace uncertainty to crisis-intensified service environments, where rapid adaptation is essential. Simultaneously, the study also reinforces COR Theory by demonstrating how customer incivility and abusive supervision deplete employees' psychological resources, heightening job stress, which in turn increases turnover intentions and work-life imbalance.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The present study has its limitations. Primarily, it examined an explicit crisis situation, potentially restricting the generalizability of the findings. Future researchers may also extend the literature by validating this model in other geographical areas and in other service industries where front-line employees face job stress. Secondly, the unexpected negative association of workplace incivility with employee turnover intentions and work-life balance during uncertain times (pandemic) needs further empirical evidence. The uncertainty is a broad concept (Bhowmik et al., 2022), so it offers a broader scope for future researchers who can replicate this study. Thirdly, future researchers may be to add combined family income (Minnotte & Yucel, 2018) as moderator to see if low income further dampens the effect of abusive

workplace behaviors and job stress on turnover intentions. Moreover, the role of co-workers' abusive behavior (Geldart et al., 2018) along with the two types of incivilities discussed in this research may also be intersecting area for future research. Lastly, the cross-sectional methodology may be less effective in establishing causal relationships (Spector, 2019). Therefore, a longitudinal study design is warranted in future research to further validate the causal relationships among the variables of interest.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, study findings highlighted the intricate relationships between various workplace stressors along with the associated outcomes for frontline employees and their employers. These findings are explicitly tying back to Conservation of Resource (COR) and Individual Adaptability theories. Particularly in the context of COVID in Pakistan, these results did not only confirm the established relationships but also revealed some unexpected nuances that expand our understanding of employee behavior and stress responses amidst crisis. These counterintuitive findings emphasize the importance of considering cultural and economic contexts in interpreting workplace stressors. Managerial interventions aimed at retaining employees must be sensitive to the contextual factors such as collectivism, pandemic and family orientation. COVID introduced an unprecedented challenge, amplifying existing stressors and introducing new ones. Hence, the organizational response must resonate with frontline employees' experiences and needs amid this pandemic.

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## Appendix A: Questionnaire

**Study Purpose:** This study aims to examine the effects of workplace incivility on employee well-being, with a particular focus on the moderating role of COVID-19-related anxiety. By employing Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory and Individual Adaptability Theory (I-ADAPT), this research seeks to understand how customer incivility and abusive supervision contribute to job stress, work-life imbalance, and turnover intentions among frontline service employees at major international airports in Pakistan. The findings will provide valuable insights into workplace dynamics and inform managerial strategies to mitigate stress and improve employee retention.

**Ethical Statement:** This study is conducted in accordance with ethical research guidelines to ensure the rights and well-being of participants. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time without any consequences. No personally identifiable information will be collected, and all responses will remain strictly confidential, used solely for academic research purposes. Data will be fully anonymized to protect participant privacy. By proceeding with this questionnaire, you confirm that you understand the study's purpose and consent to participate.

1. Do you consent to participate in this study, knowing that your responses will remain confidential and that you can withdraw ☐ Yes ☐ No\* at any time?

*\* If no, please do not proceed with the questionnaire)*

2. Please indicate your gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Other
3. How long have you been working have you been working under your current supervisor?
- |                                           |                                               |                                               |
|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Less than 1 year | <input type="checkbox"/> Between 1 to 2 years | <input type="checkbox"/> Between 2 to 4 years |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Between 4 to 8   | <input type="checkbox"/> More than 8 years    |                                               |
4. Which airport do you work at?
- |                              |                              |                              |
|------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> LHE | <input type="checkbox"/> ISB | <input type="checkbox"/> KHI |
| <input type="checkbox"/> MUX | <input type="checkbox"/> LYP | <input type="checkbox"/> SKT |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| <b>Customer Incivility:</b> Please rate the following statements on the scale of 1 to 5 where “1 = Never” and “5 = Very Often”. <b>Within the past one month, how often have passengers...</b> |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| ...continued to complain despite your efforts to assist them?                                                                                                                                  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |   |   |
| ...made gestures (e.g., eye rolling, sighing) to express their impatience?                                                                                                                     | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |   |   |
| ...grumbled to you about slow service during busy times?                                                                                                                                       | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |   |   |
| ...how often have passengers made negative remarks to you about your organization?                                                                                                             | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |   |   |
| ...blamed you for a problem that you did not cause?                                                                                                                                            | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |   |   |
| ...used an inappropriate manner of addressing you (e.g., “Hey you”)?                                                                                                                           | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |   |   |
| ...failed to acknowledge your efforts when you have gone out of your way to help them?                                                                                                         | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |   |   |
| ...grumbled to you that there were too few employees working?                                                                                                                                  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |   |   |
| ...complained to you about the value of services?                                                                                                                                              | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |   |   |
| ...made inappropriate gestures to get your attention (e.g., snapping fingers)?                                                                                                                 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |   |   |
| <b>Abusive Supervision:</b> Please rate the following statements on the scale of 1 to 7 where “1 = strongly disagree,” and “7 = strongly agree”. <b>My immediate supervisor...</b>             |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| ...ridicules me                                                                                                                                                                                | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| ...tells me that my thoughts or feelings are stupid                                                                                                                                            | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| ...puts me down in front of others                                                                                                                                                             | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| ...makes negative comments about me to others                                                                                                                                                  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| ...tells me that I am incompetent                                                                                                                                                              | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| <b>Employee Job Stress:</b> Please rate the following statements on the scale of 1 to 7 where “1 = strongly disagree,” and “7 = strongly agree”                                                |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| I have often felt nervousness as a result of my job                                                                                                                                            | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| My job gets to me more than it should                                                                                                                                                          | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| There are lots of times when my job drives me right up a wall                                                                                                                                  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| Sometimes when I think about my job, I get a tight feeling in my chest                                                                                                                         | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| I feel guilty when I take time off from the job*<br>(item removed due to factor loading < 0.5)                                                                                                 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| I have too much work to do and too little time to do it in                                                                                                                                     | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| In my field of work, too many employees get burned-out by job demands                                                                                                                          | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| I sometimes fear the telephone ringing at home because the call might be job-related                                                                                                                                          | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| I feel like I never have a day off                                                                                                                                                                                            | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| <b>COVID Driven Anxiety:</b> Please indicate your level of concern caused by following factors on a scale of 1 to 5 where “1 = Causes me no concern” and “5 = Causes me great concern”. <b>How concerned are you about...</b> |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| ...bringing COVID-19 home to someone in family from work                                                                                                                                                                      | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |   |   |
| ...contracting COVID-19 at work                                                                                                                                                                                               | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |   |   |
| ...company not covering pay if in quarantine                                                                                                                                                                                  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |   |   |
| ...dangerous work conditions (e.g., feeling inadequately protected from virus)                                                                                                                                                | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |   |   |
| ...handling customers who say they cannot wear a mask                                                                                                                                                                         | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |   |   |
| <b>Work-Life Imbalance:</b> Please rate the following statements on a scale of 1 to 3 where “1 = Disagree”, “2 = Sometimes”, “3 = Agree”                                                                                      |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| At the moment, because the job demands it, I usually work long hours                                                                                                                                                          | 1 | 2 | 3 |   |   |   |   |
| There is not much time to socialize/relax with my partner or family                                                                                                                                                           | 1 | 2 | 3 |   |   |   |   |
| Relaxing and forgetting about work issues is hard to do                                                                                                                                                                       | 1 | 2 | 3 |   |   |   |   |
| My family is missing out on my input, either because I don't see enough of them or I am too tired                                                                                                                             | 1 | 2 | 3 |   |   |   |   |
| Finding time for hobbies or leisure activities is difficult due to my work                                                                                                                                                    | 1 | 2 | 3 |   |   |   |   |
| Finding time to maintain friendships is difficult due to my work                                                                                                                                                              | 1 | 2 | 3 |   |   |   |   |
| Finding time to maintain extended family relationships is difficult due to my work                                                                                                                                            | 1 | 2 | 3 |   |   |   |   |
| <b>Employee Turnover Intentions:</b> Please rate the following statements on a scale of 1 to 7 where “1 = strongly disagree” and “7 = strongly agree”                                                                         |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| I sometimes feel compelled to quit my job in my current workplace                                                                                                                                                             | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| I will quit my job at my current organization in 1 year or less                                                                                                                                                               | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| I am currently seriously considering leaving my current job to work at another company                                                                                                                                        | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| I will quit this company if the given condition gets even a little worse than now                                                                                                                                             | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |