'It's not a big deal': Customer misbehaviour and social washing in hospitality

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Abstract

Purpose – This article examines customer misbehaviour in the hospitality sector during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Design/methodology/approach – The article draws on a cross-sectional survey of employees in the Scottish hospitality sector highlighting customer misbehaviour as a key concern during the pandemic. Prevalent types of abuse and harassment experienced are outlined along with employee and management responses to incidents of misbehaviour.

Findings –Verbal abuse and sexual harassment from customers are the most prevalent types of misbehaviour either experienced or witnessed by respondents. Customer misbehaviour is commonly thought of as 'part of the job' and therefore 'not a big deal'. Managers, largely, expect workers to tolerate abusive behaviours from customers and do not take reports of incidents seriously.

Originality/value – Customer misbehaviour is reportedly worsening in times of Covid-19 as demonstrated by this study. Despite rhetoric that abuse and harassment are not tolerated, dismissive attitudes from managers – who expect workers to tolerate abusive behaviour – and employee silence about incidents lead us to argue that the failure to acknowledge and address this issue constitutes a form of 'social washing' in hospitality.

Social implications – The research points to an uncomfortable reality in the service economy that needs to be confronted by society. It has, therefore, important implications for key stakeholders in ensuring fair, dignified, and safe hospitality workplaces.

Practical implications – Transformational managers need to foster workplace wellbeing with a focus on physical and psychological safety. Recognition of the issue and greater support for victims are furthermore required at an industry level and on the policy front.

Keywords: hospitality, service work, workplace violence, customer misbehaviour, sexual harassment, workplace dignity, employee wellbeing, decent work, transformational leadership

Introduction

This article examines the issue of customer misbehaviour in the Scottish hospitality sector during the Covid-19 pandemic. The analysis presented in this paper outlines the prevalence and types of abuse or harassment experienced by employees in relation to demographic variables (age and gender). Employee and management responses to incidents of customer misbehaviour are also analysed. The label 'customer misbehaviour' is employed to denote behaviours that emerge within customer service that deliberately violate generally accepted social norms of conduct. These include verbal abuse, bullying and harassment, including sexual harassment (Reynolds and Harris, 2009). Abusive behaviour occurs when a person directs behaviours that are violent, threatening or intimidating towards another person (Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act, 2018). Sexual harassment, which forms part of customer misbehaviour, refers to someone engaging in unwanted conduct of a sexual nature that violates the dignity of another person (Equality Act, 2010). The term sexual harassment is commonly used within the hospitality literature, understood as "a form of discernment or aggression that involves unwelcome verbal, non-verbal or physical sexual advances" against another person or people at work (Ineson *et al*., 2013, p. 2).

While abusive behaviours are highly prevalent in services (Taylor, 2019), and indeed in hospitality (Ram, 2018), there are few studies investigating how these behaviours manifest in periods of crisis when interactions with customers occur under circumstances characterised by social stress as observed by Ostrom *et al.* (2021) and Voorhees *et al.* (2020). Emergent research suggests that customer misbehaviour has worsened during the Covid-19 pandemic in a variety of service settings (Hadjisolomou and Simone, 2021; Mayer *et al*., 2022; Shin *et al*., 2021; Voorhees *et al*., 2020). A recent study by the non-profit organisation One Fair Wage (2020) reveals that 41% of the 1,675 service workers surveyed reported a noticeable change in the frequency of sexual harassment from customers. For instance, a customer asking a worker to take off her mask to see a 'pretty face'. What is more, 78% of respondents in the above-mentioned study experienced or witnessed hostile behaviour from customers in response to staff enforcing Covid-19 safety protocols (social distancing, wearing of masks, etc.).

Despite reports of the customer misbehaviour increasing during Covid-19, research on this context remains thin and limited. This is the research gap we seek to address through our cross-sectional inquiry. This article draws on data from a broader study on the experiences of hospitality employees in a range of workplaces in Scotland during the first phase of the pandemic. Customer misbehaviour stood out as a key impact of the pandemic for employees with the vast majority of our respondents reporting that they have experienced and/or witnessed abuse and/or harassment from customers. Few hospitality studies consider customer abuse across a diverse set of hospitality workplaces with extant research on the impact of Covid-19 focussing on occupational stress and coping rather than customer mistreatment (Lippert *et al.*, 2021) or on customer mistreatment experienced by specific groups like café workers (Ahmed *et al.*, 2021), hotel workers (Chung *et al.*, 2021) or immigrant hospitality workers (Sönmez *et al.*, 2020).

Addressing customer misbehaviour is pertinent to ensuring that workplaces are free from violence and abuse. This objective corresponds with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals of promoting 'decent work' and 'responsible consumption' – issues largely neglected in the case of hospitality work (Baum *et al.*, 2020; Bianchi and de Man, 2021). Furthermore, sexual harassment in hospitality settings remains under-researched, under-reported, and often 'silenced' (Ram *et al.*, 2016; Turkoglu, 2020). There is a need to understand how workers experience the new service reality in times of Covid-19 to address this issue (Voorhees *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, it is necessary to explore how hospitality employees experience work during a social crisis, consider workplace responses and deliberate on the protections needed by governments and employers to counter abuse and harassment as this study aims to do.

Literature

Customer misbehaviour in service work

Customer misbehaviour is a longstanding problem in the service economy and the experiences of hospitality employees reportedly correspond with employee experiences in other front-line (customer-facing) service jobs like retail (see for example Ariza-Montes *et al.*, 2017; Cheng *et al.*, 2020; Hadjisolomou and Simone, 2021; Mayer *et al.*, 2022; Poulston, 2008; Voorhees *et al.*, 2020; Yagil, 2017). Several different terms are used in the literature to refer to customer

misbehaviour, including 'deviant' customer behaviour (Fan *et al*., 2021; Reynolds and Harris, 2009); 'dysfunctional' customer behaviour (Harris and Reynolds, 2004); 'jay-customer' behaviour (Harris and Reynolds, 2004; Kim *et al*., 2014) which includes customer 'aggression' (Yagil, 2017); customer 'mistreatment' (Ahmed *et al*., 2021; Yang and Huang, 2020); customer 'incivility' (Boukis *et al.*, 2020; Cheng *et al*., 2020; Frey-Cordes *et al*., 2020) and 'problematic' customer behaviours (Özekici and Ünlüönen, 2021). This article adopts the wider term customer misbehaviour, in line with scholars who define it as "behavioural acts by consumers which violate the generally accepted norms of conduct in consumption situations" (Fullerton and Punj, 1997, p. 337, also see Reynolds and Harris, 2009; Yagil, 2017). This term is used to describe a variety of deviant forms of behaviour, overcoming the inconsistent categorizations of such behaviours.

Being 'hospitable', and focused on the customer experience, is integral to the business model of hospitality establishments (Wang *et al*., 2022). As the same authors note, this emphasis reinforces service cultures adopting the mantra that the 'customer is king' to ensure customer satisfaction and return business. However, this situation also leads to an unequal relationship between service providers and customers, bolstering customer superiority and accordingly misbehaviour (Özekici and Ünlüönen, 2021; Wang *et al*., 2022; Yagil, 2017; Zampoukos, 2021). These perceptions imply that customers, as paying clients, may abuse and even make unwanted sexual advances toward employees without evident penalties, while employees are expected to tolerate it and remain silent (Kim *et al*., 2014; Ram *et al*., 2016) or even accept it 'as part of the job' (Poulston, 2008). As Yagil (2017) concludes, as long as customers routinely mistreat service employees and observe other customers' mistreatment not being penalized, its perceived legitimacy is reinforced.

Workplace responses to customer mistreatment in hospitality

There are few hospitality studies which consider customer misbehaviour during the Covid-19 pandemic through the experiences of employees. Notable exceptions include studies by Ahmed *et al.* (2021), Chung *et al.* (2021), and Sönmez *et al.* (2020). However, these studies focus on specific groups of employees rather than sampling a broader set of hospitality enterprise types as this study does. Research on customer misbehaviour in hospitality is typically concerned with behaviours, types of abuse or harassment, antecedents and drivers of these, along with the responses of employees and employers, consequences, and the management implications of

these issues (Boukis *et al.*, 2020; Madera *et al.*, 2018; Meng and Choi, 2021; Özekici and Ünlüönen, 2021; Ugwu *et al.*, 2021). Certain studies examine the impact of customer incivility on job and organisational performance and employee retention (Chung *et al.*, 2021; Shin *et al.*, 2021). For Harris and Reynolds (2004), consequences of customer misbehaviour include direct and indirect financial costs associated with compensating the victims of abuse and dissatisfied customers. These authors further stress the negative impacts of incivility on individual front-line employees, i.e. eroded morale, post-traumatic stress, exhaustion and emotional harm. Indeed, the literature demonstrates that abusive behaviours create employee stress, impede workplace dignity and adversely impact employee wellbeing (Booyens, 2022; Brown *et al.*, 2020; Mayer *et al.*, 2022; Meng and Choi, 2021; Jung and Yoon, 2020).

A suite of recent studies looks into customer misbehaviour's impact on organisational stress taking employee anger and mediating mechanisms into account, albeit not necessarily in the context of Covid-19 (Cheng *et al.*, 2020; Huang and Kwok, 2021; Jung and Yoon, 2020; Meng and Choi, 2021; Ugwu *et al.*, 2021). These studies point to the mediating role of supervisors and/or managers in response to employee anger which frequently leads to 'service sabotage'. In the first instance, authors have concentrated on managerial mechanisms, systems, and procedures to minimize the effects of customer misbehaviour. These include anti-bullying and –harassment policies along with interventions by supervisors or management to either counter or diffuse incidents of violence (Ahmed *et al.*, 2021; Boukis *et al.*, 2020; Gupta *et al.*, 2020; Huang and Kwok, 2021; Madera *et al.*, 2018; Ugwu *et al.*, 2021). In the second instance, emotional regulation or management is underscored as a mediating factor to prevent employees from seeking revenge and committing service sabotage (Cheng *et al.*, 2020; Meng and Choi, 2021). In this regard, Meng and Choi (2021) suggest that strong attachment with parents and/or colleagues has a moderating effect on service sabotage.

Human resource management strategies such as using targeted recruitment processes to identify individuals who can suppress their emotions when faced with challenging customers are accordingly put forward (Cheng *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, the training of employees in adaptive emotional regulation, during abusive scenarios, by using role-play for example is recommended by some (Boukis *et al.*, 2020; Cheng *et al.* 2020; Kim *et al.*, 2014; Madera *et al.*, 2018; Shin *et al.*, 2021). It has also been suggested that organisations should develop guidelines for dealing with deviant customers (Kim *et al.*, 2014) and additionally help employees to analyse the causes of incivility to recognize whether this was initiated by them

or customers (Cheng *et al*., 2020). The above emphasis on emotional regulation corresponds with other recent contributions stressing the self-efficacy, resilience and strategies of workers to 'cope' with and 'recover' from abusive experiences (Fan *et al*., 2021; Good and Cooper, 2016; Gupta *et al*., 2020; Yang and Huang, 2020). On their part, employers typically ignore or are indifferent to reports of workplace abuse and harassment (Tan *et al*., 2020). According to Frey-Cordes *et al.* (2020), employee reactions to customer misbehaviour include venting, denial, avoidance and disengagement. Employee silence is also common (Gupta *et al.,* 2020; Turkoglu, 2020). Intimidating supervisory styles and broken trust between employees and management is one reason for employee silence (Huang and Kwok, 2021).

Organisational culture and the role of leadership to enhance employee wellbeing

Dismissive attitudes by managers accompanied by employee silence, as discussed above, are both problematic workplace responses that result in toxic workplaces impeding workplace wellbeing and endangering workers (Gupta *et al*., 2020; Madera *et al*., 2018; Ram, 2018; Tan *et al*., 2020). Organisational cultures with a customer-dominant logic (Kuppelwieser and Finsterwalder, 2016) arguably enable these employer and employee responses. The customer-dominant logic aligns with 'the customer is king' or the 'customer is always right' narratives (see Özekici, and Ünlüönen, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2022) that inform certain management practices for dealing with customer misbehaviour.

Conversely, transformative service research, focussed on interactions between service and consumer entities (Anderson *et al*., 2013), emphasises a service-dominant logic that underscores the wellbeing of service providers and customers alike (Kuppelwieser and Finsterwalder, 2016). Transformative service research points to value co-creation or co-production between customers and service providers averring on how this can simultaneously create value for establishments and enhance employee wellbeing outcomes (Anderson *et al*., 2013). This said, service researchers typically focus on managerial outcomes linked to customer satisfaction and loyalty, for instance, while ignoring negative outcomes or value co-destruction (Kuppelwieser and Finsterwalder, 2016; Rosenbaum, 2015). Customer misbehaviour coupled with defensive and/or sabotaging reactions by employees is an example of value co-destruction. This leads to the breakdown of the service encounter along with any potential value creation. Customers will leave abusive scenarios agitated and hopefully ashamed, employees are left degraded and the reputation of establishments is at stake leading

to mediating managerial responses aimed at mitigating the impacts of incidents. The latter constitute a suite of reactive responses aimed primarily at protecting businesses while typically neglecting the wellbeing of employees.

Alternative responses to the above can be envisaged through leadership intervention. Leadership, as per the transformative service research notion (Rosenbaum, 2015), accordingly has a transformational role in establishing organisational norms and values to create work cultures that actively foster employee wellbeing. Recent research by Shehawy (2021) shows that "empowering leadership moderates the relationships between workplace deviant behaviours, emotional behaviour, job satisfaction and firm performance" (p. 1; also see Özekici and Ünlüönen, 2021). In line with a service-dominant logic, people-centred work cultures underscored by workplace dignity and respect can be cultivated to foster safe and supportive workspaces (Gupta *et al*., 2020; Shehawy, 2021; Tan *et al*., 2020).

Methods

Research design, sample and analysis

The research reported here is cross-sectional in design allowing for data collection from a range of participants. Self-report surveys are used to examine prevailing themes and collect data on multiple variables over a relatively short period but focused on a specific point in time (Cherry, 2019). The survey was rolled out during the first phase of the pandemic (in June-October 2020), distributed via social media platforms (Facebook, LinkedIn), our alumni and relevant industry/third sector contacts. Respondents were asked to self-identify as persons who have worked in hospitality in Scotland. The survey had 322 responses overall[1]. The statistical package SPSS was used for the descriptive statistics outlined in this article.

A range of hospitality work types was surveyed. Of respondents, 37% worked in bar or pub settings, serving food and beverages. A further 32% worked as servers in restaurants or cafés (sometimes in hotels) while 24% had experience in accommodation establishments (hotels, guest houses) either in front-of-house (customer-facing) or back-of-house (including

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[1] Note that not all questions in the survey were answered by all respondents. We do report on the total of responses per question in the analysis.

housekeeping, kitchens and food and beverage department) roles. A further 8% of the sample served either at events or entertainment venues.

In terms of length of service, the largest cohort of respondents (44%) had 3-10 years of service within the Scottish hospitality sector. A further 27% and 20% of respondents respectively had 10-20 and 20+ years of experience in the sector. The remaining 19% had worked in the sector for less than three years. Overall, the above points to an experienced workforce serving in a range of different hospitality roles and workplaces over time. Additionally, just over a quarter of respondents (27%) had supervisory or management experience.

Demographic information for the participants can be found in Table 1. With regards to ethnicity and nationality, most participants identified as 'White Scottish' ($N = 94$) or 'White British' ($N = 40$). Furthermore, 58 participants identified as 'Scottish,' 14 as 'British,' 1 as 'English,' 1 as 'Black British' and 3 as 'UK White.' The other respondent nationalities vary greatly and are generally split between a small number of participants with nationalities from outside the United Kingdom.

Table 1: Age and gender of participants

Gender	Male	Female	Not Listed	Transgender Male	Prefer Not to Say	
Total	77	194	1	1	1	
Age	**16-25**	**26-35**	**36-45**	**46-55**	**56-65**	**Prefer Not to Say**
Total	127	88	42	15	1	1

During the initial analysis of the survey findings, customer misbehaviour emerged as a key concern for hospitality employees during Covid-19. It was then decided to explore this issue of customer misbehaviour further by doing follow-up interviews with willing respondents. This approach is in keeping with the cross-sectional research design explained above. Accordingly, ten semi-structured interviews were completed in January 2021. In the interviews, respondents were asked to:

a) describe their experiences of customer misbehaviour in more detail, and
b) identify management responses and support with respect to reports of abuse and/or harassment.

Qualitative responses (both those in the survey and as part of the interviews) were analysed thematically, focussing on:

- how Covid-19 impacted customer misbehaviour,
- whether incidents of misbehaviour were reported, and
- how managers responded to incidents of misbehaviour.

Ethical considerations

Experiences of abuse and harassment are sensitive and questions about this can potentially trigger victims. The research was approached with these ethical concerns in mind. Respondents were assured that participation in this study was both voluntary and anonymous. The names of participants, where they worked, and their contact information were not recorded. Only those who indicated that they were willing to be interviewed and supplied a contact email for follow-up interviews were contacted. As part of our online instrument, contact details for organisations providing counselling and other support were supplied.

Research limitations

Due to the sensitivity of the issues at hand, employees were not approached via employers or workplaces. Instead, a self-select online survey was used as explained above. This approach is similar to the one followed by another study that this research draws on (see acknowledgements). It can be argued that those who experienced abuse were more likely to participate, but this was not a requirement for participating. In other words, victims were not targeted since the survey investigated employment experiences more broadly, as indicated above. While it can be argued that a level of response bias is present, this is difficult to overcome. This said, the issue of response bias is not a foremost concern since the aim of this study was not to determine the incidence of abuse and harassment in the sector for which a representative sample would have been required. Instead, the analysis presented offers more in-depth considerations of the issues identified.

Findings

Prevalence of customer misbehaviour and types

The findings show that abusive behaviours from customers are so frequent that it is considered "part of the job" in the hospitality sector. Although other forms of abuse were reported, the most pronounced types of misbehaviour experienced, as per our survey, included verbal abuse and sexual harassment - see standard deviation (SD) scores in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics per type for abuse or harassment experienced by hospitality workers

Stats (All)	Verbal/ psychological	Physical	Racial/ ethnic	Sexual	Bullying
Mean	2.37	1.34	1.27	1.96	1.73
Mode	2	1	1	2	1
SD	.993	.555	.656	.976	.856
Range	4	3	4	4	4

Over 80% of respondents reported that they experienced verbal abuse, and 64% reported sexual harassment, raging between 'sometimes' and 'always' in both cases (see Table 3). Furthermore, half of the participants had witnessed physical abuse towards other employees and 77% report having witnessed sexual harassment towards their colleagues.

Table 3: Abuse or harassment experienced by hospitality workers

Type of abuse	Verbal/ psychological	Physical	Racial/ ethnic	Sexual	Bullying
Never					
N (%)	39 (15.9%)	169 (69.3%)	196 (80.3%)	89 (36.5%)	116 (47.4%)
Sometimes					
N (%)	123 (50%)	69 (28.3%)	37 (15.2%)	103 (42.2%)	94 (38.4%)
Half the time					
N (%)	43 (17.5%)	4 (1.6%)	4 (1.6%)	30 (12.3%)	23 (9.4%)
Most of the time					
N (%)	35 (14.2%)	2 (0.8%)	6 (2.5%)	17 (7%)	10 (4.1%)
Always					
N (%)	6 (2.4%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.4%)	5 (2.0%)	2 (0.8%)
Total Responses					
N (%)	**246 (100%)**	**244 (100%)**	**244 (100%)**	**244 (100%)**	**245 (100%)**

Three-quarters of respondents identified customers as the main perpetrators of abuse (Figure 1). A core theme was that customers 'feel they have the right' to abuse staff. Many respondents reported sexual harassment of staff members by customers, while others noted that they also
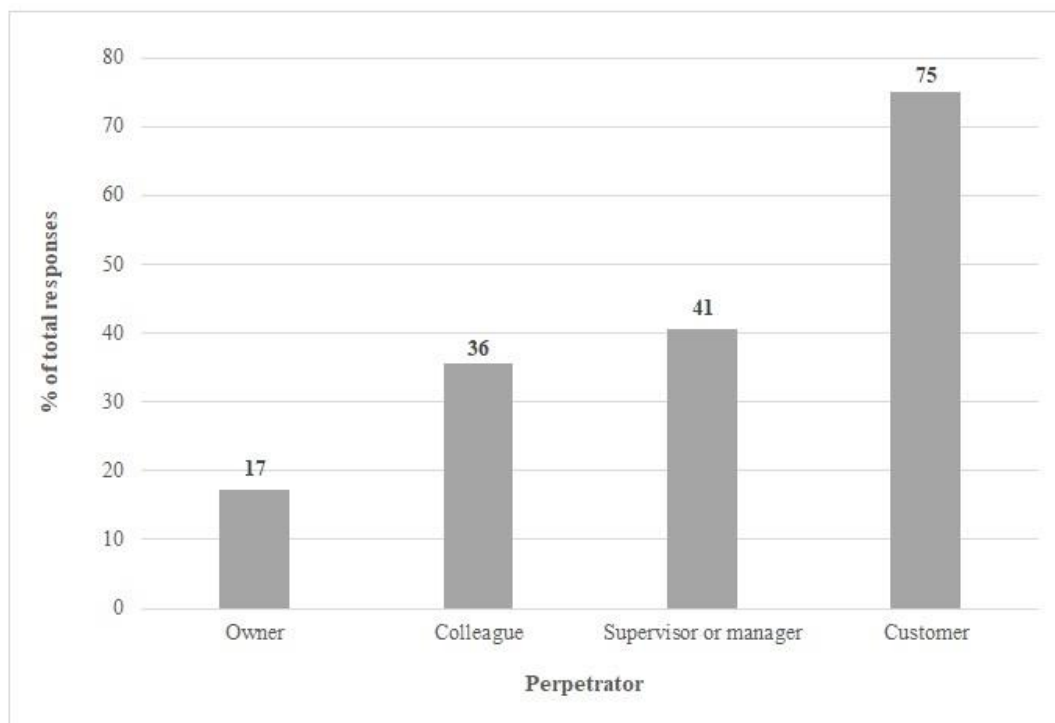
frequently witnessed customers being racist towards staff. Gender did not appear to change the experiences of customer abuse, with similar scores between male and female participants. Often respondents said that customer misbehaviour was commonly accompanied by the consumption of alcohol. One of our interviewees noted: "Alcohol brings out the worst in people, we take abuse from drinkers daily. Drinkers don't like following sets of rules [i.e. Covid-19 regulations] and trying to enforce them in the future will be a struggle".

Figure 1: Perpetrators of abuse in hospitality workplaces

Verbal abuse by age and gender of employees

The overall mean response for the entire participant group related to whether or not they had experienced verbal abuse in the sector was 2.37 (SD = 0.993), with a mode of 2. This indicates that the most common response to this question was 'sometimes' and generally participant responses ranged between 'sometimes' and 'about half of the time'. One manager noted that they often witnessed, "Rowdy customers thinking it's okay to verbally/physically abuse my staff male or female, [ranging] from sex to racial [abuse]," suggesting that though verbal abuse was the most commonly reported, customers tend to abuse staff in a multitude of ways.

On the more specific question of how gender impacted verbal abuse. Male participants had a mean response to this question of 2.30 (SD=0.905), while females had a slightly higher mean of 2.39 (1.024), indicating that female respondents felt they experienced verbal abuse more than males[2] (Table 4). A t-test was then conducted to determine whether this difference was statistically significant. The result of p=0.499 is higher than 0.05 and therefore not statistically significant (Table 5).

Table 4: Verbal abuse responses per gender

Indicator	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Male	2.30	67	.905
Female	2.39	177	1.023
Not listed	4.00	1	.
Prefer not to say	3.00	1	.
Total	**2.37**	**246**	**.993**

Table 5: Verbal abuse gender t-test

Descriptive stats	Variable 1	Variable 2
Mean	2.298507	2.389831
Variance	0.818634	1.046032
Observations	67	177
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	134	
t Stat	-0.67827	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.249385	
t Critical one-tail	1.656305	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.49877	
t Critical two-tail	1.977826	

Further analysis was undertaken to uncover the prevalence of verbal abuse per age group. Those in the 56-65 years age bracket had the highest overall mean score for this question, averaging a response of 3, indicating that they experienced verbal abuse 'about half the time'.

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[2] Male and female categories were selected since there categories had the most observations. Observations in non-conforming gender categories were too few for meaningful analysis.

The lowest mean score of all age groups for experiencing verbal abuse was for those within the 16-25 years age bracket, with an average of 2.29 (SD= 0.980), followed by those in the 26-35 bracket (mean=2.35, SD=1.010) (Table 6). To determine whether the mean differences between the various participant age groups were significant or not, an ANOVA test was used. The result of p=0.095 reveals that the differences per age group are not statistically significant since p > 0.05.

Table 6: Verbal abuse responses per age

Age	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
16-25 years	2.29	115	.980
26-35 years	2.35	77	1.010
36-45 years	2.61	36	1.022
46-55 years	2.36	14	.842
56-65 years	3.00	3	1.000
Prefer not to say	4.00	1	.
Total	**2.37**	**246**	**.993**

Sexual harassment by age and gender of employees

The statistical analysis for the entire population of respondents experiencing sexual harassment found the average response to be 1.96 (SD=0.976), with a mode of 2. This shows that the majority of participants in the survey determined that they 'sometimes' experienced sexual abuse or harassment. A mean score of 2.29 (SD=1.061) was calculated as the average response for all participants when asked how often they witnessed sexual harassment, indicating that in general respondents witnessed this abuse 'sometimes' or 'about half the time'. The mode response for this question was 2, indicating that again the majority of participants stated that they 'sometimes' witnessed this type of abuse. For those who had witnessed sexual abuse, a stark response from one individual was that they "saw sexual abuse almost every day". Again, the responses to this question varied in terms of the perpetrators of the sexual harassment, one participant shared that a customer had stalked a young female employee before being banned from the outlet.

The qualitative observations disclose that customers (both male and female) expect hospitality workers to be willing to flirt with them and that sexual harassment by customers is acceptable. One female respondent stated that when they had "worked in a bar [they were] constantly being groped when [they were] clearing tables, have had a guy try to give £50 to [their] manager to get 'alone time' with [them]." Another female respondent similarly described that:

> As a young female working in this industry, it is expected that you will simply brush off sexual harassment from customers. This is a common occurrence and is something that people seem to believe is normal. It can be incredibly distressing and make work a lot more difficult. It is not uncommon for customers to make comments about my appearance or make belittling remarks regarding their perception of my intelligence level. Management will intervene but it is mostly just easier to ignore it.

As with verbal abuse, whether the characteristics of gender and age affected the extent to which respondents experience sexual harassment were analysed. When gender was utilised as an independent variable for analysis, results suggest that female participants were the most likely to experience sexual harassment at work, with a mean score of 2.11 (SD=0.985) – see Table 7. The mean score for male respondents in relation to experiencing sexual abuse or harassment was 1.56 (SD = 0.844). The t-test points to a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$, at 0.000) between the mean scores reported for male and female respondents (Table 8). Thus, according to the data, female participants were significantly more likely to experience sexual harassment than male participants.

Table 7: Sexual harassment responses per gender

Gender	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Male	1.56	66	.844
Female	2.11	176	.985
Not listed	1.00	1	.
Prefer not to say	2.00	1	.
Total	**1.96**	**244**	**.976**

Table 8: Sexual harassment gender t-test

Descriptive stats	Variable 1	Variable 2
Mean	1.560606	2.113636
Variance	0.711655	0.96987
Observations	66	176
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	135	
t Stat	-4.33256	
P(T<=t) one-tail	1.43E-05	
t Critical one-tail	1.656219	
P(T<=t) two-tail	2.86E-05	
t Critical two-tail	1.977692	

The next independent variable investigated was the age range of participants and whether this resulted in any differences in the reported experience of sexual harassment. The highest mean score for this question was for participants aged 26-35 years old, with a mean of 2.08 (SD=1.010 – Table 9) suggesting they sometimes experienced sexual harassment. Participants aged 46-55 years had the lowest overall score for this question, with a mean of 1.62 (SD=1.121) making them the least likely to experience harassment. The ANOVA test results, to determine whether the mean scores for participant age groups were significantly different from one another, were statistically significant since $p = 0.025$, therefore making $p < 0.05$.

Table 9: Sexual harassment responses per age

Age	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
16-25 years	1.97	116	.955
26-35 years	2.08	77	1.010
36-45 years	1.76	34	.955
46-55 years	1.62	13	1.121
56-65 years	2.00	3	.000
Prefer not to say	2.00	1	.
Total	**1.96**	**244**	**.976**

Covid-19 and customer misbehaviour

The evidence of this study underscores that customer misbehaviour has not only continued but worsened during the Covid-19 pandemic. The introduction of social distancing and other protective measures, which do not necessarily conform to customers' expectations, has triggered customer misbehaviour. Of respondents, 78% said that customers refused to comply with social distancing measures, leading to increased abuse of employees. For example, one of our interviewees noted:

> I was called a Nazi by a customer for not letting him in without providing his track and trace details[3] 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 nasties…I've been called quite a few names for not letting people in without a mask.

Another respondent recognised:

> Customers have always been a mix of good and bad. But even the nice ones have got into a habit of turning on us at the moment [in times of Covid-19][4]. They don't respect us or the current [Covid-19] guidelines. They would rather ruin our day than follow a simple instruction of where to stand and when it's safe to sit down, etc. They don't like getting told what to do, but continually insult and abuse staff just for a cup of coffee.

Similarly, one employee pointed to heightened abuse from customers as a result of Covid-19 restrictions, recognising that, "I have been screamed at on a weekly basis for asking customers to socially distance".

Reporting of incidents and management responses

When asked whether the incidents they had experienced or witnessed were reported to anyone, 59% stated they did not report them. Interestingly, the responses from both women and men

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[3] This refers to the details that customers were required to provide at the time (often via an app) in order to be traced in cases of reported Covid-19 infections.
[4] [ ] used for added emphasis.

were similar with regards to not reporting customer misbehaviour. Of the participants, 60% of females and 64% of males said that they did not report the abuse they experienced or witnessed.

From the data, four categories were determined as reasons for participants not reporting incidents. These were:

- a culture that abuse in the sector should be accepted by staff ($N = 43$),
- thinking that nothing would be done about the issue ($N= 29$),
- a fear of repercussions ($N = 26$), and
- issues with the process ($N = 20$).

The prevailing sentiment was that customer incivility is regarded as part of hospitality workplace cultures. Some respondents said that they were told by management that the misbehaviour they had witnessed or experienced 'wasn't a big deal' and were told to 'not bother' with officially reporting it. Moreover, respondents said that misbehaviour is often 'passed off as humour'. One participant said that they did not report the abuse since they "…felt like there was no proof and reporting things can make you a target or bring you unwanted attention".

Concerning not reporting incidents because of the view that nothing would be done about it, one response indicated that: "No manager/owner has ever taken these reports seriously", while another echoed having problems with management's handling of abuse stating, "Management would kick [the abusive customer] out for the night but they'd be back the next day and just do the same again." This highlights that even when action was taken, this was not done in a way that the employees felt was meaningful or made any real difference to the situation as illustrated below by a restaurant worker:

> Verbal abuse is a regular thing…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…in that case, the duty manager would have said 'ask them to leave', but it needs to be a big scene, you wouldn't kick them out for a wee thing. 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 sees it as part of the industry, is 'part of your job'…it's almost like a 'suck it up' type of attitude.

Participants who did not report their abuse for fear of repercussions were typically concerned about their job security or felt vulnerable. One participant succinctly captured this issue by observing that, "people who need jobs don't complain". Furthermore, one participant, who was a manager, also feared repercussions for reporting abuse higher up the chain of the organisation. This participant stated that since they were 'the person in charge' when the abuse occurred, they did not report it because those higher up "don't like to hear about bullying by staff you manage".

For those participants who stated that they did report abuse, the processes generally involved internal bottom-up reporting (N=76), reporting to the organisation's security team (N=4), or reporting externally to the police (N=23). However, of those who reported using an internal reporting system, some determined that the process was not as useful as it could have been. For example, as one respondent highlighted: "the HR process for reporting inappropriate comments is too long, sometimes painful and not successful". Several participants also stated that the internal reporting system within their organisation was often not fit-for-purpose. For instance, one participant explained that they were supposed to report issues to "the venue manager, who is often complicit in the bullying". Some establishments had security teams, i.e. venue bouncers, to whom incidents of misconduct should be reported. However, while respondents said that reporting to venue bouncers was useful this was not always possible since security teams were usually only available over weekends.

While respondents said that serious cases of misbehaviour were mostly, but not always, reported externally to the police, the reactions to this form of reporting varied considerably. Some participants suggested that it resulted in legal charges. For example, one respondent noted that: "One woman who kicked me in the shin and tried to punch me in the face was reported to the police and arrested". However, other respondents recognised that even when reporting externally to the police, they did not feel that the reports were dealt with properly. In this sense and contra to the quote above about a customer being arrested, other respondents highlighted a lack of action on the part of the police. For example, one participant recounted, "I have only contacted the police once during my time in hospitality and despite being assaulted I was told the incident wasn't worth opening a case".

Discussion

Conclusions

While customer misbehaviour is a known problem in hospitality, this research points to the phenomenon becoming more pronounced during Covid-19 as appears to be the case in other customer-facing service jobs (Hwang *et al*., 2022; Mayer *et al*., 2022; One Fair Wage, 2020; Shin *et al*., 2021). This research highlights verbal abuse and sexual harassment as the most prevalent types of customer misbehaviour experienced by hospitality workers. While the analysis demonstrates that differences with respect to gender and age are not statistically significant when it comes to verbal abuse, unsurprisingly, young females are the most vulnerable when it comes to sexual harassment. This research confirms an alarming lack of support by management, revealing that managers and supervisors often side with the customer, and expect employees to tolerate the abuse and/or harassment that they face from customers. Based on the findings of this study, we introduce the term 'social washing' for the failure to acknowledge and address the issue of customer misbehaviour in hospitality workplaces. We argue that this response is driven by perceptions that customer incivility is 'normal' in the sector, leading to an alarming lack of managerial and organisational support.

Theoretical implications

As previous research has found, sexualized labour is common in hospitality environments, especially where alcohol is served, which often acts as a trigger for harassing behaviour from customers (Brown *et al*., 2020; Warhurst and Nickson, 2009; Zampoukos, 2021). Young workers, including adolescents, are typically employed in jobs with a high risk of workplace violence like hospitality (Brown *et al*., 2020; Good and Cooper, 2016). Brown *et al*. (2020, p. 263) caution that the experiences of workplace violence often lead to depression, anxiety, and feelings of worthlessness which spill over into the personal lives of young workers. This said, in view of rising incivility during the Covid-19 pandemic, these behaviours lead to the increased mental health morbidity of service workers as reported in recent studies (Hwang *et al*., 2022; Mayer *et al*., 2022).

Workplace violence in hospitality is increasingly under the spotlight with recent calls stressing that it needs to be investigated further, particularly through feminist and human rights lenses (Baum and Hai, 2020; Grosser and Tyler, 2021). An important implication is the need to

recognise abuse and sexual misconduct as human rights violations (Grosser and Tyler, 2021), and not merely in euphemistic terms like customer 'deviance' or 'incivility'. The temporality of positions in hospitality and their low status renders employees vulnerable to abuse, bullying and sexual harassment at work (Alrawadieh *et al.*, 2021; Ram, 2018; Turkoglu, 2020). Indeed, low wage, migrant workers, and female workers in service sectors in the global South are especially vulnerable when it comes to workplace violence (Grosser and Tyler, 2021; Sönmez *et al.*, 2020; Zampoukos, 2021). Minorities, including LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer [sometimes Questioning] plus), workers, are also vulnerable to discrimination and abuse although the intersections of personal characteristics with gender and experiences of violence and sexual harassment remain under-explored (see Hadjisolomou, 2021).

This study reveals that incidents of abuse are under-reported by hospitality employees. This under-reporting is accompanied by the dismissive attitude of those in management or supervisory positions who suggest that it is 'not a big deal'. The situation occurs despite the wider management rhetoric in the sector that workplace abuse and/or harassment are not tolerated. Thus, we would question the extent to which anti-harassment policies or campaigns, as observed widely in the Scottish hospitality sector with businesses putting anti-bullying signs up and launching 'be kind' to staff campaigns (visible on billboards, in the media and on company websites), can be effective unless these are backed by managerial actions to address customer bullying and harassment. Consequently, we would argue that these practices will often constitute a form of 'social washing'. As Quach (2020, p. 1) recognises, "social washing refers to statements or policies that make a company appear more socially responsible than it actually is". If reports of abuse are either ignored or dismissed, as we demonstrate in this study, and no real protection of employees is evident we would contend that many hospitality organisations are engaged in social washing in addressing customer abuse. Thus, social washing of customer misbehaviour is a human resource equivalent of 'white' or 'green' washing practices to gloss over any offences or to give the impression that business or industry is more environmentally friendly or socially responsible than it is in reality.

While certain establishments put mediating mechanisms in place as confirmed by recent studies (Cheng *et al.*, 2020; Huang and Kwok, 2021; Jung and Yoon, 2020; Meng and Choi, 2021; Ugwu *et al.*, 2021), employees are not necessarily protected. Neither is a focus on the 'coping' strategies of employees sufficient, nor satisfactory, since responsibility is shifted to employees

rather than emphasising the responsibility of managers and organisations (Brown *et al*., 2020; Gupta *et al*., 2020; Tan *et al*., 2020). Tan *et al.* (2020) explain that a lack of organisational support, coupled with a lack of co-worker support and low awareness of sexual harassment, leads to under-reporting of incidents. Active or pro-active approaches are needed instead. Therefore, more concerted efforts are required to address toxic organisational cultures over and above putting preventative measures in place (i.e. codes of behaviour, anti-abuse policies).

Practical implications

Management implications

In line with a service-dominant logic as per the transformative service approach (Kuppelwieser and Finsterwalder, 2016), the onus is on organisations to be socially responsible by prioritising employee wellbeing and taking on a duty of care for their staff. This requires transformational leaders – managers and human resource professionals – to create organisational cultures that foster physical and psychological safety to discourage deviant workplace behaviours (Gupta *et al*., 2020; Mandera *et al*., 2018; Tan *et al*., 2020). Although Harris and Daunt (2013) conclude that it might be unrealistic to assume that customer misbehaviour can be eliminated, they nevertheless argue for the creation of a formal system for reporting incidents which is an important starting point in hospitality workplaces. Protocols or policies for dealing with difficult or uncivil customers will need to be developed for the use of managers forming part of workplace management training. Furthermore, greater support is required for victims of abuse and/or harassment. This support will include ensuring firstly that the incidents are recognised and not ignored, and then that individuals get the mental health, trauma counselling or other psychological interventions they might need. The help of experts will be required and managers and/or human resource professionals will need to deal with such situations with the appropriate duty of care and sensitivity it deserves.

Industry implications

Within the context of the United Kingdom, the union which represents retail workers, The Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW), has recently urged the government to offer greater protection for retail workers, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic with front-line workers facing health-threatening conditions and abuse. These calls however focus

only on retail and neglect extensive customer misbehaviour in the wider service economy and particularly in hospitality. The hospitality industry employs over three million workers in the United Kingdom and has very low levels of union density of less than 5% (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2020). Notwithstanding low overall density, it should be noted that trade unions can still act on this issue. For example, Unite Hospitality (a division of Unite, the United Kingdom's largest trade union) has launched a Fair Hospitality Campaign along with the Unite Fair Hospitality Charter. The charter aims to promote fair employment in the sector, calling for employers to pay the real living wage and implement anti-sexual harassment policies at work (Carpintero Torres-Quevedo, 2021).

Policy implications

Policy developments to curtail workplace violence has been lagging in hospitality with legal protections for individuals against various forms of harassment being erratic in the United Kingdom and Unites States alike (Gupta *et al.*, 2020). The continuing prevalence of abuse and harassment toward front-line service employees has increasingly led trade unions to argue for the need to introduce measures to address customer abuse. As noted above, in the retail sector in the United Kingdom, this has led to calls for legislation proposing that assaulting, threatening, abusing, and/or obstructing a retail worker would be classed as a specific criminal offence.

This research provides evidence to inform the arguments for ensuring the inclusion of hospitality workers by those proposing new regulations and/or legislation. These matters become increasingly important in the intra- and post-Covid-19 periods where employees, similar to other periods of socio-economic instability, increasing unemployment and job insecurity might be reluctant to speak up or quit and either tolerate or accept abusive behaviour from customers (Baum *et al.*, 2020; Ram, 2018; Sönmez *et al.*, 2020).

Future research

The current socio-economic crisis and the increasing employment uncertainty in the hospitality sector raise important issues that need to be investigated further in relation to customer misbehaviour. Greater attention needs to be given to gender and gender identity, race, class, and power dynamics while also considering the agency of employees (see Alrawadieh *et al.*,

2021; Bianchi and de Man, 2021; Zampoukos, 2021). In addition, a greater emphasis is needed on settings in the global South and the experiences of the LGBTQ+ workers. We also need to understand better how supportive and enabling organisational cultures can be cultivated and which policy interventions might be effective to tackle customer misbehaviour in service work.

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