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ORGANIZATIONAL ETHICAL CLIMATE AND EMPLOYEE BEHAVIOR ON THE SERVICE FRONTLINE: MECHANISMS AMONG EARLY-CAREER EMPLOYEES — AN INTEGRATIVE LITERATURE REVIEW

The aim of this study is to provide a mechanism-level interpretation of the relationship between organizational ethical climate and employee behavior on the service frontline, with particular attention to early-career employees. The integrative literature review is based on the synthesis of empirical, theoretical, and review studies published between 2015 and 2026. The final analytical sample consisted of 25 publications. The analysis examines the effects of organizational ethical climate, ethical leadership, group norms, customer-related pressure, job insecurity, and digital monitoring on employee behavior. The findings identified three recurring mechanisms: harmful behaviors associated with emotional exhaustion, unethical pro-organizational or counterproductive behaviors linked to perceived threat and uncertainty, and employee reactions related to perceptions of control and monitoring. The synthesis suggests that early-career status should not be understood as an independent causal factor but rather as an interpretive condition that may modify the strength and meaning of organizational influences. The practical implications of the study highlight the importance of ethical socialization, managerial support, customer conflict management, the prevention of emotional exhaustion, and transparent monitoring systems in fostering desirable employee behaviors.

Introduction

In service-related roles, ethically relevant decisions typically arise in situations embedded within everyday interactions, such as handling customer complaints, interpreting rules and procedures, or managing service failures. In these situations, employees may simultaneously face tensions between organizational regulations, customer orientation, and the practical constraints of their own work performance.

According to the literature, the relationship between organizational ethical climate and employee behavior can be understood as a pattern shaped by the combined influence of multiple organizational and psychological factors (Pagliaro et al., 2018). Climate characteristics, leadership practices, group norms, job demands, and control mechanisms create a contextual framework that may influence the likelihood of certain behaviors occurring (Auzoult, & Mazilescu, 2021). Research typically identifies this relationship as an association rather than a direct causal effect (Pagliaro et al., 2018; Auzoult, & Mazilescu, 2021).

Within the service frontline, employees who have recently joined an organization experience unique adaptation processes, as they must learn not only formal job expectations but also informal operating norms and emotional requirements (Hwang et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2022). In the literature, this group is often classified as “newcomers,” a category operationalized by Liu and colleagues (2021) as employees with less than one year of organizational tenure. The present study adopts this definition not as a generational category but as an empirically well-defined form of short organizational tenure. Accordingly, the focus of this study is not on the general characteristics of Millennial or Generation Z employees, but rather on the organizational and psychological mechanisms that may influence employee behavior during the early stages of organizational entry.

The aim of this study is to provide a mechanism-level interpretation of the relationship between organizational ethical climate and employee behavior. Rather than seeking to confirm the general effect of ethical climate, the study reviews how different organizational conditions and psychological mediating processes may give rise to varying behavioral outcomes among early-career employees working on the service frontline.

The analysis focuses on three research questions:

1. Which organizational and psychological mechanisms may mediate the relationship between ethical climate and employee behavior?
2. How might these mechanisms be modified in situations characterized by limited organizational experience?
3. Under what conditions can the same normative environment lead to different behavioral outcomes?

The study identifies several explanatory pathways that may become relevant under different organizational conditions. This approach may contribute to a better understanding of why different patterns of employee behavior can emerge despite the presence of similar formally declared organizational values.

Conceptual Delineation

In this study, the concepts of early-career employee, newcomer, early-career, short organizational tenure, Millennial, and Generation Z are not treated as synonymous. Distinguishing between these concepts is necessary because the literature operationalizes early employee vulnerability in several different ways, including age, generational affiliation, career stage, and length of organizational tenure. The primary focus of the present study is not a generational typology; therefore, it does not seek to describe Millennials or Generation Z employees as stable and homogeneous groups. Generational labels are included only when the studies reviewed examined workplace uncertainty, engagement, or behavioral outcomes within such samples. In this context, these findings are interpreted cautiously not as generational characteristics, but rather as one possible approximation of conditions associated with the early stages of a career and organizational entry.

The term newcomer refers to employees who have recently joined an organization. In the study by Liu and colleagues (2021), this category is operationalized as employees with less than one year of organizational tenure. The present study adopts this definition as an empirically well-defined form of short organizational tenure.

The concepts of early-career employee and early-career are broader in scope. They do not necessarily refer exclusively to recent entry into a particular organization but may also encompass the early stages of an individual's professional career. In this study, however, early-career status is conceptualized primarily not as an age-based or generational category, but as an organizational

condition characterized by limited organizational experience, lower levels of embeddedness, stronger dependency relationships, and an increased need for normative learning.

Accordingly, the central question of the analysis is not what a particular generation is like, but rather how uncertainty associated with short organizational tenure, information deficits, adaptation to group norms, customer-related pressure, and perceptions of control may be linked to employee behavioral outcomes through various organizational and psychological mechanisms. The generational literature therefore serves only as a supplementary interpretive background, while the study's primary explanatory framework is grounded in vulnerabilities associated with limited organizational experience and the processes of organizational socialization.

Methodology

The present study was conducted as an integrative literature review. Its objective was not to produce a comprehensive systematic review or meta-analysis, but rather to explore the mechanisms through which organizational ethical climate, leadership, group norms, customer-related pressure, workplace uncertainty, and digital monitoring may function as mediating or moderating factors influencing employee behavioral outcomes on the service frontline, particularly among employees with limited organizational experience. Accordingly, the study sought to identify recurring patterns and explanatory mechanisms rather than to statistically aggregate findings.

The literature search was conducted between November 2025 and February 2026. The review period was defined as 2015–2026, as the study primarily aimed to examine research related to contemporary service work organization, digital monitoring practices, newcomer socialization, and modern human resource management approaches. Earlier foundational theories of ethical climate were incorporated into the synthesis through later review articles and empirical studies that built upon these theoretical perspectives. The primary search was carried out in structured scientific databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, and Directory of Open Access Journals. Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and institutional repositories were used exclusively for supplementary snowball searching. Publications identified through these sources were included only when they were found to be relevant through references cited in studies retrieved from the primary databases or through closely related literature connected to those studies.

The search strategy was based on the combination of three conceptual dimensions:

1. organizational ethical environment (e.g., “ethical climate”, “ethical leadership”, “organizational ethics”),
2. behavioral outcomes (e.g., “counterproductive work behavior”, “unethical pro-organizational behavior”, “service sabotage”, “workplace deviance”),
3. early organizational stage and service context (e.g., “newcomer”, “organizational socialization”, “frontline employee”, “service employee”, “hospitality”, “retail”, “banking”, “healthcare”).

The search was conducted within title, abstract, and keyword fields using Boolean operators. The principal search combinations are presented in *Table 1*.

TABLE 1. MAIN SEARCH COMBINATIONS USED IN THE LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Focus Areas	Boolean-Combinations
Ethical climate and behavioral outcomes	„ethical climate” AND („counterproductive work behavior” OR „workplace deviance” OR „employee behavior”)
Ethical leadership and service-related behavior	„ethical leadership” AND („service recovery performance” OR „ethical work behavior” OR „employee behavior”)
Customer-related pressure and negative workplace behavior	(„customer mistreatment” OR „dysfunctional customer behavior” OR „unethical customer behavior”) AND („service sabotage” OR „workplace deviance” OR „displaced aggression”)
Emotional labor and employee exhaustion	(„surface acting” OR „emotional labor” OR „emotional exhaustion”) AND („employee sabotage” OR „service sabotage” OR „counterproductive work behavior”)
Workplace uncertainty and unethical behavior	„job insecurity” AND („unethical pro-organizational behavior” OR „counterproductive work behavior” OR „moral disengagement”)
Newcomers and organizational socialization	(„newcomer” OR „organizational socialization” OR „early-career”) AND („proactive behavior” OR „coworker ostracism” OR „feedback seeking”)
Short organizational tenure and early-career vulnerability	(„Generation Z” OR „millennial” OR „generational characteristics”) AND („workplace” OR „job insecurity” OR „employee behavior”)
Digital control and monitoring	(„electronic performance monitoring” OR „algorithmic management” OR „employee monitoring”) AND („stress” OR „job satisfaction” OR „counterproductive work behavior” OR „performance”)
Service frontline work	(„frontline employee” OR „service employee” OR „hospitality” OR „retail” OR „banking” OR „healthcare”) AND („ethical climate” OR „ethical leadership” OR „workplace deviance”)

Source: Author’s own compilation (2026)

The inclusion criteria comprised empirical, review, and theoretical studies published between 2015 and 2026 that interpreted the relationship between organizational context and employee behavioral outcomes through mediating or moderating mechanisms. The final sample included studies that examined a clearly identifiable organizational factor, psychological mechanism, or behavioral outcome.

The exclusion criteria encompassed publications that did not investigate employee behavioral outcomes, did not interpret ethical or behavioral phenomena within an organizational context, did not include a mediating or moderating mechanism, or focused exclusively on consumer-related or macro-level ethical issues. Studies that were not meaningfully related to service work, workplace dynamics, leadership, organizational socialization, or control environments were also excluded. The selection process was not based on a formal quality-scoring procedure but rather on substantive relevance. This approach was chosen because the review is integrative in nature, incorporating studies with diverse methodological designs — including quantitative empirical

research, bibliometric analyses, qualitative investigations, and theoretical reviews — to enable the interpretation of the examined mechanisms from multiple perspectives.

To ensure transparency, the selection process followed the main stages of the PRISMA framework, as illustrated in *Table 2*. However, the study should not be considered a fully systematic review. The purpose of applying the PRISMA logic was to document the search and screening decisions and to provide a transparent and verifiable presentation of how the analytical sample was developed.

TABLE 2. LITERATURE SELECTION PROCESS

Selection Stage	Number of Records	Reason for Decision
Initial records identified through primary databases and supplementary searches	612	–
After removal of duplicates	448	–
Publications excluded during title and abstract screening	360	Did not examine employee behavioral outcomes, did not focus on organizational mechanisms, or were not related to a service/frontline context
Studies selected for full-text assessment	88	Contained potentially relevant mechanisms or contextual factors
Studies excluded after full-text assessment	63	Did not include an explicit mediating or moderating mechanism, were too distant from the research focus, or did not fit the early-career/frontline interpretive framework
Final analytical sample	25	Studies met the substantive inclusion criteria

Source: Author's own compilation (2026)

The final analytical sample consisted of 25 studies. These included publications addressing ethical climate, ethical leadership, customer-related pressure, emotional exhaustion, workplace uncertainty, digital monitoring, generational issues, and newcomer socialization. During the analysis, the organizational factor under investigation, the proposed mediating or moderating mechanism, the behavioral outcome, and the relevance of the findings for employees with limited organizational experience were identified for each study.

The analysis did not aim to statistically aggregate the findings of individual studies; rather, it sought to identify recurring explanatory patterns across the literature. Based on this synthesis, three major mechanisms emerged. The first concerned harmful or rule-violating behaviors associated with emotional exhaustion. The second involved unethical pro-organizational or counterproductive behaviors linked to perceptions of threat and uncertainty. The third related to employee reactions associated with perceptions of control and digital monitoring practices.

Overview of the Included Studies

The main characteristics of the 25 studies included in the final analytical sample are summarized in Table 3. The purpose of the table is to demonstrate that the review is not based solely on a narrative synthesis but also on a systematic categorization of the included studies according to organizational context, examined mechanisms, and behavioral outcomes.

TABLE 3. OVERVIEW OF THE INCLUDED STUDIES

Author(s), Year	Sector	Sample	Examined Mechanism	Outcome Variable	Main Finding
Auzoult & Mazilescu, 2021	Workplace/ organizational context	Empirical study	Ethical climate as a social norm	Judgments and behavioral intentions	Ethical climate becomes a behavioral reference point when it is perceived as a norm and social expectation.
Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022	Labor market/ workplace	Bibliometric analysis	Generation Z in the workplace	Workplace characteristics and research trends	When interpreting generational differences, it is important to distinguish between factors related to age, career stage, and organizational experience.
Chen & Wu, 2022	Workplace/ service context	Empirical study	Customer mistreatment, mediating and moderating effects	Workplace deviance	Negative customer experiences may be associated with deviant behaviors within the organization.
Ghosh & Shum, 2019	Hospitality	Empirical study	Causes of organizational rule-breaking	Rule-violating employee behavior	Rule-breaking can be understood not only as an individual decision but also as a consequence of organizational and work-environment conditions.
Guo et al., 2023	Education sector	Empirical study	Ethical leadership	Ethical workplace behavior	Ethical leadership can foster ethical employee behavior and the development of positive workplace norms.
Hwang et al., 2021	Hospitality/ service sector	Empirical study	Dysfunctional customer behavior; emotional exhaustion, social support	Service sabotage	Dysfunctional customer behavior may lead to service sabotage through emotional exhaustion; social support can weaken this relationship.
Jarrahi et al., 2021	Digital work environment	Literature review	Algorithmic management, control, transparency	Employee autonomy and perceptions of control	Algorithmic control can reshape power relations, autonomy, and perceptions of transparency.
Jung et al., 2020	Hotel industry	Empirical study	Job insecurity, generational moderation	Work engagement, turnover intention	Job insecurity may reduce engagement and increase turnover intentions; generational characteristics may modify this relationship.
Kalischko & Riedl, 2021	Digital workplace	Literature review	Electronic performance monitoring	Stress, satisfaction, performance, behavioral reactions	The effects of monitoring depend on its purpose, transparency, and employees' perceptions of control.

Author(s), Year	Sector	Sample	Examined Mechanism	Outcome Variable	Main Finding
Kong, 2016	Organizational context	Empirical study	Organizational identification, work passion, mindfulness	Unethical pro- organizational behavior (UPB)	Strong organizational identification may, under certain conditions, be associated with unethical pro-organizational behavior.
Liu, Chen & Liu, 2020	Service/ workplace context	Empirical study	Customer mistreatment, displaced aggression, moral identity	Aggression toward coworkers	Customer mistreatment may trigger negative reactions directed not only toward customers but also toward coworkers.
Liu, Zhang, Ji & Wu, 2021	Newcomer/ organizational socialization	Empirical study	Coworker ostracism, psychological availability	Proactive adjustment behavior	During the newcomer period, ostracism may reduce information- seeking, feedback-seeking, and proactive adjustment behaviors.
Ma et al., 2022	Service context	Empirical study	Ethical leadership, organizational virtuousness, mindfulness	Service recovery performance	Ethical leadership may improve service recovery performance through organizational virtuousness.
Mayr et al., 2022	Retail	Empirical study	Causes and consequences of unethical customer behavior	Employee stress, organizational consequences	Unethical customer behavior can generate employee strain and organizational costs.
Melcher, 2019	Public service organizations	Theoretical/ practical analysis	Organizational integrity, ethical governance, control	Integrity and organizational functioning	Ethical functioning depends not only on declared values but also on observable and enforceable organizational practices.
Newman et al., 2017	Organizational ethical climate	Literature review	Dimensions and measurement of ethical climate	Organizational behavioral consequences	Ethical climate functions as a collective perceptual framework that influences interpretations of behavioral norms.
Pagliaro et al., 2018	Organizational context	Empirical study	Ethical climate types, identification, norm compliance, moral disengagement	Employee behavior	Different ethical climate types may influence behavioral outcomes through distinct psychological processes.
Siegel et al., 2022	Workplace electronic monitoring	Meta-analysis	Electronic surveillance	Satisfaction, stress, performance	Electronic monitoring may be associated with slightly lower satisfaction, higher stress, and increased counterproductive work behavior (CWB).

Author(s), Year	Sector	Sample	Examined Mechanism	Outcome Variable	Main Finding
Wu & Wang, 2020	Workplace control environment	Empirical study	Surveillance and interaction monitoring	Employee trust	The type and communication of monitoring may have different effects on employee trust.
Xiao et al., 2022	Service frontline	Empirical study	Dysfunctional customer behavior, negative emotions, supervisor support	Prosocial service behavior	Supervisor support can mitigate the negative emotional effects of dysfunctional customer behavior.
Xu, Wen & Wang, 2022	Organizational context	Empirical study	Job insecurity, impression management, organizational identification	Unethical pro- organizational behavior (UPB)	Job insecurity may be linked to UPB through impression-management motives, particularly when organizational identification is strong.
Yiwen & Hahn, 2021	Millennial employees / COVID-19 context	Time-lagged empirical study	Job insecurity, moral disengagement, psychological resources	Counterproductive work behavior (CWB)	Job insecurity may lead to CWB through moral disengagement; psychological resources can weaken this relationship.
Zhang et al., 2018	Service occupations	Empirical study	Surface acting, emotional exhaustion	Customer-directed sabotage	Emotional exhaustion may mediate the relationship between surface acting and customer sabotage; social relationships can buffer this effect.
Zhang et al., 2022	Organizational context	Empirical study	Job insecurity, moral disengagement, moral identity	Destructive/ counterproductive behavior	Job insecurity may be associated with destructive workplace behaviors through moral disengagement.
Zhang, Sun & Jin, 2025	Digital performance monitoring	Empirical study	Electronic performance monitoring, self-efficacy	Job performance	Monitoring perceived as developmental may improve performance through enhanced self- efficacy.

Source: Author's own compilation (2026)

As shown in *Table 3*, the included studies represent diverse methodological approaches and sectoral contexts. Nevertheless, they consistently highlight three major mechanisms: behavioral reactions associated with emotional exhaustion, the effects of workplace uncertainty and perceived threat, and employee responses related to perceptions of control and monitoring. These recurring patterns provide a rationale for the integrative approach adopted in the present study, which seeks not to examine a single causal relationship but rather to organize and interpret multiple interconnected explanatory pathways.

Ethical climate theory

Organizational ethical climate refers to the shared perceptions held by employees regarding which behaviors are considered expected, appropriate, and consequential within a given organization (Newman et al., 2017). Rather than representing an individual attitude, ethical climate functions as a collective interpretive framework that provides employees with a reference point when navigating ambiguous situations.

The influence of ethical climate on behavior can primarily be understood as an interpretive mechanism. It may shape which courses of action employees perceive as acceptable, risky, or organizationally supported. Climate characteristics can alter the perceived acceptability and risk associated with particular behavioral alternatives, thereby influencing the likelihood of different behavioral outcomes. According to Pagliaro and colleagues (2018), different types of ethical climate are associated with distinct psychological processes, including patterns of organizational identification, norm compliance, and moral disengagement, which may differentially affect the probability of harmful or rule-violating behaviors. From a normativity-based perspective, Auzoult and Mazilescu (2021) argue that a rule becomes an actual behavioral reference only when it is perceived as applicable to the situation, shared by members of the group, and reinforced through social expectations. This may be particularly relevant in service occupations, where employees frequently encounter situations involving direct customer interactions in which local group norms may play an important role alongside the interpretation of formal organizational rules.

In the present study, the term negative behavioral outcomes are used as an umbrella concept encompassing counterproductive work behavior (CWB), service sabotage, and workplace deviance (Pagliaro et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2018; Yiwen, & Hahn, 2021; Chen, & Wu, 2022). Unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) refers to rule-breaking or ethically questionable actions that are undertaken with the perceived intention of benefiting the organization (Kong, 2016).

Ethical leadership

Within service organizations, research on ethical leadership often focuses not directly on unethical behavioral outcomes but rather on indicators of service performance. Several studies interpret these outcomes as being associated with organizational processes that may also carry ethical relevance (Hwang et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2022; Guo et al., 2023).

In a frontline service context, Ma and colleagues (2022) found that ethical leadership may be associated with higher levels of service recovery performance, with this relationship being mediated by organizational virtuousness, conceptualized as a collective organizational resource. This finding may be interpreted to suggest that increased managerial support and employee empowerment can reduce situations in which employees perceive informal practices or rule-bending solutions as necessary. However, the study did not directly measure behavioral outcomes of this kind.

A recurring issue in ethical leadership research is that the construct is frequently assessed through perception-based measures, which may introduce interpretive limitations similar to those identified in ethical climate research (Newman et al., 2017).

Within the service frontline context, several authors argue that the study of leadership ethics should be complemented by the analysis of specific managerial decisions and practices, such as supporting employees in setting appropriate boundaries or providing resources necessary for effective service recovery, rather than focusing exclusively on formally declared values (Melcher, 2019; Ma et al., 2022).

Team and peer norms

For employees who have recently entered an organization, organizational functioning often becomes understandable through direct workplace relationships. Immediate supervisors, experienced colleagues, and the everyday practices of workgroups provide important reference points for interpreting behavioral expectations. In a study of newcomers, Liu and colleagues (2021) found that workplace ostracism was associated with lower psychological availability and weaker proactive adjustment behaviors. Other research suggests that such experiences may reduce the likelihood of seeking feedback and speaking up, which, in ethically relevant situations, may also be associated with a lower willingness to voice concerns or raise issues (Guo et al., 2023).

The role of team-level relational resources has also been examined in connection with negative behavioral outcomes in service settings. Zhang and colleagues (2018) found that both coworker exchange (CWX) and leader-member exchange (LMX) can weaken the resource-depletion process through which emotional exhaustion contributes to harmful customer-directed behaviors. These findings suggest that support within the workgroup may have significance not only for employee well-being but also for the regulation of workplace behavior.

Customer pressure

In service occupations, ethically relevant behaviors are shaped not only by internal motivations but also by the characteristics of customer interactions (Liu et al., 2020; Chen, & Wu, 2022). Several studies identify dysfunctional customer behavior as an important contextual factor influencing employee responses.

Using a hospitality-sector sample, Hwang and colleagues (2021) found that dysfunctional customer behavior was associated with higher levels of service sabotage. In this relationship, emotional exhaustion acted as a mediating mechanism, while social support weakened the association. In a frontline financial services context, Xiao and colleagues (2022) identified a similar pattern: dysfunctional customer behavior was associated with stronger negative emotions and lower levels of prosocial service behavior, whereas supervisor support mitigated employees' negative emotional reactions. These findings suggest that managerial support may represent an important contextual condition influencing behavioral responses.

Liu and colleagues (2020) linked the phenomenon of customer mistreatment to displaced aggression. Negative experiences with customers were found to manifest in behaviors directed toward coworkers, with moral identity serving as a moderating factor in this relationship. This finding suggests that the effects of customer interactions may extend beyond customer relationships themselves and influence behaviors within the organization more broadly (Chen, & Wu, 2022).

In a qualitative retail study, Mayr and colleagues (2022) described various forms of unethical customer behavior and their organizational consequences, highlighting that such interactions may generate organizational costs through increased employee stress and exhaustion. Taken together, these findings suggest that when interpreting organizational ethical climate, both customer-side expectations and organizational response practices should be considered relevant contextual factors.

Emotional labor and resource state

In service occupations, emotional labor — particularly surface acting — may require substantial psychological resources. Several studies have examined how this resource demand is associated with employee behavioral outcomes. In the model proposed by Zhang and colleagues (2018),

higher levels of surface acting were associated with increased emotional exhaustion, which in turn was linked to harmful customer-directed behaviors. According to the authors' interpretation, such behaviors should not necessarily be viewed as indicators of deficient values or character, but rather as outcomes associated with processes of resource regulation and depletion.

In the same study, both coworker exchange (CWX) and leader-member exchange (LMX) weakened this relationship. At the level of organizational practice, these factors may be linked to workplace conditions such as supportive leadership and assistance provided within the workgroup (Xiao et al., 2022). Hwang and colleagues (2021) reported a similar pattern, finding that dysfunctional customer behavior was associated with emotional exhaustion, which subsequently contributed to service sabotage, while social support reduced the strength of this relationship.

Taken together, these findings suggest that employees' resource states may represent an important mediating factor when interpreting behavioral outcomes in service occupations. Accordingly, alongside formal organizational regulation, the management of emotional demands and the provision of a supportive work environment may play an important role in maintaining desired patterns of employee behavior.

Job insecurity and behavioral outcomes

Employees with limited organizational experience frequently encounter uncertain employment conditions, such as probationary periods, fixed-term contracts, or variable work schedules. Xu and colleagues (2022) linked job insecurity to unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB), finding that perceptions of threat were associated with impression-management motives, which, in the presence of strong organizational identification, were related to higher levels of UPB. This finding suggests that organizational identification may, under certain circumstances, be associated with different behavioral consequences (Kong, 2016).

In several studies, moral disengagement appears as a mediating variable between situations of uncertainty and behavioral outcomes. Using a Millennial sample, Yiwen and Hahn (2021) found that job insecurity was associated with higher levels of counterproductive work behavior (CWB), with moral disengagement acting as a mediator, while psychological resources weakened the relationship. In a hotel industry sample, Jung and colleagues (2020) demonstrated that uncertainty associated with the COVID-19 pandemic was linked to lower work engagement, with differences observed across generational groups. Although work engagement is not itself an ethical outcome, previous research suggests that lower engagement may be associated with reduced rule compliance and diminished work effort (Ghosh, & Shum, 2019).

Similarly and colleagues (2022) found that job insecurity may be associated with destructive coworker-directed behaviors through the mechanism of moral disengagement. Taken together, these findings suggest that uncertainty may create interpretive situations for early-career employees in which the application of behavioral norms becomes less clear and more susceptible to contextual influences.

Digital monitoring and surveillance

In service occupations – such as call centers, banking customer service, and retail settings – performance monitoring is often an integral component of work organization. Common monitoring practices include call recording, performance metrics, mystery shopping programs, and location-based tracking. Consequently, research in this area examines not only technological forms of control but also how such practices are perceived by employees (Wu & Wang, 2020; Jarrahi et al., 2021; Kalischko, & Riedl, 2021; Siegel et al., 2022).

According to the meta-analysis conducted by Siegel and colleagues (2022), electronic monitoring is, on average, associated with slightly lower job satisfaction, higher levels of stress, and increased counterproductive work behavior (CWB), while no consistent positive effect on performance has been demonstrated. Other studies suggest that these outcomes may depend on how employees perceive the function of monitoring — whether it is viewed as supportive and developmental or primarily punitive in nature (Wu, & Wang, 2020).

At the same time, the evidence is not entirely one-sided. Zhang and colleagues (2025) found that electronic performance monitoring implemented for developmental or preventive purposes may be positively associated with employee performance, with self-efficacy serving as a mediating mechanism. This finding suggests that the effects of monitoring may depend substantially on the manner in which it is introduced and the communication framework surrounding its implementation.

In the context of algorithmic and platform-based control, Jarrahi and colleagues (2021) identify three recurring mechanisms: the transformation of power relationships, the emergence of new competency requirements, and limitations in transparency. When employees do not understand the rules governing evaluation and rewards, they may perceive organizational procedures as less predictable. According to some studies, lower perceptions of predictability may be associated with a greater willingness to circumvent rules and procedures (Kalischko, & Riedl, 2021).

Generational and career-stage vulnerability

Early-career status should not be understood solely as an age-based category but rather as a position characterized by limited organizational experience, lower levels of organizational embeddedness, and stronger dependency relationships with supervisors and workgroups (Liu et al., 2021). As a result, employees in this stage may rely more heavily on behavioral cues and reference points provided by their organizational environment. At the same time, caution is warranted when interpreting generational differences, as many observed variations may be explained by the early stages of a career or by the organizational entry process itself, rather than by stable cohort characteristics (Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022).

Within service contexts, several studies have shown that limited organizational experience may modify the strength of organizational influences. Using a hotel industry sample, Jung and colleagues (2020) identified a generational moderating effect in the relationship between job insecurity and work engagement. Similarly, Yiwen and Hahn (2021) found, in a Millennial sample, that job insecurity was associated with counterproductive work behavior through the mediating mechanism of moral disengagement.

Research on newcomer socialization (Liu et al., 2021) further suggests that the quality of the organizational social environment is particularly influential during the early stages of organizational entry. Workplace ostracism may be associated with lower levels of feedback-seeking and information-seeking behavior, potentially affecting the learning processes through which employees interpret and internalize organizational ethical norms.

Integrated conceptual model

Within the framework proposed in this study, the term *early-career employee* primarily refers to individuals with limited organizational experience (typically one year or less of organizational tenure) and should not be equated exclusively with age-based or generational categories. Based on the reviewed literature, an interpretive framework focusing on early-career employees can be proposed. The identified patterns represent contextual conditions under which particular behavioral outcomes appeared more frequently across the studies included in the review.

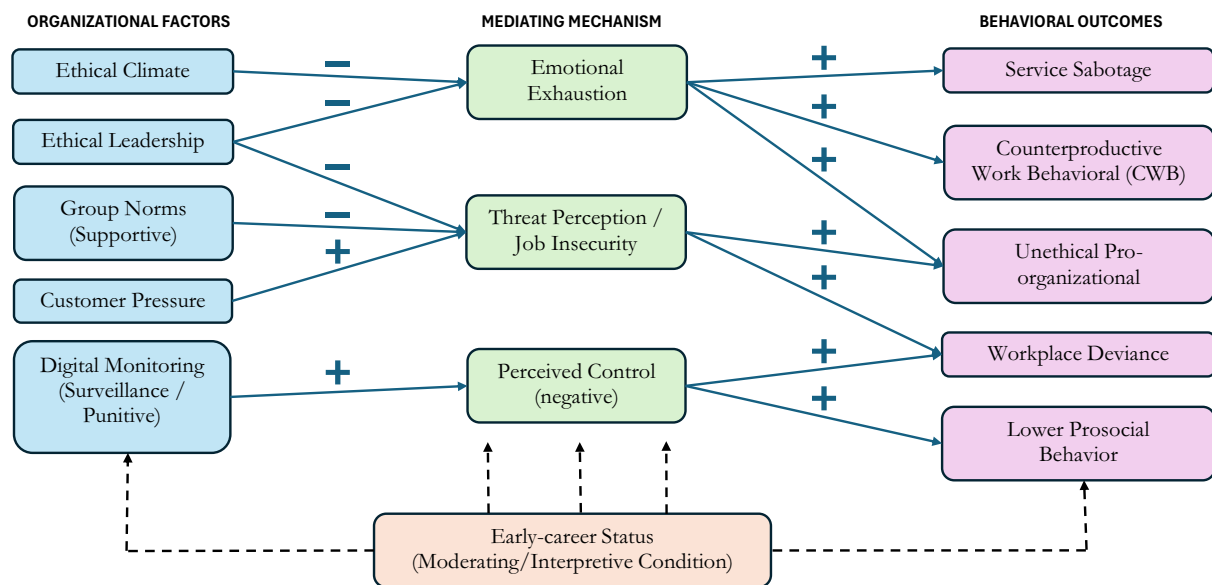
The literature suggests that, in service occupations, employee behavior is influenced not only by formally declared organizational values but also by organizational and psychological processes related to resource availability, social relationships, and perceptions of control. Among employees with limited organizational experience, these processes may play an especially important role because such individuals tend to rely more heavily on environmental cues, social references, and feedback from others.

The proposed framework identifies three recurring patterns within the literature:

1. the emergence of harmful behaviors associated with emotional exhaustion, particularly in the context of customer interactions and emotional labor;
2. the possibility of unethical pro-organizational rule violations associated with perceptions of threat and insecurity, especially when combined with strong organizational identification;
3. and reactive responses related to perceptions of control within monitoring-intensive work environments.

These patterns should not be interpreted as deterministic outcomes. Rather, they represent contextual conditions that were more frequently associated with specific behavioral outcomes across the studies reviewed. Within this framework, early-career status does not function as an independent causal factor but as an interpretive condition that may modify the meaning and strength of organizational influences.

FIGURE 1. INTEGRATED CONCEPTUAL MODEL



+ = Increases the risk / strengthens the relationship
 - = Decreases the risk / weakens the relationship
 Dashed line = Moderating or interpretive condition

Source: Author's own compilation (2026)

Conclusions and implications

Based on the literature synthesis, the behavior of early-career employees in service occupations cannot be explained solely by an organization's formally declared values. It is also shaped by organizational and psychological processes that influence how employees interpret situations and

make decisions in their day-to-day work. The studies reviewed suggest that emotional exhaustion, job insecurity, and perceptions of control may play key roles in determining how organizational conditions are associated with behavioral outcomes.

For employees at the beginning of their careers or with limited organizational experience, these processes may be particularly important because the interpretation of organizational norms, the acquisition of role expectations, and the management of decision-related uncertainty are still developing during this stage. The literature points to several practical implications that may be relevant for both human resource management and managerial practice.

1. Ethical socialization should not be limited to communicating formal rules

Research suggests that organizational norms become genuine behavioral reference points only when employees are able to apply them in concrete situations (Auzoult, & Mazilescu, 2021). Accordingly, onboarding and integration programs for newcomers should complement the presentation of formal policies with practice-oriented learning activities. Customer complaint-handling simulations, discussions of ethical dilemmas, role-playing exercises, and case studies may be particularly useful in helping employees develop a practical understanding of organizational norms.

2. Clear organizational protocols are needed for managing customer conflicts

Several studies indicate that dysfunctional or unethical customer behavior may be associated with emotional exhaustion, service sabotage, workplace deviance, or lower levels of prosocial behavior (Liu et al., 2020; Hwang et al., 2021; Xiao et al., 2022). Organizations may therefore benefit from establishing clear procedures specifying the support employees can expect when confronted with aggressive, abusive, or unethical customer conduct. Such protocols may reduce uncertainty and strengthen employees' perceptions of organizational support.

3. Managerial support should extend beyond performance evaluation

The reviewed studies suggest that managerial presence and support function not only as performance-related factors but also as mechanisms of behavioral regulation (Ma et al., 2022; Xiao et al., 2022; Guo et al., 2023). For early-career employees in particular, access to managerial consultation and feedback may be critical when dealing with uncertain or ethically complex situations. Supportive leadership practices can facilitate the internalization of appropriate norms and reduce the likelihood of rule-bending or avoidance behaviors.

4. Acceptance of digital monitoring depends on transparency

The effects of digital control systems and electronic performance monitoring depend substantially on how employees interpret their purpose (Wu, & Wang, 2020; Kalischko & Riedl, 2021; Siegel et al., 2022). Monitoring systems perceived as developmental and supportive may generate different reactions than systems viewed primarily as punitive or surveillance-oriented. From an HR perspective, it is therefore advisable to communicate clearly the purpose of monitoring, the evaluation criteria employed, and the feedback opportunities available to employees.

5. Preventing emotional exhaustion is also an ethical concern

The reviewed literature consistently identifies emotional exhaustion as a recurring mediating mechanism in the development of negative behavioral outcomes (Zhang et al., 2018; Hwang et al., 2021). Consequently, managing workload should not be viewed solely as an employee well-being issue but also as a means of sustaining desired organizational behaviors. Job rotation practices, adequate rest periods, regular managerial support, supervision opportunities, and structured debriefing sessions following customer conflicts may all contribute to reducing emotional exhaustion.

Overall, the literature suggests that an ethical climate alone does not guarantee the emergence of desired employee behaviors. The practical effectiveness of organizational norms also depends on the support employees receive during socialization, how customer-related pressures are managed, the degree of uncertainty employees experience, and how organizational control mechanisms are interpreted. Human resource management and leadership practices therefore play a crucial role not only in communicating norms but also in ensuring their effective implementation in everyday organizational life.

Labor Relations and HR Practice Relevance

The findings of the present study have direct implications for several areas of human resource management and labor relations practice, particularly in organizational settings where employees engage in regular customer interactions and where organizational socialization and performance control play a central role. The literature synthesis suggests that ethical climate, ethical leadership, group norms, customer-related pressure, and digital monitoring should not be viewed as isolated factors but rather as organizational conditions that may influence employee behavioral outcomes.

The findings may be especially relevant for organizations providing customer service, where employees routinely encounter conflictual or emotionally demanding customer situations. Similar implications may apply to retail and hospitality organizations, where employees are often required to deliver a high-quality customer experience while simultaneously coping with substantial emotional labor demands and performance pressures.

The study's conclusions are also applicable to front-office banking operations, financial customer service departments, and call centers, where digital monitoring, continuous performance tracking, and standardized service delivery processes constitute central elements of work organization. Based on the reviewed literature, transparent communication regarding the purpose of monitoring systems, the provision of managerial support, and the effective management of emotional demands may be particularly important in these environments.

In addition, the findings may contribute to the development of onboarding and newcomer integration programs. During the newcomer period, employees tend to rely heavily on behavioral cues and reference points provided by supervisors and colleagues. Consequently, ethical socialization, the provision of opportunities for feedback, and practice-oriented training in conflict management may represent important components of successful organizational integration.

The study highlights that shaping employee behavior requires more than formal regulation or the mere articulation of ethical expectations. For HR practitioners, it is equally important to create a supportive organizational environment, maintain an active managerial presence, implement effective socialization processes, and ensure that employees perceive organizational practices as fair, transparent, and trustworthy.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The present review has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings.

First, the focus on early-career employees is often operationalized only indirectly in the literature, for example through newcomer definitions, generational categorizations, or Millennial samples. Consequently, the synthesis partly relies on service-sector studies that did not exclusively examine newly hired employees but rather identified mechanisms within broader employee samples that may assume greater significance during the early stages of organizational membership (Jung et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2021; Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022).

Second, a substantial proportion of research examining the relationship between ethical climate and ethical behavior is based on perception-based and cross-sectional measures, which limits causal interpretations (Newman et al., 2017). Future research could therefore benefit from longitudinal and intervention-based designs, including studies investigating the effects of onboarding and socialization programs, customer conflict management practices, and alternative approaches to framing and communicating monitoring systems.

Third, the available empirical evidence from service settings is concentrated within specific regions and industries. Future studies could examine how cultural norms – such as attitudes toward hierarchy or customer orientation – influence the interpretation of organizational situations (Auzoult, & Mazilescu, 2021), as well as perceptions of power and fairness associated with technological forms of control (Jarrahi et al., 2021).

An additional limitation is that most of the included studies rely on self-report measures, increasing the risk of common method variance. Furthermore, the cultural concentration of many research samples may limit the generalizability of the findings across different national and organizational contexts.

Finally, the review focused on publications published between 2015 and 2026. As a result, classical theoretical models are represented primarily through their later empirical applications and review-based interpretations rather than through direct engagement with the original theoretical formulations.

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