

ABSTRACT

Morally disengaged managers and customers on the service front-line: Evidence from the Greek tourism and hospitality sector during the pandemic.

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Customer abuse remains a pervasive social problem that is widespread across the service sector, which has been exacerbated because of the Covid-19 pandemic, affecting employee wellbeing (Hadjisolomou and Simone, 2021). Worryingly, authors argue that customer abuse has become a social norm (Taylor, 2019) which is developed, facilitated, and strengthened by service cultures within which the customer 'is always right' (Korczynski and Evans, 2013). This reinforces the perception that customers may abuse service workers, without evident penalties for their (mis)behaviour whilst management tolerates such behaviour. This uncomfortable truth poses important questions regarding morality in the service employment relationship that warrants further and theoretical and empirical attention.

This paper, building on Sayer's moral economy framework, discusses moral disengagement by managers and customers within the triangular employment relationship in the Greek hospitality and tourism sector. Sayer (2007) reports that humans are ethical social beings who evaluate behaviour and actions that affect well-being, whilst Bolton and Laaser (2013), reflecting on Sayer's focus on human flourishing, stress an essential sociological inquiry: if and how capitalism dehumanizes workers. This paper contributes to this enquiry exploring customer abuse in a period of socio economic crisis.

Drawing on a survey conducted during the Covid-19 period, research findings indicate that customer abuse continued during the pandemic, whilst respondents have emphasized the inactive role of management in protecting workers. Specifically, 53% of respondents have reported that they have experienced abuse and 67% witnessed abuse in the workplace, with the customer being identified as the main perpetrator. Alarming, however, from those who have reported the abuse to management, only 20% have reported that action was taken and only for the 19% reporting has improved the situation. This shows that front-line employees are part of social and employment structures that are ethically problematic, especially in a period of crisis. Arguably, customers are morally disengaged detaching themselves from moral actions when interacting with service workers, whilst they rationalize abuse and the abandonment of moral principles drawing on the 'customer is always right' culture found in organizations (Yakut, 2021). Along similar lines, management is morally disengaged by tolerating, and neglecting abuse on the front-end and failing to act and protect workers. The paper reveals another level of complexity in organizations which is related to the notion of power imbalance within the service triangle and its impact on morality and workers' wellbeing (Sayer, 2011). Accepting Sayer's (2011) argument that organisations are 'important 'moral arenas' for their members, this paper questions morality on the services front-end and within the service triangle, where the powerful and immoral acts of customers, which violate employee wellbeing, are being tolerated and neglected by management. Managerial actions to protect workers are limited within a customer-oriented culture that is driven by market dynamics (Hadjisolomou and Simone, 2021). This reinforces Sayer's argument that markets are the major force weakening the moral economy and driving moral disengagement within organizations. Understandably, market pressures, especially in a period of crisis, force management and customers to act, 'if not immorally, then at least amorally' (Sayer, 2000; 91).