

# Customer pressure and restaurant employee green creative behavior: serial mediation effects of restaurant ethical standards and employee green passion

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Today's consumers are aware of restaurants' effects on the environment and pressure them to implement green practices. As restaurant success largely depends on how employees meet customer expectations, employee green creative behavior (EGCB) is critical. Therefore, this study aims to investigate how to enhance EGCB by integrating a comprehensive set of three-dimensional components: external, organizational and individual factors.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Data analysis was conducted using responses from full-time employees in the US restaurant industry. The PROCESS macro was used to test the direct and indirect relationships between the study variables. A series of mediation analyzes were conducted to investigate the mediation effects of "restaurant ethical standards" and "employee green passion" on their relationships to "customer pressure" and EGCB.

**Findings** – The results verified a direct effect of "customer pressure" on "restaurant ethical standards" and EGCB. The study also demonstrated positive direct relationships of "restaurant ethical standards" – "employee green passion" and "employee green passion" – EGCB. The result showed that "restaurant ethical standards" and "employee green passion" sequentially explained the partial impact of "customer pressure" on EGCB.

**Practical implications** – The study recommends that restaurant managers acknowledge growing customer environmentalism and prepare to address their customers' stricter green requirements. Restaurants need to review their ethical standards on a regular basis to meet rising customer pressure. The study also offers empirical evidence regarding the importance of selecting employees who are passionate about sustainability and empowering them to encourage their green creative behavior.

**Originality/value** – Although past studies have introduced various determinants of employee creative behavior, they have mainly focused on organizational and individual-level factors but have ignored a critical external factor, which is customer pressure. The study addresses this research gap by investigating the interrelationships between customer pressure and EGCB through restaurant ethical standards (organizational-level) and employee green passion (individual-level).

**Keywords** - Customer pressure, Employee green creative behavior, Employee green passion, Ethical standards, Restaurant sustainability

## Introduction

Sustainability is now a key trend in the restaurant industry, as environmental concerns are increasingly top of the mind for customers. Food quality, price, location and online reviews are still the main drivers of restaurant selection, but sustainability is becoming a bigger factor (Kim *et al.*, 2013; Kim *et al.*, 2016; Raab *et al.*, 2018; Xu and Jeong, 2019; Yang *et al.*, 2017). Today's customers are paying more attention to how companies address sustainability in the marketplace and they show support for businesses that demonstrate social and environmental responsibility (Assaker, 2020; Awan *et al.*, 2019; Balaji *et al.*, 2019; González-Rodríguez *et al.*, 2020; Neff *et al.*, 2015; Olya *et al.*, 2019). Millennials and Generation Z consumers in particular are increasingly prioritizing sustainability when making purchases (Yamane and Kaneko, 2021). Hospitality researchers showed evidence that customers are willing to spend more to patronize a green restaurant (Han *et al.*, 2020; Moon, 2021; Namkung and Jang, 2013; Teng and Wu, 2019). Following this trend, restaurants are developing green strategies to improve their environmental practices, paying attention to how they procure food ingredients, improving resource use in their operations, reducing food packaging waste and providing more food transparency for modern eco-conscious customers (Friedlander, 2020).

The restaurant industry is characterized as being dominated by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), representing the most competitive business segment with easy business entry, imitation and low levels of access to resources (Bos-Brouwers, 2010; Cho *et al.*, 2018; Jogaratnam, 2017). As a customer-facing sector, customer pressure is one of the most prominent factors influencing restaurants' green responses. It is also the momentum behind the customer pressure forcing the increased pace of green initiatives (Balaji *et al.*, 2019; Wang *et al.*, 2013).

On the other hand, due to their small and simple organizational structure, SMEs, including those in the restaurant sector, have the relative advantages of flexibility, adaptability and a short decision chain, so they can make quick responses to changes in market conditions and customer demands (Gunasekaran *et al.*, 2011). Restaurant businesses, in particular, deal directly with their customers, which gives them a greater capacity to detect and satisfy the very specific needs of their customers.

Restaurants have a complete service orientation where their success hinges on how customer expectations are met by their employees at the point of interface, so restaurant employees' eco-friendly behavior can significantly enhance their restaurants' green practices (Mittal and Dhar, 2016). Due to their proximity to customers, employees who perform green behavior voluntarily can be an effective channel for the transmission of novel green ideas to restaurant customers (Bhutto *et al.*, 2021). By being so close to customers, it will be easier for employees to communicate with them, which helps solve problems and share new ideas. Therefore, it is vital to examine how restaurant employees play the part of sustainability gatekeepers, as their green creative behavior can safeguard the restaurant from reputational damage and improve its environmental performance in aggregate ways (Umrani *et al.*, 2020). However, a review of the literature shows that much research attention has been devoted to the perspective of the customer (DiPietro *et al.*, 2013; Hu *et al.*, 2010) and only a handful of researchers explored the role of the restaurant employees in implementing restaurant sustainability practices (Hu *et al.*, 2013; Jang, 2020; Jang and Zheng, 2020).

Customers are integral to the service system of a restaurant business because they actively participate in many aspects of the supply chain (Sigala, 2014). However, customer influence alone is not necessarily sufficient enough to influence employee green creative behavior (EGCB). Green creativity is referred to as the development of novel ideas about green products and services (Song and Yu, 2018) and as such, the influences of

organizational contexts and individual employee factors may be necessary to affect EGCB. Many corporations are actively integrating sustainability principles into their business practices to demonstrate social responsibility and support the welfare of their key stakeholders (Ahmed *et al.*, 2021; Ozdemir, 2020). Previous studies have underscored the point that green creativity can be achieved when organizations develop and transmit sustainable policies and codes of conduct to their employees, so the employees foster them and use their own innovativeness in an environmentally friendly manner (Aboramadan and Karatepe, 2021; Jia *et al.*, 2018; Li *et al.*, 2020). Clarity on organizations' ethical standards and procedures reduces any potential ambiguities and strengthens the employees' focus on green innovations, thereby achieving the desired outcomes long term (Reuter *et al.*, 2012).

Several authors have strongly supported the idea that employees' green passion is a key pre-requisite of EGCB (Jia *et al.*, 2018; Luu, 2020; Robertson and Barling, 2013). Li *et al.* (2020) suggested that when employees have a higher level of green passion, they are more likely to suggest ideas to protect the environment and actively participate in discussions and implementation.

The current body of research introduces the different determinants of employee creative behavior at three levels: external (e.g. stakeholder engagement and customer pressure), organizational (e.g. leadership, ethical standards and management entrepreneurial orientation) and individual (e.g. values, motivation and passion) (Aboramadan and Karatepe, 2021; Ahmed *et al.*, 2021; Bhutto *et al.*, 2021; Feng *et al.*, 2018; Gualandris and Kalchschmidt, 2014; Jang *et al.*, 2017; Jiang *et al.*, 2018; Luu, 2020). Yet, these prior studies have only explored the organizational and individual-level influences on employee creativity and ignored a critical external factor, which is customer pressure.

This research gap encouraged the authors of this study to investigate the interrelationship between customer pressure and EGCB through organizational ethical standards (organizational level) and employee green passion (individual level) in the context of the restaurant industry. The study first explains some of the variances in EGCB by examining the effects of three components, namely, the external (customer pressure), organizational (restaurant ethical standard) and individual (employee green passion) factors, separately. Then, how EGCB can be more effectively enhanced is assessed using the perspective of the dynamic interactions between these three-dimensional factors. More specifically, the objective of this study is to examine how customer pressure influences the extent to which a restaurant's ethical standards and employee green passion contribute to enhancing EGCB. Through this goal, the study can enrich sustainability research on restaurant management by demonstrating the serial mediation paths underlying the impacts of customer pressure, restaurant ethical standards and employee green passion on EGCB.

## **Literature review and hypothesis development**

### *Restaurant sustainability*

Sustainability often refers to consumption that does not damage natural, physical or human capital (Costanza *et al.*, 1991). With the worsening of global warming, sustainability awareness has increased and many businesses are increasingly implementing strategies to attract consumers with pro-environmental products and services. Being a major industry, as well as a large source of greenhouse gas emissions, the restaurant industry faces great pressure from customers and stakeholders to adopt green practices to protect the environment and preserve natural resources (Abbas and Hussien, 2021; Xu and Jeong, 2019).

Sustainable practice has become a new trend for the restaurant industry and is no longer just a supplement to business practices. Many restaurants take advantage of opportunities

to use sustainability concepts to increase revenues. For example, they feature more organic menu offerings or use locally grown ingredients, as evidently, consumers would pay a price premium for more sustainable food products (Namkung and Jang, 2013; Poulston and Yiu, 2011).

The topic of waste reduction is another focus for scholars and restaurant practitioners alike due to the devastating environmental impact of food and plastic disposal (Hu *et al.*, 2013; Pirani and Arafat, 2016). Reducing food waste not only provides an opportunity for restaurants to save money but also helps to enhance public perception of the actively participating restaurants. Jang *et al.* (2017) argued that the implementation of food sustainability and waste minimization needs stakeholders' involvement because changes in restaurant practices may affect a business's performance in financial, as well as non-financial terms.

### *Employee green creative behavior*

Employee green behavior is considered the key to achieving an organization's sustainable practices. Recently, the concept of organizational citizenship behavior toward the environment has been extensively investigated to understand employees' psychological processes to implement an organization's green practices (Gilal *et al.*, 2019; Mousa and Othman, 2020; Sainaghi *et al.*, 2020). The theory of organizational citizenship behavior offers a basis for better understanding how an organization's green human resource management influences its employees' green behavior and the organization's sustainable practices. Luu (2019) argued that such behavior is voluntary in nature and may not be explicitly recognized by the organization's formal reward system, focusing instead on benefiting the environment. Prior research has shown that those employees willing to engage in green behavior tend to recycle waste, save energy and contribute to the overall green practices of the organization (Lamm *et al.*, 2013; Story and Forsyth, 2008). This green organizational citizenship behavior produces behaviors that increase concern about the environment and even lead to the development of useful ideas about more eco-friendly products, services and processes (Awan *et al.*, 2019; Luu, 2019).

Chen and Chang (2013) defined green creative behavior as an individual's generation of new green ideas or solutions for environmental conservation or improvement that can be converted into green practices. Despite the anticipated benefits, green creative behavior is still an under-explored concept in the tourism and hospitality literature (Bhutto *et al.*, 2021; Luu, 2020). When this behavior focuses on the workplace and is relevant to employees, such behavior becomes EGCB. EGCB evolved from green organizational citizenship behavior and is a proxy for green innovation, aiming to create more eco-friendly services and mitigate the overall environmental impact of the organization (Paillé and Raineri, 2015). It is imperative, however, for organizations to integrate their sustainability philosophy with a creative mindset to produce organizational green initiatives and activate further green creativities (Aboramadan and Karatepe, 2021; Song and Yu, 2018).

Previous studies have endorsed the arguments that EGCB depends on different factors, such as organizational and individual antecedents. For example, Bhutto *et al.* (2021) identified inclusive leadership as a prime organizational component that might help to motivate employees to manage environmental challenges at work both creatively and innovatively. In addition, individual factors, such as employees' environmental attitude or passion, may also be necessary to affect employees' green creativity (Jia *et al.*, 2018; Luu, 2020). Prior research has further demonstrated that other antecedents, such as the social or work environment and management ethics, may also influence the creative behavior of individuals (Ahmed *et al.*, 2021; Feng *et al.*, 2018; Huang *et al.*, 2016; Li *et al.*, 2020). Still, the

complex and dynamic effects of those factors on EGCB remain unclear given the limited evidence currently available.

### *Customer pressure*

According to the stakeholder theory, organizations are expected to consider the important role of various stakeholders and maintain the balance between their incompatible claims (Freeman, 2010). The groups of stakeholders include customers, local communities, suppliers, shareholders, media, the general public, activists, government, policymakers and stakeholder representatives. Of those stakeholders, customers are the most important and influential and they can exert considerable pressure to achieve sustainable or environmental performance (Lin and Ho, 2011). A study by Lee (2008) showed that changes in customer preference and requirements may have a direct impact on business' green strategies by serving as the instigators and drawing more business' attention to environmental issues. Failure to conform to this ever-increasing customer pressure can cause organizations to lose a market share in today's competitive environment (Gualandris and Kalchschmidt, 2014). With customers' rising environmental concerns, SMEs, such as restaurants, become more responsive and sensitive to the demand of their customers. Customer pressure can stimulate SMEs to adopt green management practices to boost competitiveness by differentiating their products from the competition (Chen and Liu, 2020). Restaurant businesses have, thus, realized the importance of considering their stakeholders as partners when developing sustainable management strategies and adopting green practice standards (Jang, 2020).

The stakeholder theory suggests that an organization's decisions that affect stakeholder outcomes need to be ethical and the organization must build an ethical culture (Fontaine *et al.*, 2006). Top management should assess the potential consequences of failing to comply with customer pressure and adopt ethical standards accordingly. An organization's ethical standards address its stakeholders' sustainable pressures and cultivate ethical relationships with them, which can help to formulate more relevant green strategies (Black and Härtel, 2004).

Park and Kim (2014) noted that stakeholder pressure is the most significant factor affecting employees' green behavior and enhancing an organization's adoption of environmental sustainability programs. Singh (2000) stated that employees working in the service industry in particular are required to generate creative ideas and implement them in practice to meet customer requirements. As individuals are typically more passionate about issues that they perceive to have social value, the stakeholder demand can directly invoke employees' green enthusiasm and environmental passion (Deng *et al.*, 2013; Robertson and Barling, 2013). For employees to manage environmental challenges creatively, they should cultivate relationships with key stakeholders, such as customers, to create green passion by internalizing external activities that produce employees' engagement in green creative endeavors (Luu, 2020). The following hypotheses are, thus, offered in this study:

- H1. Customer pressure is positively associated with restaurant ethical standards of sustainability.
- H2. Customer pressure is positively associated with employee green passion.
- H3. Customer pressure is positively associated with EGCB.

### *Restaurant ethical standards*

Ethical standards are considered a subset of organizational culture and are adopted by organizations to help guide the decision-making and behavior of members by providing a

set of principles (Park *et al.*, 2017). Organizations use ethical guidelines to demonstrate the social responsibility of the business to all stakeholders who can be affected by its operations (Aboramadan and Karatepe, 2021; Jenkins, 2004). Many organizations focusing on ethical practices explicitly detail their commitment to corporate social responsibility and outline ethical codes of conduct to manage the behavior of employees and other relevant stakeholders (Erwin, 2011).

When employees clearly understand the ethical standards of their organization and see the social value of their work, they are likely to feel encouraged and proud of themselves. Organizations can promote their ethical practices by rewarding the employees whose performances go above and beyond to demonstrate workplace ethics, which can stimulate greater work engagement and passion (Tymon *et al.*, 2010). Research views passion as a positive emotion that leads an individual becoming more engaged in certain behaviors (Coelho *et al.*, 2011). A study by Gilal *et al.* (2019) showed that an organization's green reward system generates employees' green passion and, in turn, motivates employees to contribute to environmental goals.

Ethical standards have become an essential business function, as they direct the operations of an organization and impact the work attitude, as well as ethical behaviors of its employees (Treviño *et al.*, 1998). Brown and Treviño (2006) argued that both organizational leaders and employees are affected by an organization's ethical standards and the leaders can promote ethical culture by modeling ethical behaviors to the rest of the organization. Following role-modeling and ethical standards, employees may pay more attention to their ethical behaviors and perform behaviors that are critical for the organization (Ahmed *et al.*, 2021; Clegg *et al.*, 2007). Past studies showed that the organization's ethical standards can promote the ethical behavior of employees through the promotion of ethical practices, subsequently leading to employees' organizational citizenship and creative behavior (Feng *et al.*, 2018; Mayer *et al.*, 2009; Tian *et al.*, 2020; Tu and Lu, 2013).

Several researchers have examined the relationship between ethical standards and employees' creative behavior to show that organizations with higher ethical standards could have an impact on the levels of creativity of their employees (Feng *et al.*, 2018). Chen and Hou (2016) provided evidence that ethical leaders can be positive role models for employees to boost employees' creative performance in solving an organization's issues. When ethical standards are clearly communicated, employees can translate these expectations into their work and feel more comfortable being creative (Kark and Carmeli, 2009). More recently, Khan *et al.* (2019) applied the social learning theory to show that supervisors' ethical standards play a constructive role in influencing employee attitude and behavior, such as organizational citizenship behavior and creative behavior, toward the environment. Therefore, the following hypotheses were developed:

- H4. Restaurant ethical standards are positively associated with employee green passion.
- H5. Restaurant ethical standards are positively associated with EGCB.

#### *Employee green passion*

Several studies have focused on the impacts of individual traits and characteristics on EGCB. For example, Hameed *et al.* (2020) emphasized the role of individual values in influencing the green attitude and behavior of employees. Robertson and Barling (2013) drew attention to the possible influence of employees' green passion on environment-related

outcomes. Green passion is referred to as a positive emotion that can inspire pro-environmental behaviors and green creativity (Afsar *et al.*, 2016). When an individual has strong green passion, they may be more motivated and willing to engage in green performance (Gilal *et al.*, 2019). Tian *et al.* (2020) stated that if employees are motivated by strong green passion, they are more likely to engage in green creative endeavors that go beyond their organization's expectations, as they view tasks as fun, interesting or even challenging. When employees are passionate about the environment, they put extra effort into their green practices and promote more green creative ideas (Shalley and Gilson, 2004). From the discussion above, the following hypothesis was formulated:

*H6.* Restaurant employee green passion is positively associated with EGCB.

#### *Mediation of restaurant ethical standards of sustainability and employee green passion*

In light of the discussions above, empirical evidence was offered to propose a direct effect of restaurants' customer pressure on EGCB. Within that same relationship, this study proposes a mediation effect of restaurants' ethical standards based on the existing literature (Baker *et al.*, 2006; Chaudhary and Akhouri, 2019). The researchers argued that business external environments (e.g. changes in competition and customer preferences) directly affect a firm's operational strategies, which, in turn, influence employee behavior. In particular, customer pressure induces a high propensity to enforce the organizational culture and implements the formal ethical standards (Weaver *et al.*, 1999). Therefore, it is expected that a restaurant's ethical standards that are driven by customer environmental concerns and pressures may encourage the restaurant employees to perform more green creative behavior.

This similar mediation effect of employees' green passion is also posited between customer pressure and EGCB. The most important responsibility of any business is to motivate and inspire its employees to take ownership of their work and be more creative so that the firm's goals will be translated into reality. A stakeholder's high expectations and pressures can directly invoke employees' green passion and enthusiasm (Robertson and Barling, 2013). When experiencing passion, employees will become more inspired to engage in their work and the scope of their attention will be enlarged, eventually enhancing their ability to generate new ideas and engage in green creative behavior (Jia *et al.*, 2018). The current study, thus, posits that customer pressures can produce employee green passion and ultimately affect EGCB.

Finally, this study proposes a serial mediation effect of restaurant ethical standards and employee green passion on the relationship between customer pressure and EGCB. Due to the complex nature of human behavior, more intricate mechanisms should be further investigated by addressing both the direct and indirect effects of the antecedents of individual behavior (Altunoglu and Gürel, 2015). An early study by Hart (1995) asserted that the success of an organization's environmental management and employee green behavior can be achieved through direct and indirect coordination between the external drivers and internal capabilities. The prior research on human resource management has also proposed potential mediation roles of organizational and individual factors for the relationships between external factors and employee behavior (von Rosenstiel, 2011). Few research studies have yet explored the effects of interactions between individual and organizational variables on EGCB in the restaurant setting.

Green organizational culture that focuses on the environmental concerns of external stakeholders also reflects the proactive integration of rules and standards for greater environmental responsibility and sustainability of organizational processes (Jiang *et al.*, 2018). That circumstance then drives employees to engage in more creative green behavior

(Meijerink *et al.*, 2020). In addition, the ethical standards set by the organization can inspire individual employees to behave in the best interest of the organization, allowing them to embrace external customer pressure for more green creative practices (Feng *et al.*, 2018). Thus, this study proposes not only the individual mediation effect of restaurants' ethical standards and employees' green passion but also their serial mediation effect, as offered in the following hypotheses. The hypothesized relationships in this study are presented in Figure 1:

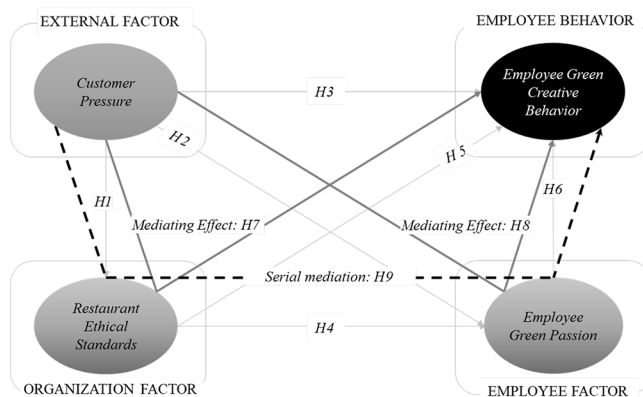
- H7. Restaurant ethical standards mediate the relationship between customer pressure and EGCB.
- H8. Employee green passion mediates the relationship between customer pressure and EGCB.
- H9. Restaurant ethical standards and employee green passion serially mediate the relationship between customer pressure and EGCB.

## Methodology

### *Data collection and sampling*

Using an online panel survey is known as one of the most reliable ways to collect business-level data, as it reduces data collection time and optimizes opportunities to obtain high-quality responses (Görizt, 2007). Thus, a leading panel survey company that represents business professionals worldwide was selected to collect responses from full-time employees having over three years of experience working in the US restaurant industry. As only qualified and eligible respondents who can provide accurate and sufficient information about business-level operations and market conditions in the best possible manner were recruited to participate in the survey, any potential issues related to non (or late) response bias did not exist in the data pool. A total of 321 responses from as many restaurant owners or managers were, thus, obtained, with no missing value.

To avoid a potential social desirability response bias and encourage honesty in the responses, all potential participants were advised that their responses would be treated with strict confidentiality and anonymity. In addition, the survey questionnaire items were



**Figure 1.**  
Research framework



randomized to prevent the respondents from expecting that any items that belonged to a certain study construct. A self-administered web-based survey was used for this study and contributed to reducing any potential social desirability bias issue (Li *et al.*, 2020). The study sample comprised more male respondents (56.5%) than women (43.5%) aged between 30 and 39 years old (38.7%), followed by the age groups of 20–29 (25.8%) and 40–49 (24.4%). The length of time participants had been employed in the restaurant industry averaged seven years.

### *Measures*

The measurement items used for this study are presented in Table 1. A total of 17 items were adapted from prior relevant studies to test the study's hypotheses. First, three items on "customer pressure" were adapted from Chen and Liu (2020) and Yen and Yen (2012), four items on "restaurant ethical standards" were then adapted from Treviño *et al.* (1998) and Fritz *et al.* (2013), four items on "employee green passion" were developed using Robertson and Barling (2013) and Luu (2020) and six items on EGCB were developed based on Chen and Chang (2013). The items were assessed using a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). The last section of the survey questionnaire was developed to obtain information on the respondents' age, gender and the number of years working at the restaurant to control for their potential effects on EGCB (Jaiswal and Dhar, 2015).

### *Preliminary analysis*

Due to the self-reported survey method used in this study, common method bias was tested using Harman's single-factor test. The single-factor extraction solution with no rotation explained 42.67% of the variance (less than 50%), leading to the conclusion that common method bias might not be a critical issue for our data set (Podsakoff and Organ, 1986). Among the 321 responses, 17 were identified as outliers based on Mahalanobis's distance and Cook's values and, therefore eliminated. A total of 304 responses were used for the final analysis.

### *Data analysis*

Supporting a consensus that views a bootstrapping approach (e.g. PROCESS macro) as superior to other mediation tests (Marshall *et al.*, 2020; Teoh *et al.*, 2021), the SPSS PROCESS macro (Model 6) was used to test the direct and indirect associations between "customer pressure," "restaurant ethical standards," "employee green passion," and EGCB. This approach allows the simultaneous examination of the indirect effects in a serial mediation model using bootstrap confidence levels and provides pairwise comparisons between the proposed indirect effects (Bhutto *et al.*, 2021). The analysis calculated all path coefficients, simultaneously controlling for employee age, gender and the number of years working at the restaurant. Of the three control variables, only one variable, "gender," was found to exert a potential confounding influence on the dependent variable. This finding implied that female employees are less likely to show green creativity than men.

## **Results**

### *Validity and reliability test of the measurement items*

Confirmatory factor analysis was performed to evaluate the reliability and validity of the measures. As presented in Table 1, the measurement model generated appropriate goodness-of-fit statistics ( $\chi^2/df = 1.171$ , root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.063, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.950, incremental fit index (IFI) = 0.951, Tucker Lewis index (TLI) = 0.940, goodness of fit (GFI) = 0.932). All indicators showed loadings that ranged from

Items	Factor loading	AVE	CCR	Item-total correlation	Cronbach's $\alpha$
<b>Customer pressure</b>		0.675	0.862		0.862
Increased awareness of environmental issues among our customers	0.842			0.747	
Customers' preference for environmentally friendly products	0.838			0.751	
Customers' continuous attention to our restaurant environmental practices	0.784			0.716	
<b>Restaurant ethical standards</b>		0.539	0.823		0.821
Our restaurant has established formal guidelines for us to comply with for sustainable practices	0.778			0.684	
Our restaurant communicates appropriate ethical codes with us	0.745			0.667	
Our restaurant has an ethical code that guides our behavior and tells us what to do	0.685			0.612	
Our restaurant discusses with us the expectations for an appropriate ethical code	0.725			0.618	
<b>Employee green passion</b>		0.594	0.854		0.853
I am passionate about the environment	0.739			0.649	
I feel strongly about environmental values	0.797			0.723	
I enjoy engaging in environmentally friendly initiatives in my workplace	0.777			0.700	
I passionately encourage others to be more environmentally responsible	0.770			0.706	
<b>Employee green creative behavior</b>		0.536	0.874		0.873
I suggest new ways to achieve the environmental goals of our restaurant	0.714			0.655	
I propose new green ideas (environmentally-oriented) to improve environmental performance for our restaurant	0.762			0.701	
I promote and champion new green ideas (environmentally-oriented) to others at work	0.690			0.640	
I develop adequate plans for the implementation of new green (environmentally-oriented) ideas	0.742			0.685	
I would rethink and revised green (environmentally-oriented) ideas for our restaurant	0.732			0.681	
I would find out creative solutions to environmental problems for our restaurant	0.749			0.689	
<b>Notes:</b> $\chi^2/df = 1.171$ ( $p < 0.001$ ), CFI = 0.950, IFI = 0.951, TLI = 0.940, GFI = 0.932, RMSEA = 0.063; CCR = Composite construct reliability; AVE = Average variance extracted					

**Table 1.**  
Reliability and validity of the measures

0.690 to 0.842 and all values of average variance extracted (AVE) (0.536 to 0.675) were larger than the recommended threshold of 0.50 (Hair *et al.*, 2009). Item–total correlations and Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficients were analyzed to confirm that all items were drawn from the domain of each construct of this study. The results showed high item-total correlations (greater than 0.6) on the total relevant subscale and appropriate values of Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficients ranging from 0.821 to 0.873. Thus, the internal consistency of the measurements was evident (Hair *et al.*, 2009). All values for composite construct reliability ranging from 0.823 to 0.874 exceeded the minimum threshold of 0.07. Table 2 shows that all the square

roots of AVE values were greater than those between the construct correlations. As a result, the convergent and discriminant validity of the measures were verified (Hair et al., 2009).

*Direct relationships between the constructs*

The six direct associations between the study constructs were tested (Figure 2). First, H1 through 3 proposed the positive effect of “customer pressure” on “restaurant ethical standards” (H1), “employee green passion” (H2) and EGCB (H3). The results showed a significant and positive effect of “customer pressure” on “restaurant ethical standards” ( $\beta = 0.434, p < 0.001$ ) and EGCP ( $\beta = 0.324, p < 0.001$ ). However, the effect of “customer pressure” on “employee green passion” was not significant ( $\beta = 0.067, p > 0.05$ ). Thus, H1 and H3 were supported, but H2 was not supported.

Next, H4 and H5 anticipated positive associations of “restaurant ethical standards” with “employee green passion” (H4) and EGCB (H5). The results revealed that “restaurant ethical standards” had a significant and positive effect on “employee green passion” ( $\beta = 0.426, p < 0.001$ ). Unexpectedly, the effect of “restaurant ethical standards” on EGCB was negatively significant ( $\beta = -0.087, p < 0.05$ ). Hence, H4 was supported, but H5 was not. Finally, “employee green passion” significantly and positively influenced EGCB ( $\beta = 0.621, p < 0.001$ ), thereby supporting H6.

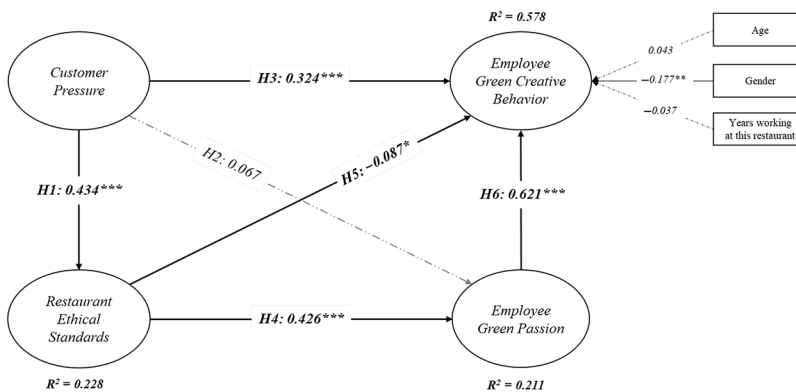
*Mediation analysis*

A series of mediation analyzes were conducted to investigate the mediation effects of “restaurant ethical standards” and “employee green passion” on their relationships for

	Mean	S.D.	(CR)	(RES)	(EGP)	(EGCB)
(1) Customer pressure (CR)	4.99	1.47	<b>0.821<sup>a</sup></b>			
(2) Restaurant ethical standards (RES)	5.25	1.36	0.477	<b>0.743</b>		
(3) Employee green passion (EGP)	5.54	1.35	0.265	0.456	<b>0.773</b>	
(4) Employee green creative behavior (EGCB)	5.22	1.32	0.481	0.369	0.691	<b>0.733</b>

**Table 2.** Correlations and discriminant validity

**Note:** <sup>a</sup>Diagonals: Square root of AVE from the observed variables by the latent variables



**Figure 2.** Results of testing H1 through 6

“customer pressure” and EGCB. This procedure used 5,000 bootstrap samples to create a 95% bias-corrected confidence interval (CI) and ultimately evaluates the significance of the indirect effects (Hayes, 2017). As presented in Table 3, *Ind1* and *Ind2* tested the solo mediation of “restaurant ethical standards” and “employee green passion,” while *Ind3* tested the sequential mediation of those two variables. *Ind1* investigated how “customer pressure” indirectly influences EGCB through “restaurant ethical standards.” *Ind2* examined how “customer pressure” indirectly influences EGCB through “employee green passion.” Finally, *Ind3* tested how “customer pressure” indirectly and sequentially influences EGCB through “restaurant ethical standards” and “employee green passion.”

Results showed that “restaurant ethical standards” did not significantly explain the relationship between “customer pressure” and EGCB (*Ind1*: effect =  $-0.039$ , SE =  $0.021$ , 95% CL =  $-0.079 \sim 0.004$ ) because the CL included zero (0) (Hayes, 2017). Thus, *H7* was not supported. In addition, there was no significant mediation role of “employee green passion” on the relationship between “customer pressure” and EGCB (*Ind2*: effect =  $0.035$ , SE =  $0.022$ , 95% CL =  $-0.006 \sim 0.081$ ). Therefore, *H8* was not supported. Finally, “restaurant ethical standards” and “employee green passion” were tested for their sequential mediation roles. The results showed that the indirect effect of “customer pressure” on EGCB through the sequential mediation of “restaurant ethical standards” and “employee green passion” was significant (*Ind3*: effect =  $0.117$ , SE =  $0.018$ , 95% CL =  $0.085 \sim 0.156$ ). Thus, *H9* was supported.

### Conclusions and discussion

This study was undertaken to examine how best to incorporate an external factor, “customer pressure,” and its role into the general theory that explains the significant effects of organizational and individual factors on EGCB. The study focused on the restaurant industry and its business characteristics, as SMEs enables employees to apply their individual creativity more feasibly to green practices than large businesses. It is evidently clear that “customer pressure” serves as the stimuli to indicate managerial implications for restaurant employee creativity that is specifically related to their green practices. More importantly, “restaurant ethical standards” and “employee green passion” greatly contributed to forming EGCB through their sequential mediation roles. The prior relevant literature demonstrated that an organization’s ethical culture can lead to more positive attitudes and behaviors of its employees (Aboramadan and Karatepe, 2021; Bavik, 2019; Kuenzi *et al.*, 2020). However, the study’s findings showed that restaurant ethical standards inversely affected EGCB and instead contributed to developing positive “employees’ green

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Indirect effects of customer pressure on  
employee green creative practices

	Effect	Boot. SE	Boot. LLCI	Boot. ULCI
<i>Ind1</i> (CP – RES – EGCB)	-0.039	0.021	-0.079	0.004
<i>Ind2</i> (CP – EGP – EGCB)	0.035	0.022	-0.006	0.081
<i>Ind3</i> (CP – RES – EGP – EGCB)	0.117	0.018	0.085	0.156
C1 ( <i>Ind1</i> minus <i>Ind2</i> )	-0.074	0.023	-0.121	-0.028
C2 ( <i>Ind1</i> minus <i>Ind3</i> )	-0.156	0.031	-0.219	-0.096
C3 ( <i>Ind2</i> minus <i>Ind3</i> )	-0.082	0.030	-0.143	-0.025

**Table 3.**  
Results of testing  
serial mediation  
analysis: *HH7*  
through 9

**Notes:** 5,000 bootstrap samples for a 95% bias-corrected confidence interval; customer pressure (CP), restaurant ethical standards (RES), employee green passion (EGP), employee green creative behavior (EGCB); low level confidence interval (LLCI), upper level confidence interval (ULCI)

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passion,” which then further positively affected EGCB. These findings offer specific insights that are also partially contradictory to the existing body of knowledge with regard to the impact of organizations on their employees’ behavior. This might be driven by the study’s specific focus on employees’ voluntary green creative behavior and the particular context of the study. Based on the study’s findings, several important theoretical and managerial implications are discussed below.

### *Theoretical implications*

This study provides empirical support that “customer pressure” on green practices does serve as a powerful external driver to encourage restaurants to establish their ethical standards. The literature states that SMEs are particularly vulnerable to environmental requirements and stakeholder pressures (Bos-Brouwers, 2010; Jogaratnam, 2017). Accordingly, SMEs tend to consider customer pressure as imperative and they are able to be more responsive to customers due to their small and more straightforward organizational structures. In this regard, restaurants as an SME may be one of the most appropriate business sectors for developing and implementing corporate-level ethical standards effectively (Cho *et al.*, 2018; Lin and Ho, 2011), thereby reflecting the extent to which customer needs and desire for sustainability can be a basis of their organizational culture.

No significant relationship was found between “customer pressure” and “employee green passion.” Whether the external environment (e.g. stakeholder pressure) directly influences employee attitudes and behaviors has been the focus of debate in the prior literature. For example, some scholars demonstrated that employees are inspired to have positive attitudes and pursue pro-environment behavior as a result of stakeholder demand (Deng *et al.*, 2013; Robertson and Barling, 2013). Conversely, Dobre (2013) reported that employees who feel pressured by customers were demotivated to exhibit voluntary green behavior and they focused only on what they were required to do. These inconsistent findings implied a need to investigate some intervening mechanisms that could amplify the effects of “customer pressure” on “employee green passion.”

The direct effect of restaurant “customer pressure” on EGCB was supported in this study. According to the stakeholder theory, customer pressure can be a critical source of knowledge and capabilities that exist outside the organizational core domain because customers are an essential group of stakeholders who directly affect organization decision-making on sustainability issues (Freeman, 2010; Han *et al.*, 2020). Further, customer pressure can encourage employees to perform beyond their expectations to achieve environmental performance, such as green creativity (Chen and Chang, 2013). Chen and Liu (2020) stated that customer pressure can stimulate SMEs to adopt green management practices to boost competitiveness. Singh (2000) stressed that employee creativity is particularly important in the service industry wherein employees are required to generate creative ideas and implement them in practice to meet customer requirements. Thus, employees in the restaurant industry are more likely to be sensitive to customer sustainability pressure, which further promotes their job creativity and performance of better and more green practices.

This study verified the positive direct effect of “restaurant ethical standards” and “employee green passion.” It is commonly accepted that employees are likely to feel encouraged and proud of themselves when they understand the organization’s systems, codes of conduct and reward system (Gilal *et al.*, 2019; Tymon *et al.*, 2010; Treviño *et al.*, 1998). A more recent study by Tian *et al.* (2020) also stated that formal organizational culture that provides the standard for what to do and how to act at work is directly associated with employee values and passion. Therefore, the study’s finding could be explained using a general theoretical perspective that organizations with strong

environmental values are more likely to develop eco-friendly ethical standards, leading their employees to be passionate about sustainability.

Unexpectedly, “restaurant ethical standards” were not positively associated with EGCB; instead, the results showed a negative relationship. While prior research has shown a linear association between an organization’s ethical standards and positive organizational outcomes, a handful of researchers has argued that the effects of organizational ethical codes on employee creativity can be more complex than a mere linear relationship (Stouten *et al.*, 2013). Eisenbeiß and Brodbeck (2014) argued that overly strict organizational guidelines may hinder employee autonomy and creativity. Feng *et al.* (2018) also unveiled the curvilinear effect of ethical leadership on employee creativity to conclude that it may be reduced if organizations overemphasize ethical rules and processes. Therefore, a potential reason behind the negative association between “restaurant ethical standards” and EGCB could be the unexpected outcomes of strict adherence to restaurant ethical standards.

This study demonstrated the significant and direct effect of “employee green passion” on EGCB. Voluntary and creative green behavior at work is mostly determined by individual characteristics, such as attitudes, motives, passion and involvement (Norton *et al.*, 2015). Employees can be motivated to voluntarily engage in a certain behavior due to both external pressure and their personal interests (Tian *et al.*, 2020). This logic was well-founded in the analysis showing the strong association between restaurant “employee green passion” and EGCB.

Finally, the result revealed that “restaurant ethical standards” and “employee green passion” sequentially explained the partial impact of “customer pressure” on EGCB. This finding implied that a comprehensive approach that integrates the three essential components of employee behavior (i.e. external, organizational and individual factors) should be applied to an examination of how effectively EGCB can be encouraged. Furthermore, this study extends the understanding of the effect of “customer pressure” on EGCB by revealing the two fundamental mechanisms of “restaurant ethical standards” and “employee green passion.” These results reflected the notion that “customer pressure” can be employed as an effective means of value co-creation and provide the direction for developing proper restaurant operational strategies and implementing appropriate employee training programs. However, this study revealed that either “restaurant ethical standards” or “employee green passion” alone is not enough to intervene in the relationship between “customer pressure” and EGCB. Again, this finding highlights the importance of incorporating the role of customers as an external pressure within the restaurant-owned internal structure to stimulate employee passion for sustainability and thereby further facilitate EGCB.

### *Managerial implications*

The findings of this study offer certain critical implications for restaurant owners and managers. The study confirmed that customers are no longer passive observers. When deciding where to shop, customers look for businesses that interact with stakeholders, the local community and society. Given that restaurant businesses are particularly vulnerable to external customers’ demand, customers have a heightened awareness of how restaurants reflect sustainability in their strategies and operations. Customer pressure for sustainability has become a market driver for employees’ creative behavior in the restaurant business. It is, therefore, first recommended that restaurant managers acknowledge growing customer environmentalism and prepare themselves to address their customers’ environmental and social requirements. During the COVID-19 pandemic, customers have increased their pressure on the restaurant industry to source ingredients responsibly and demand higher transparency at every stage of the restaurant dining experience (Friedlander, 2020).

Consequently, restaurants need to pay more attention to all the functions within their value chain, including how they purchase raw ingredients, how they can improve responsible sourcing, reduce the waste of resources wastes and provide full ingredient transparency to their customers. Customers will likely remember, which sustainable practices restaurants and employees demonstrate during this pandemic even after the COVID-19 crisis is over.

Second, the results suggest that employee creativity might be inhibited when restaurant ethical standards are too strict. However, a firm's ethical guidelines are still seen as a powerful tool for companies to use to transform their organizational cultures and improve their employees' ethical performance (Chen and Hou, 2016). Restaurant ethical standards can have an essential function to help guide employee behavior and the transition into an ethical workplace. Therefore, managers should acknowledge the attenuating effect of ethical standards but then adopt them with caution to avoid excessive ethical guidelines and a potentially negative effect on employees' creative behavior. More importantly, restaurants need to review their existing standards and revise them regularly to meet critical customer pressure and any changes in customer requirements.

Third, actionable results based upon these research findings suggest that restaurants need to recruit those who have green passion and inspire their green enthusiasm by establishing fair ethical standards. Because the restaurant industry is a labor-intensive sector, employees need to have positive attitudes and the prerequisite skills to perform high-quality sustainable practices. Therefore, restaurants should sustain a common underlying core of selecting employees who are passionate about sustainability, training them and giving them autonomy to reflect their creative ideas in both green practices and performance. Moreover, restaurant culture needs to emphasize participation and openness to share knowledge and creativity of employees so that employees can minimize any risks of performing green creative behaviors. Additionally, it is recommended that restaurants focus on their human resource management to retain employees by providing appropriate incentives, ultimately building a creative workforce. Furthermore, restaurants should encourage employees to co-innovate green practices and collaborate with customers. Restaurant employees, who are open to collaboration, can successfully manage customer pressure and improve co-creation outcomes for all parties involved (Sorensen and Jensen, 2015).

#### *Limitations and future research*

This study has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, as the research used a cross-sectional design, the predictive relationships found among constructs in the study model do not warrant causal inferences. Future studies can adopt a longitudinal or experimental design, which may offer a more in-depth understanding of the interrelationships. Second, the variables were chosen from previous relevant studies and may not be comprehensive. Future research should include a broader spectrum of variables to measure the organizational, individual and external factors completely. Third, this study does not differentiate between business-to-business and business-to-consumer contexts, as the intensity of customer pressure could be significantly higher in the latter. Finally, future research should investigate how other external drivers of green innovation, such as a regulatory push and a demand-pull, actually affect EGCB.

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