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**Social washing and customer misbehaviour in the hospitality  
sector: A problem that remains unreported  
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# Customer misbehaviour and service work

- Deviant customer behaviours are endemic across service occupations, with front-line service employees 'routinely faced with situations in which they are subjected to abuse and mistreatment by customers' (Reynolds and Harris, 2006 p.106).
- Customer abuse seen as an aggressive, intimidating or insulting behaviour (Korczynski and Evans, 2013, pp.769).
- **Customer misbehaviour:** refers to behaviours that emerge within customer service that deliberately violate generally accepted social norms of conduct. These include verbal abuse, bullying and harassment, not excluding sexual harassment (Reynolds and Harris, 2009)
- Customer misbehaviour is strongly related to the promotion of a service culture, within which the 'customer is king' and it is driven by business models dominated by the managerialist ideology that the **customer 'is always right'** (Korczynski and Evans, 2013):
  - Perceptions that customers are superior to workers and hold higher social status and the latter suggests the authority of customers over service providers (Wang, 2016).
  - These perceptions imply that customers may abuse and even sexually harass workers, without evident penalties for their (mis)behaviour, whilst workers have to tolerate it and remain silent, or even accept it 'as part of the job' (Poulston, 2008; Ram, 2015).

# Customer abuse and Covid-19

- Customer misbehaviour in the hospitality economy sector has increasingly come under the media and academic spotlights during the Covid-19 pandemic (Donnelly, 2020; Sönmez et al., 2020).
  
- The one fair wage research (2021) in the USA shows:
  - 41% of hospitality workers in the USA reported that there has been a noticeable change in the frequency of unwanted sexualized comments from customers, and 25% report that they have experienced or witnessed a significant change in the frequency of such sexual harassment.
  
  - 78% Experienced or witnessed hostile behavior from customers in response to staff enforcing COVID-19 safety protocols.
  
  - 59% Experienced or witnessed hostile behavior on a weekly basis from customers in response to staff enforcing COVID-19 safety protocols.
  
- Evidently, customer abuse has become a social norm (Taylor, 2019) and *remains* a worrying, uncontrolled and growing problem in service work, *violating workers' dignity at work* (Sayer, 2007).

# Research Objectives

To contribute to debates regarding customer abuse of staff this study has three key concerns:

1. To explore the incidence and nature of such deviant customer behaviour against hospitality workers during a period of socioeconomic crisis – Covid-19
2. To examine and understand whether, how and when employees report abuse
3. To investigate what support, if any, management offers workers experiencing customer abuse in this context.

# Methods

- Online survey between June-October 2020
- Distributed via social media platforms - respondents were asked to self-identify as persons who have worked in hospitality in Scotland over the past two years
- Our survey had 322 anonymous responses overall and we conducted 10 follow-up semi-structured interviews with willing survey participants in January 2021

# About our respondents

Largest % of  
respondents were  
aged 16-25

71% of  
respondents were  
female

Vast majority  
identified their  
nationality as  
'White Scottish'

74% worked (at  
time of survey) in  
the Scottish  
hospitality industry

The majority were  
front of house staff

# Key findings

85% of respondents had experienced verbal abuse over the past year, and 64% reported sexual harassment

Customers were identified as perpetrators by 76% of respondents

According to employees, customers (both male and female) expect hospitality workers to flirt with them

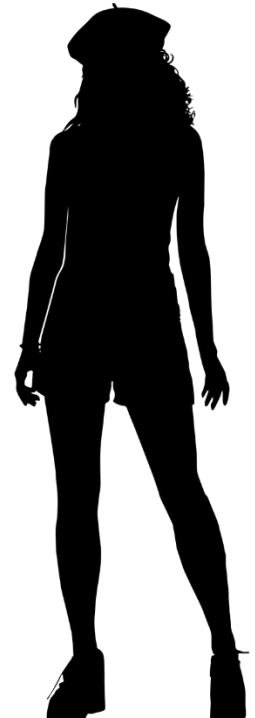
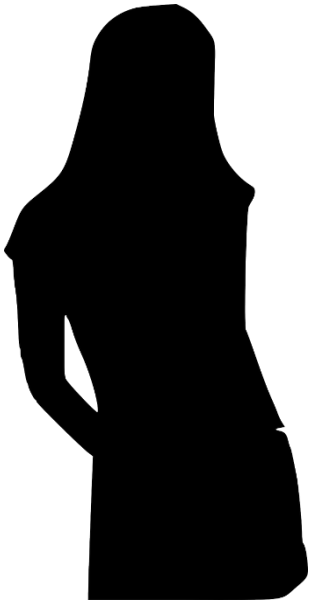
Abuse by customers (verbal, physical and/or sexual) is common and regarded as acceptable in the sector

Alcohol a driver for abuse

## Abuse is regular

*Verbal abuse is regular...and there is nothing you can do about it. It's just about being apologetic...You [supposedly] can refuse to serve someone if they are intoxicated and have been really vulgar... but it needs to be a big scene, you wouldn't kick them out for a wee thing.*

*I don't think you can work in hospitality without experiencing customer abuse, it kind of comes with the job.*



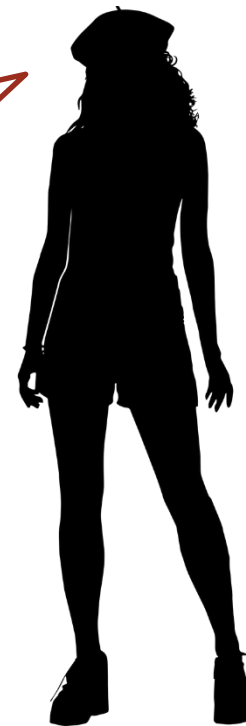


Abuse gets worse

*We put up with a lot from some of our customers because because they pay X amount of money each year. There's sometimes a lot of aggression [threats] towards myself and colleagues.*

*I had enough. I can't do it anymore.*

*The treatment [from customers] seems to get worse and worse and worse.*



# Impact of Covid-19

Our evidence shows that customer misbehaviour has not only continued, but worsened during Covid-19

The introduction of social distancing and other protective measures have triggered customer abuse

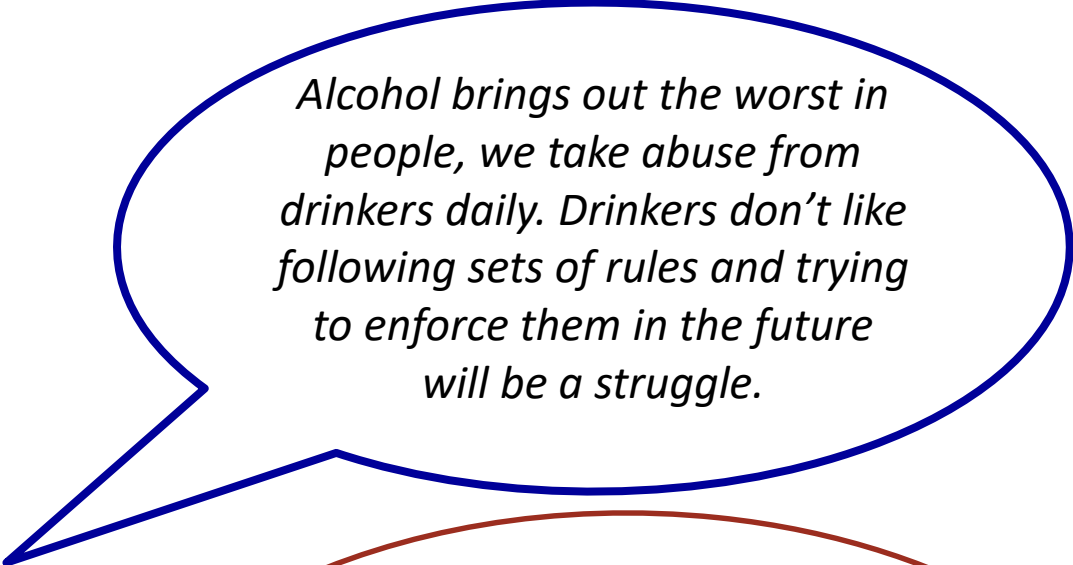

78% of respondents reported that customers did not follow/refused to comply with restrictions

*I was called a Nazi by a customer for not letting him in without providing his track and trace details and/or wearing a mask, he even pretended to try and spit at me as well. And that has directly to do with the pandemic because a lot of people already don't like being told what to do, so when it's enforced by law, they get even more upset about it, people have left bad reviews, calling us like nasties...I've been called quite a few names for not letting people in without a mask basically.*


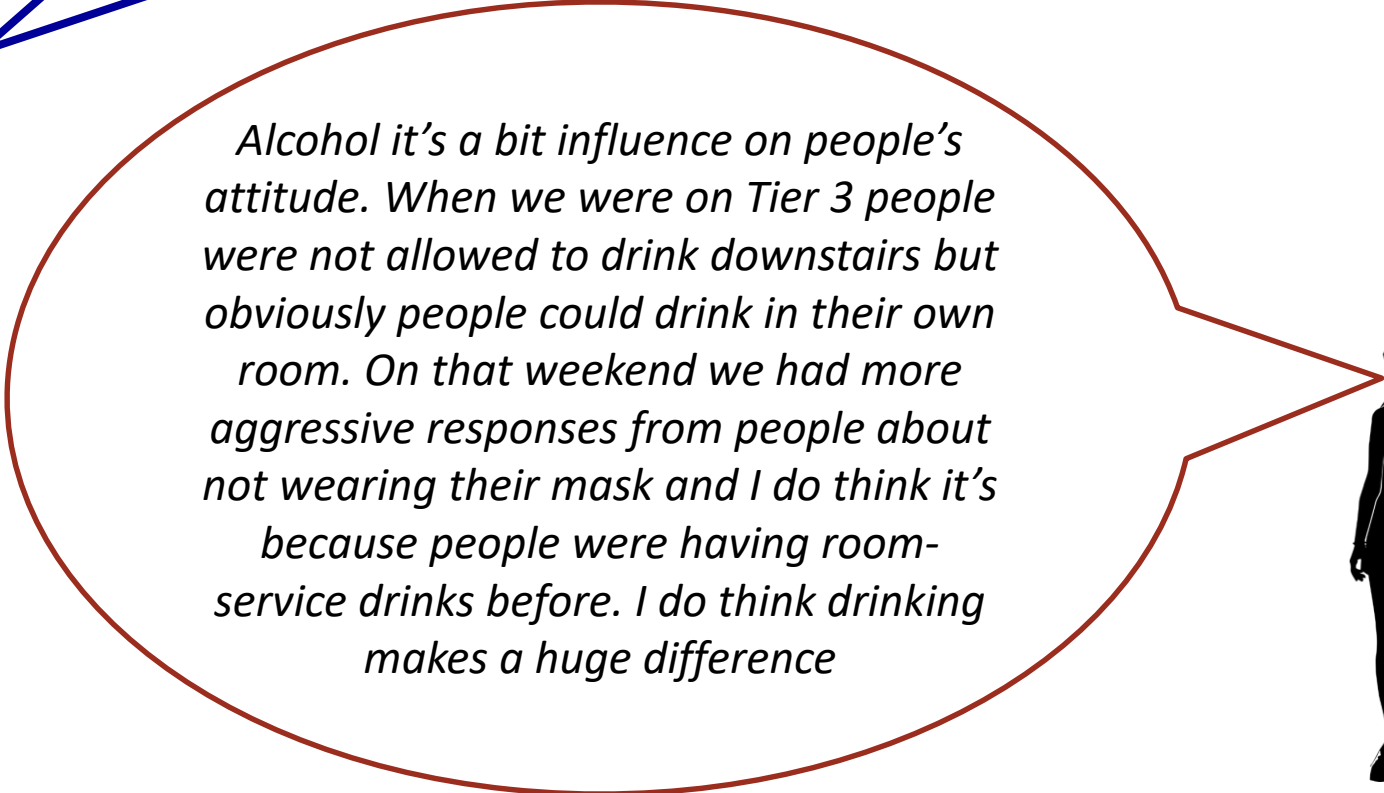


*All complaints now is all about 'I can't wear a mask, I don't need to wear a mask, I've got health condition'...Guests that came from England and stayed in the hotel they were complaining in general for having to wear a mask inside the hotel, walking around tables for example because they don't have to wear a mask in England to walk to the toilet. If they are halfway from their table, it's our job to ask them to go turn back and put on their mask and then they're just huffing and puffing and swear at you: 'oh for f\*\*\* sake it won't make a difference, why do I need it on, it's not like I'm near anyone anyway.'*





*Alcohol brings out the worst in people, we take abuse from drinkers daily. Drinkers don't like following sets of rules and trying to enforce them in the future will be a struggle.*



*Alcohol it's a bit influence on people's attitude. When we were on Tier 3 people were not allowed to drink downstairs but obviously people could drink in their own room. On that weekend we had more aggressive responses from people about not wearing their mask and I do think it's because people were having room-service drinks before. I do think drinking makes a huge difference*

# A lack of support for employees

A lack of support for employees by management is evident

Alarming, abuse and harassment remain underreported or even unreported - 59% do not report abuse

Lack of processes for reporting issues

In cases where it is reported, it is frequently dismissed, or belittled by management.

Management tend to side with the customer, expecting workers to accept and tolerate the abuse and harassment that they face from customers

## Absent or overcomplicated report processes



*No real HR department doing anything to help the employees...There is barely any support in this industry.*

*The HR process of reporting inappropriate comments is too long and sometimes painful and not successful.*

*I didn't know whom to report to.*



*If people are being rude but are not intoxicated there's not really much we can do...[managers] wouldn't do anything about it...because management see it as part of the industry, is part of your job...it's almost like 'suck it up' type of attitude.*

*General sense that 'it is part of the job' dealing with rude and abusive customers.*





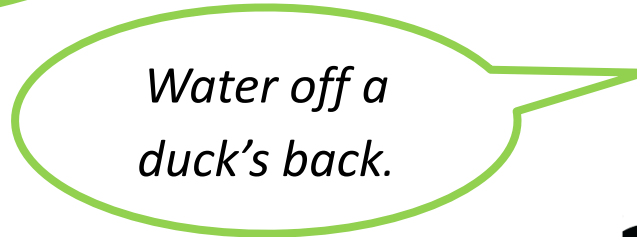
Abuse part of the job



*Verbal abuse,  
harassment happens  
so much it's not worth  
reporting.*



*Who cares?*



*Water off a  
duck's back.*



*I did once before, it  
got brushed under  
the carpet so chose  
not to again.*



*No  
manager/owner  
has ever taken  
these reports  
seriously.*





*Occasionally it felt like there was no proof, and by reporting things, can make you a target or bring you unwanted attention.*

*People who need jobs don't complain.*

Too scared to report abuse



## Concluding comments:

- Customer misbehaviour remains an endemic and underreported problem in the hospitality sector
- The Covid-19 pandemic has brought the issue of customer misbehaviour to the fore and arguably exacerbated the problem
- Our research points to an uncomfortable reality (abuse and social washing) in the service economy which we would argue needs to be confronted as a society
- Risk for employees to further accept and fail to report unsocial behaviours, incivility and abuse from customers because of the precariousness of hospitality employment due to Covid-19