

# Customer abuse and harassment in the hospitality industry: the immersion of an everyday workplace crime

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## ABSTRACT

This article, drawing on the General Strain Theory (GST), discusses customer abuse and harassment in the Greek hospitality sector during the unprecedented strain of the Covid-19 pandemic. The study draws on an online survey questionnaire, incorporating a combination of open-ended and closed questions to secure both qualitative and quantitative data. Customer abuse and harassment are outlined as endemic phenomena of workplace violence in the industry, and workplace crimes that were further intensified because of the pandemic. Managerial immoral inaction towards customer misbehaviour, as well as the underreporting of this issue, are discussed as impeding factors in addressing customer abuse and harassment. The study's theoretical contribution stems from the examination of abuse and harassment from a criminology perspective, employing the GST and the classification of such (mis)behaviours as an everyday workplace crime, which remains unmanaged, accepted, and tolerated in the hospitality and tourism sector, violating employees' well-being and dignity at work.

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## KEYWORDS

Customer abuse and harassment; hospitality and tourism; workplace crime; general strain theory; managerial inaction; moral economy

## 1. Introduction

While customer abuse and harassment have been well examined within the mainstream sociology of service work literature, highlighting the normalisation of such misbehaviours, as well as the psychosocial injuries for victims and the impact on employee well-being (Booyens et al., 2022; Jung & Yoon, 2020; Ram, 2018), limited research has explored this issue from a criminology perspective. Abuse and harassment are noted as the most experienced and/or witnessed misbehaviours within the hospitality and tourism sector. Such misbehaviour is defined as 'forms of discernment or aggression that involves unwelcomed verbal, non-verbal or physical advances' from one person to another (Ineson et al., 2013, p. 2). This article, drawing on key theoretical criminology principles, as the General Strain Theory (Agnew, 2001; Barlett et al., 2021), discusses customer abuse and harassment (i.e. physical, verbal, psychological, racial/ethnic, sexual, bullying) as everyday workplace crimes which are normalised, tolerated, and accepted in the Greek hospitality and tourism sector. This became significantly more evident during the recent Covid-19 socio-economic crisis when, alarmingly, as recent research outlines, customer abuse and harassment have doubled (Booyens et al., 2022; USDAW, 2022).

Several authors further argued that unwanted abuse and harassment represent human rights violations (Coffey et al., 2023; Grosser & Tyler, 2021), which are regarded as an offence by the Greek

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employment law and could result upto one year or a pecuniary penalty for abusers/offenders (Magliveras, 2005). Therefore, customer abuse and harassment, as a form of workplace violence, need to be recognised as a source of victimisation and a matter of justice to avoid being reinforced (Schindeler et al., 2016). The negative aftermath of such widespread phenomena is related to violations of workplace morality and constitute everyday crimes (Ellemers et al., 2019). These have an impact on employee well-being, as well as dignity at work, while management teams often choose to silence such incidences, in favour of business prosperity (Cai et al., 2021 Hadjisolomou et al., 2022; Hadjisolomou & Simone, 2021; Robinson et al., 2022).

Hospitality management teams have reinforced service cultures that adopt the mantra that the 'customer is always right' to secure customer satisfaction and returning sales. However, this leads to a power imbalance between service providers and customers, which is fundamental to the occurrence of workplace violence, such as abuse and harassment (Korczyński & Evans, 2013; Ram, 2018). These service cultures imply that customers, as paying clients, may abuse and even make unwanted advancements towards workers without evident penalties, while workers are expected to tolerate it and remain silent (Kim et al., 2014), or even accept it 'as part of the job' (Poulston, 2008). This key proposition is also supported by the criminology literature, arguing that such misbehaviour is described as 'just part of life' and 'par for the course' (Karstedt & Farrall, 2006, pp. 1011–1012). Evidently, customer abuse and harassment remain worrying, uncontrolled, and pervasive social issues within the hospitality sector that require recognition as an action of everyday workplace crime, and the moral imperative for management intervention to prevent, manage and respond to such acts of violence (Booyens et al., 2022).

Kim et al. (2014) outlined the important role managers could play in dealing with deviant customer behaviours, firstly by acknowledging reported misbehaviours, and eventually building a culture of mutual respect for the service encounter relationship. However, often, managers, especially in a period of crisis, act 'if not immorally, then at least amorally', as Sayer (2000, p. 91) puts it, and disengage from their moral, and legal, responsibility to protect workers. This, alarmingly, leads to under-reporting customer misbehaviour incidents, such as abuse and harassment (Ellemers et al., 2019). Criminology authors have long argued that research fails to adequately consider everyday workplace crimes in relation to corporate liability (Schindeler et al., 2016). As Booyens et al. (2022) report, further research is needed to examine how employees experienced the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in relation to customer abuse and harassment. New insights on this issue can be offered by examining them through the lens of criminology and the GST in order to understand Covid-19, and other types of crises, as additional strains for customer misbehaviour to emerge and the impact these have on workers' experiences. This will allow us to inform management practice further to encounter customer abuse and harassment effectively. This study aims to address the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent did the Covid-19 pandemic, as a strain, had an impact on customer abuse and harassment, as an everyday workplace crime, in the Greek hospitality and tourism sector?

RQ2: How was customer abuse and harassment perceived, experienced and contested by employees?

RQ3: What support, if any, has management provided to tackle with customer abuse and harassment and safeguard employee well-being?

## **2. Customer abuse and harassment as an everyday workplace crime: general Strain Theory (GST)**

Customer abuse and harassment are endemic in the hospitality and tourism sector (Baum & Hai, 2020; Nimri et al., 2021; Ram, 2018). Cohen et al. (2014) argue that there is an implicit assumption that customers would behave 'properly', although it is well known that dissatisfaction and negative emotions contribute to misbehaviour, referring to this as the 'darker side' of customer behaviour. Appropriately, from a criminology perspective, and in line with key theoretical propositions

of the GST, such misbehaviours are considered everyday workplace crimes resulted from several strains (e.g. socio-economic pressures from the Covid-19 pandemic), resulting in negative emotions which then translated into misbehaviours (Agnew, 2001; Froggio & Agnew, 2007).

This article defines customer misbehaviour as 'behavioural acts by consumers which violate the generally accepted norms of conduct in consumption situations' (Fullerton & Punj, 2004, p. 1239). This term is used to describe a variety of deviant forms of behaviour (including abuse and harassment), further overcoming the inconsistent categorisations of such behaviours. Yet, while customer misbehaviour has received increasing attention from a marketing, sociology and human resource perspective, research is nascent from a criminology perspective.

Research stresses that customer misbehaviour has become a norm in the service encounter rather than a deviation (Booyens et al., 2022). However, while forms of behaviour that deviate from accepted norms are considered by society to be undesirable, unacceptable, or dysfunctional, customer abuse and harassment are viewed as normalised parts of the service interaction, putting workers physical and mental health at risk (Ram, 2018). This comes in line with Agnew's GST (2001), as well as Karstedt and Farrall's (2006, p. 1012) criminology-focused recommendations, that such misbehaviour is seen as typical and 'crime of everyday life'. GST further posits that individuals experience strain or negative emotions when they encounter events or circumstances that they perceive as frustrating, unjust, or as the removal of positive stimuli (e.g. the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic) (Agnew, 2001). Indeed, such strains could enhance individuals' stress, impede workplace dignity and impact adversely on employees' well-being (Booyens. et al, 2022; Jung & Yoon, 2020).

Cohen et al. (2014) and Hadjisolomou et al. (2023) further discuss customer misbehaviour as the 'dark, negative side of consumer'. This article extends this argument by discussing the normalisation of customer abuse and harassment as an everyday workplace crime within service interactions. Service organisations represent important workplace arenas where everyday crimes occur (Taylor, 2019). Specifically, abuse and harassment represent common workplace crimes committed in the service sector where social interactions take place daily between employees, managers, and customers (Korczyński & Evans, 2013). Researchers have extensively documented several misbehaviours that occur during service encounters, all of which violate the social norms governing how people should be treated. These negative behaviours have been found to have negative associations with both individual and organisational well-being. (Taylor, 2019).

Recent research, alarmingly, reveals that such (mis)behaviours have worsen during the Covid-19 pandemic (Booyens et al., 2022; Robinson et al., 2022). Authors attempted to explain this phenomenon, arguing that in difficult and uncertain times, such as those experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic, individuals' stress and anxiety are increased, both of which could result in inappropriate behaviours as a reaction to said negative feelings (Barlett et al., 2021). These arguments are linked to Agnew's (2001) influential GST that explains the negative social relationships between individuals, and their motivation to commit crimes. The author further argued that the higher the intensity of a strain (e.g. the pressures from the Covid-19 pandemic), the greater the likelihood for people to commit and accept crimes (in this case, abuse and harassment) as a way to mitigate the negative emotions they experience because of such an unprecedented crisis event. It remains true that while service employees are expected to work and treat customers following well-defined emotional labour regulations, hospitality management rarely enforces clear policies to define and treat customer misbehaviour. This is due to a widespread sectorial problematic culture that prioritises customer retention over employees' safety and well-being (Booyens et al., 2022). This results in abuse and harassment by customers becoming acceptable and tolerable elements of service work because of the imbalance of power within the service triangle (Korczyński & Evans, 2013), an analytical framework that extends the dyadic employment relationship to a triadic analysis of the interactional dynamics and power relations between management, workers, and customers in service work (Lopez, 2010; Subramanian & Suquet, 2018).

### 3. Silences, unreported abuse, and managerial inaction: the immerse of everyday workplace crimes

As research suggests, management typically ignores or is indifferent to experiences of workplace abuse and harassment, especially from customers (Booyens et al., 2022; Nimri et al., 2021). Knoll et al. (2016) argue that managers' inaction results from the distance they might keep from processes associated with moral conduct. Arguably, management also fails to fulfil their duty of care and moral obligation to protect workers. Utilising the criminology literature and Schindeler et al.'s (2016) four mechanisms that enable unchallenged offending (namely, diffusion and displacement of responsibility, disregarding the harm caused to others, and vilifying maltreatment recipients through blame and dehumanisation). It can be argued that management becomes accomplices to everyday workplace crimes through their passive inaction and disregard of harm on workers' well-being caused by the daily abuse and harassment from customers (Schindeler et al., 2016).

Management inaction, legitimises mistreatment and can harm individuals, raising a moral concern relating to managerial ethicality (Knoll et al., 2016). This strongly links to Sayer's moral economy framework (2000; 2007) and his focus on human flourishing, as well as Bolton and Laaser's (2013) sociological inquiry into if and how capitalism dehumanises workers. Knoll et al. (2016) argue that immoral behaviours are more likely to occur when managers seek to preserve the prevalent customer-centric culture within the sector (2016). Similarly, as noted by Schindeler (2014), managerialism, which prioritises employers' interests, legitimises mistreatment in organisations. This becomes evident in service work, especially in a period of crisis and unprecedented strains, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, when individuals increasingly experience strain and/or negative emotions, while management teams take no action to support employees who experience customer abuse and harassment (Booyens et al., 2022; Hadjisolomou et al., 2022). Advocating for recognition of safety crimes in the workplace, Tombs (2007, p. 539) underscores the inherent moral obligation to prevent and address instances of violence in the workplace. Therefore, the evident managerial inaction towards workplace violence challenges the morality of managerial practice and raises fundamental inquiries regarding the notion of lay morality within interactive service work. Organisations constitute a moral microcosm (Brief et al., 2001) within which lay morality influences individuals' moral assessments of how one should treat one another, legitimising their actions, and misbehaviours, within economic and social transactions. However, the widespread occurrence of workplace abuse and misbehaviour in the service economy highlights the lack of ethical responsibility towards the other (Lloyd, 2020; Smith & Raymen, 2018) which subsequently impacts employee safety and well-being. Management holds both moral and legal responsibility to ensure employee safety and well-being at work (Boyd, 2002; Vaughn, 2002). This obligation constitutes a fundamental principle of dignity in and at work (Bolton, 2007) and serves as a central aspect of the decent work agenda, helping workers in achieving a sense of self-respect and dignity (Winchenbach et al., 2019). However, the subordination of human dignity to financial considerations, facilitated by management inaction and the normalisation of workplace violence and customer misbehaviour, raises controversies around basic human rights (Barrett & Thomson, 2012). This specifically includes the right to dignified employment that does not endanger individuals' physical or mental welfare (Winchenbach et al., 2019).

Recent research discusses the necessity for managerial mechanisms to minimise the effects of customer abuse and harassment, such as anti-bullying and harassment policies, and an emphasis on the roles of supervisors or management to either counter or diffuse the incidence of violence (Ahmed et al., 2021). Additionally, authors put forward the argument that training programmes for emotional regulation in abuse scenarios (e.g. role-play) are needed for employees (Kim et al., 2014). Although such approaches are presented as tools to manage and minimise the impact of customer misbehaviour, they do not necessarily address the issue in hospitality and tourism, or the service economy in general, adequately. Indeed, as scholars of criminology argue, the plain promotion of mechanisms such as policies, procedures, and training provides no guarantee of either

the protection of individuals or accountability by organisations, rather it endorses an approach which overlooks systemic factors, criminal or corporate liability (Karstedt & Farrall, 2006). USDAW (2022) calls for organisational approaches to promote a greater recognition of customer misbehaviour as an everyday workplace – safety-related – crime within the wider service economy, as well as the implicit moral imperative of management to prevent and respond to such acts of workplace violence (Schindeler et al., 2016). It might be unrealistic to assume that customer abuse and harassment can be entirely eliminated, but it is crucial to acknowledge that it represents a daily crime that usually falls into a grey zone of morality and legality, it is underreported, and it relates to employees' well-being.

From a criminology perspective, Van Wilsem et al. (2006) argued that everyday crimes reflect the changes occurring within the socio-economic environments. They argue that the greater the pressures/strains brought forward by those changes, the higher the likelihood for people to engage in criminal behaviour, including workplace crimes. Indeed, key theoretical recommendations offered by the GST, recognise that the higher the negative feelings (i.e. strains) experienced by individuals because of crisis events (i.e. Covid-19 pandemic), the greater the chance to commit and accept everyday crimes (Barlett et al., 2021). Recent studies clearly outline how the pandemic has resulted in increasing employee mistreatment, abuse and harassment in service work (Booyens et al., 2022; Hadjisolomou et al., 2022). This aligns with Shover et al. (2003, p. 490) discussion describing customer misbehaviours as 'crimes of everyday life' which reflect the socio-economic challenges brought forward by crisis events. These are seen as a 'cornucopia of new or repeated criminal opportunities' by all parties being involved (e.g. customers, managers, employees), raising, however, important questions regarding managerial inaction in the service employment relationship. As it remains critical for organisations to safeguard employees' safety and well-being, it is alarming to experience increased tolerance by management of customer abuse and harassment for business prosperity in times of crisis, while at the same time abuse and harassment remain underreported (Booyens et al., 2022; Hadjisolomou et al., 2022; Nimri et al., 2021). These issues require further theoretical and empirical attention to be fully understood and addressed. This article adopts a criminology perspective, to further investigate how customer misbehaviour, and its tolerance and acceptance in the hospitality and tourism industry continue in periods of crisis and strains.

The article next outlines the methodology and examines customer abuse and harassment during the Covid-19 pandemic in the Greek hospitality sector and the actors' responses to such misbehaviours. This is followed by a discussion on the support, if any, management has offered to employees experiencing customer abuse and harassment in this context and the theoretical and practical research implications.

#### 4. Methodology

Due to the restrictions imposed by the Greek government to cope with the pandemic, and in order to get an in-depth understanding of the strain-workplace crime relationship, we employed and administered an online survey questionnaire, including a combination of open-ended and closed questions, resulting in both qualitative and quantitative data. The survey was carried out between December and June 2021 during the second phase of the Covid-19 pandemic. It was disseminated through social media as well as it was forwarded via email to several local, regional, and national hospitality employee associations, asking participants to forward this to their connections.

The sample consists of 222 individuals who identified themselves as hospitality and tourism employees in Greece. We surveyed a range of hospitality and tourism employees, such as waiters in bars, restaurants, and coffee shops; others working in accommodation establishments (hotels, guest houses) either in front-of-house (concierge, reception) or back-of-house (i.e. housekeeping, back office, sales department, food and beverage department, kitchen staff, supervisors), as well as owners of small, medium, or larger hotels, bars and other hospitality and tourism businesses. To enhance the authenticity and credibility of our research findings, we cross validated our

participants' responses through a series of statistical tests, further triangulating quantitative data with qualitative one (e.g. participants' quotes). Lastly, we implemented a rigorous screening process by requesting our participants' demographic and work-related information, which when met all follow-up questions were made available to them (alternatively, the questionnaire was terminated). To analyse the data, statistical software (i.e. Stata) was used to analyse the quantitative responses, while qualitative comments were noted and grouped using the NVivo software, according to their relevance with the quantitative data to support the key findings emerged.

The demographic characteristics of our sample can be found in Table 1. Most participants are aged between 26 and 45 years old (73.87%). There is an equal representation of female (46.40%) and male (51.80%) employees, with their experience varying from less than 10 years (54.50%) to more than 10 years (45.50%). Regarding their nationality, most participants are identified as Greek ( $N = 202$ ). Half of those employees have either permanent part-time or full-time contracts, while just 22.07% of them are members of a trade union.

## 5. Research findings

### 5.1. Abuse and harassment in the hospitality and tourism sector

A significant majority of research participants (85.14% –  $N = 189$ ) reported experiencing or witnessing some form of abuse or harassment. The types of abuse reported included sexual harassment, verbal and psychological abuse, physical abuse, racial/ethnic abuse, as well as bullying. Most participants reported having both experienced and witnessed various forms of abuse or harassment, suggesting that abuse and harassment are prevalent experiences among our research participants. The fact that a significant proportion of participants have witnessed abuse or harassment, even if they have not experienced it themselves, highlights the potential for these issues to affect not only individual victims but also the wider social context in which they occur.

All individuals who identified as transgender male or female, as well as those who did not disclose their gender, reported experiencing or witnessing abuse or harassment during their employment in the hospitality and tourism sector. Notably, with regards to employment characteristics, the findings

**Table 1.** Research participants' demographic characteristics.

|   | Percentage |
|---|------------|
| <b>Age</b>  |            |
| 16–25 years   | 6.76%      |
| 26–35 years   | 41.44%     |
| 36–45 years   | 32.43%     |
| 46–55 years   | 13.06%     |
| 56–55 years   | 6.31%      |
| <b>Gender</b>   |            |
| Female  | 46.40%     |
| Male  | 51.80%     |
| Transgender male or female  | 1.35%      |
| Prefer not to answer  | 0.45%      |
| <b>Years in Hospitality</b>   |            |
| Up to 10 years  | 54.50%     |
| Between 11 and 20   | 29.73%     |
| More than 20 years  | 15.77%     |
| <b>Frontline worker</b>   | 72.97%     |
| <b>Status of employment agreement</b>   |            |
| Permanent agreement (full-time and part-time)                                     | 50.00%     |
| Other temporary agreements (temporary part-time, seasonal, on call worker, other) | 50.00%     |
| <b>Size of organisation</b>   |            |
| Up to 50 employees  | 46.40%     |
| Between 51 and 150 employees  | 23.42%     |
| More than 150 employees   | 30.18%     |
| <b>Union Member</b>   | 22.07%     |



suggest that participants who reported no experience of abuse or harassment (14.86% –  $N = 33$ ) had fewer years of experience in the hospitality sector compared to those who had experienced such issues. Most of these employees (69.70%) had worked in the sector for less than a decade, while 54.55% held either full-time or part-time permanent contracts (Table 2). In contrast to those who had experienced or witnessed abuse or harassment, more than half (51.52%) of participants without such experiences continued working during the pandemic. This finding could suggest that those without experience of abuse or harassment may feel safer and more supported in their work environment, leading to greater job security during the difficult times of the pandemic.

However, it is important to note that these findings do not necessarily indicate that employees without experience of abuse or harassment are entirely safe from such issues. Rather, it may suggest that those who have experienced or witnessed abuse or harassment are more insecure and likely to leave the sector or experience job loss due to the negative impact of these issues on their well-being and perceived or actual work performance. Equally, in line with GST, those employees who were employed for more years in the sector, reported more incidents of customer abuse and harassment because of the greater strains (e.g. financial crisis, pandemic, precarity of work) both encountered throughout the years of their service encounter relationship.

**Table 2.** Employees having or not witnessed/experienced abuse and harassment.

|   | Have witnessed or experienced harassment | Have never witnessed or experienced harassment |
|---|--|--|
| <b>Age</b>  |  |  |
| 16–25 years   | 6.35%                                    | 9.09%  |
| 26–35 years   | 42.86%                                   | 33.33%   |
| 36–45 years   | 31.75%                                   | 36.36%   |
| 46–55 years   | 13.23%                                   | 12.12%   |
| 56–55 years   | 5.82%                                    | 9.09%  |
| <b>Gender</b>   |  |  |
| Female  | 46.56%                                   | 45.45%   |
| Male  | 51.32%                                   | 54.55%   |
| Transgender male or female  | 1.59%                                    | 0.00%  |
| Prefer not to answer  | 0.53%                                    | 0.00%  |
| <b>Years in Hospitality</b>   |  |  |
| Up to 10 years  | 51.85%                                   | 69.70%   |
| Between 11 and 20   | 32.28%                                   | 15.15%   |
| More than 20 years  | 15.87%                                   | 15.15%   |
| <b>Frontline worker</b>   | 76.19%                                   | 54.55%   |
| <b>Status of employment agreement</b>   |  |  |
| Permanent agreement (full-time and part-time)                                     | 49.21%                                   | 54.55%   |
| Other temporary agreements (temporary part-time, seasonal, on call worker, other) | 50.79%                                   | 45.45%   |
| <b>Size of organisation</b>   |  |  |
| Up to 50 employees  | 46.56%                                   | 45.45%   |
| Between 51 and 150 employees  | 23.81%                                   | 21.21%   |
| More than 150 employees   | 29.63%                                   | 33.33%   |
| <b>Union Member</b>   | 24.87%                                   | 6.06%  |
| <b>Employment arrangements during the Covid-19 pandemic</b>                       |  |  |
| I am/have been on furlough  | 13.76%                                   | 12.12%   |
| I am not working now but look to start working again after the lockdown           | 12.17%                                   | 9.09%  |
| I continued working through lockdown  | 30.16%                                   | 51.52%   |
| I have been retrenched/laid off   | 5.82%                                    | 3.03%  |
| I have returned to work   | 3.70%                                    | 0.00%  |
| I quit my job   | 2.12%                                    | 0.00%  |
| I will quit my job  | 0.53%                                    | 0.00%  |
| I will return to work after the lockdown  | 13.23%                                   | 12.12%   |
| It is unlikely that I will return to hospitality work in the foreseeable future   | 3.70%                                    | 3.03%  |
| Unsure  | 14.81%                                   | 9.09%  |
| <i>Total</i>  | 189                                      | 33   |

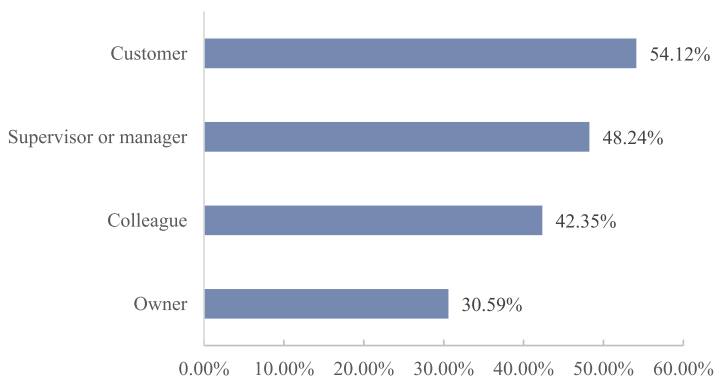
Most of the respondents felt that the pandemic impacted their employment. Specifically, an 82.89% of employees rated the impact of the pandemic on their employment at least as somewhat severe (35 participants rated the impact as 'Somewhat severe' and 149 participants rated it as 'Severe'), leaving only a 17.11% perceiving the impact of the pandemic as moderate or limited in relation to different aspects of their employment in the hospitality and tourism sector.

However, 68.47% of the respondents who have previously experienced or witnessed abuse or harassment, and a 69.70% of those who have never had such experiences, are indifferent or even disagree to a greater or lesser extent that abuse or harassment by customers has increased during the pandemic. Accounting for how widespread abuse and harassment are in the sector, this consensus among those with and without such experiences, consists of an indication that pandemic has not necessarily changed much in relation to customer abuse or harassment during the pandemic. This adds to the evidence that abuse and harassment are a persistent and endemic phenomenon of daily work in the sector. However, we must be cautious in interpreting these unconditional on any other demographic or employment characteristics proportions. On one hand, this consensus might indicate that the pandemic did not necessarily bring about significant changes in the occurrence of abuse or harassment by customers. On the other hand, it might be suggestive of how endemic abuse and harassment are in the sector. The occurrence of abuse or harassment may vary based on individual and employment characteristics, previous experiences, and perspectives. Therefore, further analysis, accounting for these factors, is needed to explore the complex interplay between abuse and harassment, the pandemic and employment in the hospitality and tourism sector. As such, further examining the topic from a criminology perspective could add to existing knowledge.

## 5.2. Perpetrators of abuse and harassment

Upon being asked to identify the perpetrators of abuse or harassment that employees had experienced or witnessed, over half of the participants (54.12% –  $N = 92$ ) named customers as the key perpetrators, 48.24% ( $N = 82$ ) named their supervisor or manager, 42.35% ( $N = 72$ ) indicated a colleague, and 30.59% ( $N = 52$ ) the business owner (see Figure 1). A small number of participants ( $N = 19$ ) named at least one perpetrator but did not specify the type or frequency of abuse or harassment they had experienced or witnessed.

As Figure 1 indicates, customers are identified as the primary perpetrators of abuse and harassment incidents experienced or witnessed by employees within the hospitality and tourism sector. This finding points to a pervasive and problematic culture that places customer satisfaction and sales above the well-being of employees. This assertion is supported by the comments of two individuals, namely a female hotel room service employee as well as a male restaurant waiter:



**Figure 1.** Perpetrators of abuse or harassment.

Note: The percentages correspond to participants that have named at least one perpetrator ( $N = 170$ ).



'The customer is always right. If you want to keep your job, you should live with this. That mantra will continue to prevail. That's why, hotel owners and managers focus more on them than to us. Such behaviours are known and acceptable'. (Room service)

'Many times, I had to deal with rude customers, but I ended up tolerating their behaviours. Having talked with my managers, he told me that this is how things work here, so either take it or leave. How can you argue on that when you are in need?' (Restaurant waiter)

It is crucial to acknowledge though that employees' abuse and harassment in the sector is not exclusively caused by customer misbehaviour. This emphasises the complex and multifaceted nature of employees' abuse and harassment within the hospitality and tourism sector. Eventually, that could also increase tolerance of such everyday workplace crimes which are characterised as normalised actions that are silenced by managers in favour of business prosperity.

### **5.3. Types and frequency of abuse and harassment incidents in relation to employees' individual characteristics**

Table 3 displays variations in the frequencies of witnessed and experienced abuse or harassment among the participants. It is noteworthy that a larger percentage of participants reported witnessing rather than experiencing abuse or harassment. Verbal/psychological abuse was found to be the most prevalent form of abuse or harassment, followed by racial/ethnic abuse or harassment, bullying, sexual abuse or harassment, and physical abuse. Specifically, 67.12% of the participants reported witnessing verbal or psychological abuse at some point, while 53.60% reported experiencing it themselves. Furthermore, a significant proportion of respondents, 39.19% and 31.53% reported witnessing and experiencing bullying, respectively. The prevalence of physical abuse was comparatively lower, with 17.57% and 12.61% reporting having witnessed and experienced it, respectively. In terms of racial abuse or harassment, 45.95% and 18.47% of the participants reported witnessing and experiencing it at some point, while 30.18% and 18.47% reported witnessing and experiencing sexual abuse or harassment, respectively.

To investigate the potential associations of individual and employment characteristics with the occurrence and frequency of various forms of abuse or harassment, we utilised regression analysis. Demographic characteristics included nationality and identification, while employment

**Table 3.** Abuse or harassment witnessed and experienced by hospitality and tourism employees by frequency.

| Type of abuse or harassment |                 | Never          | Sometimes     | About half the time | Most of the time | Always      |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|----------------|---------------|---------------------|------------------|-------------|
| Verbal/Psychological        | Witnessed (%)   | 32.88<br>(73)  | 41.44<br>(92) | 14.86<br>(33)       | 9.01<br>(20)     | 1.80<br>(4) |
|                             | Experienced (%) | 46.40<br>(103) | 37.39<br>(83) | 9.91<br>(22)        | 6.31<br>(14)     | .00<br>(0)  |
| Physical                    | Witnessed (%)   | 82.43<br>(183) | 13.96<br>(31) | 1.35<br>(3)         | 1.80<br>(4)      | .45<br>(1)  |
|                             | Experienced (%) | 87.39<br>(194) | 9.91<br>(22)  | 1.35<br>(3)         | .90<br>(2)       | .45<br>(1)  |
| Racial/Ethnic               | Witnessed (%)   | 54.05<br>(120) | 37.39<br>(83) | 5.41<br>(12)        | 2.25<br>(5)      | .90<br>(2)  |
|                             | Experienced (%) | 81.53<br>(181) | 13.06<br>(29) | 4.05<br>(9)         | .45<br>(1)       | .90<br>(2)  |
| Sexual                      | Witnessed (%)   | 69.82<br>(155) | 22.97<br>(51) | 5.86<br>(13)        | 1.35<br>(3)      | .00<br>(0)  |
|                             | Experienced (%) | 81.53<br>(181) | 13.51<br>(30) | 3.15<br>(7)         | 1.80<br>(4)      | .00<br>(0)  |
| Bullying                    | Witnessed (%)   | 60.81<br>(135) | 27.93<br>(62) | 6.31<br>(14)        | 3.60<br>(8)      | 1.35<br>(3) |
|                             | Experienced (%) | 68.47<br>(152) | 22.97<br>(51) | 6.31<br>(14)        | 2.25<br>(5)      | .00<br>(0)  |

Note: Number of responses in parentheses.

characteristics, included tenure in the hospitality industry, employment agreement status, organisation size, and union membership. By employing regression analysis, we can better understand how each individual and employment characteristic might have contributed to the likelihood of experiencing different types of abuse or harassment. This approach is advantageous compared to simply comparing unconditional proportions and means because it allows us to isolate and quantify the effects of each individual characteristic while controlling for the potential influence of other factors. Our reference group for analysis consisted of individuals who identified as male and Greek national, with over 10 years of experience in the hospitality industry, working in an organisation with fewer than 50 employees, and not being a member of a trade union.<sup>1</sup>

The estimates presented in Table 4 indicate that female respondents experienced statistically significantly higher frequencies of verbal/psychological and harassment compared to male participants. Transgender participants experienced physical and harassment, as well as bullying, more frequently compared to male participants. Indicatively, a transgender male housekeeper, and a female receptionist stated:

'I was stabbed with a pen once by a guest because their room wasn't ready on time. My boss yelled at me in front of everyone, even though I was obviously bleeding through my uniform, while the guest was clearly drunk. Neither apologised. Just one of the times, my job made me hate my life'. (Housekeeper)

'Many times, I was asked to wear tighter clothes with a neckline to tease customers. I was bullied daily, being told that I will be fired. I have also witnessed racist comments towards my foreign colleagues'. (Receptionist)

Participants employed in larger organisations, with more than 150 employees, reported experiencing verbal/psychological abuse and bullying at a lower frequency compared to those employed in smaller organisations. For instance, a female receptionist argued:

'I used to work for a small hotel and customer abuse was a daily concern. The owner did not take any action in fear of losing his customer. Now that I work for a large hotel chain, things are a bit different. There are certain policies regarding abuse and harassment, yet not always being applied – it depends on the seriousness of the

**Table 4.** Regression estimates of the frequency of experiencing abuse or harassment.

|                                       | Experienced abuse or harassment |                   |                      |                   |                   |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------|----------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
|                                       | Verbal/Psychological<br>(1)     | Physical<br>(2)   | Racial/Ethnic<br>(3) | Sexual<br>(4)     | Bullying<br>(5)   |
| Intercept                             | 1.66***<br>(0.27)               | 1.37***<br>(0.24) | 1.52***<br>(0.32)    | 1.15***<br>(0.13) | 1.47***<br>(0.25) |
| Greek                                 | 0.06<br>(0.22)                  | -0.15<br>(0.19)   | -0.30<br>(0.25)      | 0.11<br>(0.09)    | 0.00<br>(0.19)    |
| Female                                | 0.31***<br>(0.12)               | -0.07<br>(0.06)   | 0.04<br>(0.09)       | 0.18**<br>(0.07)  | 0.10<br>(0.10)    |
| Transgender                           | 0.79<br>(0.61)                  | 1.65***<br>(0.52) | 0.87<br>(0.61)       | 2.19***<br>(0.30) | 1.33*<br>(0.76)   |
| Between 11 and 20 years of experience | 0.11<br>(0.14)                  | 0.01<br>(0.07)    | 0.09<br>(0.11)       | -0.12<br>(0.08)   | 0.12<br>(0.11)    |
| More than 20 years of experience      | -0.15<br>(0.15)                 | -0.06<br>(0.06)   | -0.03<br>(0.10)      | -0.16*<br>(0.08)  | 0.13<br>(0.14)    |
| Permanent contract                    | 0.01<br>(0.12)                  | -0.11<br>(0.07)   | -0.12<br>(0.08)      | -0.13*<br>(0.07)  | -0.13<br>(0.10)   |
| Between 51 and 150                    | -0.13<br>(0.16)                 | 0.10<br>(0.08)    | 0.07<br>(0.13)       | 0.12<br>(0.09)    | 0.00<br>(0.13)    |
| More than 150                         | -0.26**<br>(0.13)               | 0.00<br>(0.08)    | 0.01<br>(0.08)       | -0.01<br>(0.09)   | -0.21**<br>(0.10) |
| Member of union                       | -0.07<br>(0.13)                 | -0.06<br>(0.05)   | 0.01<br>(0.09)       | -0.03<br>(0.07)   | -0.15<br>(0.11)   |
| <i>N</i>                              | 221                             | 221               | 221                  | 221               | 221               |
| <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>                 | 0.06                            | 0.20              | 0.07                 | 0.23              | 0.09              |

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses. \*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

incidents. Who decides about the seriousness of these is a matter of question. To my experience, working for a bigger organisation is better compared to a smaller one' (Receptionist)

Quantitative and qualitative findings provide valuable insights into how individual and employment characteristics, such as gender identity and organisational size, may signify the occurrence and frequency of different types of abuse or harassment in the sector. Further to examining the potential associations between individual and employment characteristics and the occurrence of different forms of abuse or harassment, Table 5 introduces additional controls to the regression analysis. These controls include previous experience of abuse or harassment by perpetrator, as well as an indicator variable which is equal to 1 if the respondent reported abuse or harassment in the past to a higher authority. The purpose of this analysis is to investigate whether the COVID-19 pandemic, as a strain, has had any impact on individuals' perceptions and feelings about abuse and harassment and their willingness to report it. By controlling for these additional factors, we can more accurately assess the potential impact of the pandemic on perceptions and experiences of abuse or harassment in the hospitality sector.

The findings presented in Column 1 of Table 5 suggest that individuals who have experienced harassment or abuse from an owner and/or a customer in the past tend to agree significantly more with the statement that customer abuse or harassment has increased during the pandemic. While, as discussed before, there appears to be a consensus that instances of customer abuse or harassment have not necessarily increased during the pandemic, controlling for

**Table 5.** Differences in feelings about abuse and report due to the pandemic by perpetrator.

|                                       | (1)               | (2)               | (3)                |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| Intercept                             | 3.10***<br>(0.49) | 2.91***<br>(0.49) | 3.36***<br>(0.56)  |
| Previous Perpetrator                  |                   |                   |                    |
| Colleague                             | -0.29<br>(0.24)   | -0.38<br>(0.24)   | 0.17<br>(0.28)     |
| Supervisor/Manager                    | 0.23<br>(0.24)    | -0.03<br>(0.24)   | 0.94***<br>(0.28)  |
| Owner                                 | 0.58**<br>(0.28)  | 0.43<br>(0.26)    | 0.12<br>(0.30)     |
| Customer                              | 0.85***<br>(0.22) | 0.59***<br>(0.22) | 0.36<br>(0.25)     |
| Reported in the past                  | -0.49**<br>(0.24) | -0.14<br>(0.24)   | -0.84***<br>(0.26) |
| Greek                                 | 0.02<br>(0.43)    | 0.46<br>(0.41)    | -0.81*<br>(0.48)   |
| Female                                | 0.50**<br>(0.23)  | 0.16<br>(0.22)    | 0.53**<br>(0.24)   |
| Other than male or female             | 0.92*<br>(0.47)   | 1.38**<br>(0.54)  | 1.58<br>(0.96)     |
| Between 11 and 20 years of experience | 0.00<br>(0.27)    | -0.33<br>(0.27)   | -0.27<br>(0.27)    |
| More than 20 years of experience      | -0.16<br>(0.35)   | -0.50<br>(0.33)   | 0.07<br>(0.37)     |
| Permanent contract                    | -0.22<br>(0.22)   | 0.02<br>(0.22)    | -0.53**<br>(0.24)  |
| Between 51 and 150                    | 0.03<br>(0.27)    | 0.35<br>(0.28)    | 0.06<br>(0.31)     |
| More than 150                         | 0.29<br>(0.27)    | 0.17<br>(0.26)    | -0.08<br>(0.29)    |
| Member of union                       | 0.04<br>(0.29)    | 0.35<br>(0.31)    | 0.39<br>(0.29)     |
| <i>N</i>                              | 221               | 221               | 221                |
| <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>                 | 0.14              | 0.09              | 0.19               |

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses. \*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ . (1) Abuse by customers has increased during the pandemic, (2) I'm more likely to report customer abuse during the pandemic, (3) I'm afraid of losing my job if I report abuse by customers during the pandemic.

prior experiences of abuse or harassment from customers and/or owners turns out to intensify perceptions of such incidents during these extreme times. Interestingly, female, and transgender individuals tend to agree more with the idea of an increase in such incidents during the pandemic compared to their male counterparts. Two of the participants (male hotel porter & female event planner) argued that:

'Our customers are our business. Treat them like kings no matter what they ask for or what they do. How can you go against that, especially during such difficult times?' (Hotel porter)

'Never argue with a customer. Do what's necessary to keep them satisfied. What does this actually mean? Are there any limits? With such uncertainty, I assume we should do what's necessary to keep our job' (Event planner)

Interestingly, individuals who have reported incidents of abuse or harassment to higher authorities appear to be more sceptical of the notion that customer abuse or harassment has increased during the pandemic, indicating a potential negative correlation between reporting behaviour and perception of increases in the prevalence of workplace mistreatment.

Complementary to the results of Column 1, the findings reported in Column 2 of [Table 5](#) indicate a positive correlation between prior experience of abuse or harassment by a customer and a higher likelihood of reporting incidents of customer mistreatment. In addition, Column 3 of [Table 5](#) reveals that individuals who have previously reported instances of abuse or harassment, those who are Greek nationals, and those with permanent employment contracts tend to express less fear of job loss when reporting customer abuse or harassment. Conversely, individuals who have experienced abuse or harassment from a supervisor or manager, as well as female employees, tend to express greater fear of job loss when reporting customer abuse or harassment during the pandemic. These findings suggest that prior experiences of abuse or harassment from a supervisor or manager may play a role in the fear of job loss when reporting incidents of customer abuse or harassment. As it will be discussed in the following sections, this may be indicative of potential moral disengagement on the part of supervisors and managers.

Overall, abuse and harassment are greater for female employees, as well as these are more frequent in smaller organisations with higher levels of job insecurity amongst employees. However, despite differences in types and frequency of abuse and harassment in relation to employees' individual characteristics, the characterisation of employees' mistreatment by customers as everyday workplace delinquencies (i.e. workplace crimes) is outlined, while the phenomenon continues to prevail within the sector, featuring as a normal behaviour that should be tolerated.

#### **5.4. Under-reported incidents of abuse and harassment**

Just 35.44% ( $N = 67$ ) of employees who have encountered abuse or harassment either first-hand or as a witness chose to report the incident to a higher authority, such as the HR department, manager, owner, or a colleague. More men ( $N = 36$ ) than women ( $N = 29$ ) reported abuse or harassment, while only 12.6% ( $N = 24$ ) mentioned that some sort of action was taken. A small 4.23% ( $N = 8$ ) shared their experience with their family and friends; unsurprisingly, no action was taken for these unofficially reported incidents.

Under-reporting of abuse and harassment incidents in the hospitality and tourism sector appears to be a prevalent issue, which may be partially attributed to the considerable job insecurity that many employees experience. The primary factors that discourage individuals from reporting such incidents include fear of job loss, a lack of faith in the capability and/or willingness of managers to effectively address the situation, and general fear of the perpetrator and consequences. For instance, a female waitress argued:

'I couldn't really report the incident as I was afraid of being dismissed. I have a family to support, and I need my job, and nobody would hire me if I had something reported'. (waitress)

The embedded fear of job loss within the sector may contribute to increased tolerance for such workplace misconduct. This normalisation of abusive behaviour is often treated as routine deviance that is ignored by managers and tolerated by employees. Indicatively, a concierge male employee noted that:

'I felt that nobody would do anything about it, no one would listen. If you do report it though, you should expect your working life to become worst after it'. (Concierge)

**Table 6** presents the results of the effect of demographic and employment characteristics on the propensity to report an abuse or harassment incident to higher authorities. The estimates reveal a significant correlation between an employee's nationality and their likelihood to report incidents of abuse or harassment. Specifically, Greek nationals exhibit a higher probability of reporting such incidents (21%) compared to foreign employees working in the Greek hospitality sector. Foreign employees may encounter additional hurdles in reporting abuse or harassment, such as language barriers or unfamiliarity with formal reporting procedures. That was evident in the suggestions offered by an Eastern European female and a non-European male housekeeper:

'I am employed through an agency, and I am not aware to whom I should report any incidents witnessed or experienced. Even if I knew though, I am not sure if I would report them in fear of losing my work' (Eastern European Housekeeper)

'I do my work, do not talk, and go back home. I am lucky I have this job and I want to keep it to support my family here and back home. I try to keep myself out of trouble as I am not fully aware of how things work'. (Non-European Housekeeper)

The regression analysis shows that the coefficient for employees with over 20 years of experience in the hospitality sector is negative and statistically significant at the 5% level. This suggests that individuals with greater work experience are less inclined to report incidents of abuse or harassment. This result aligns with the lower proportion of those with more than 11 years of experience who have reported such incidents, compared to those with fewer years of experience in the sector.

**Table 6.** Probability of reporting abuse or harassment.

|                                       | Report            |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Intercept                             | 0.15<br>(0.10)    |
| Greek                                 | 0.21**<br>(0.09)  |
| Female                                | -0.04<br>(0.06)   |
| Transgender                           | 0.18<br>(0.30)    |
| Between 11 and 20 years of experience | -0.05<br>(0.07)   |
| More than 20 years of experience      | -0.18**<br>(0.09) |
| Permanent contract                    | -0.01<br>(0.06)   |
| Between 51 and 150                    | 0.01<br>(0.08)    |
| More than 150                         | 0.00<br>(0.07)    |
| Member of union                       | 0.10<br>(0.08)    |
| <i>N</i>                              | 221               |
| <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>                 | 0.04              |

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses. \*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ . The dependent variable is an indicator equal to 1 if the participant reported abuse or harassment to higher authorities and zero otherwise.

The findings suggest that the normalisation of abuse and harassment in the sector or a lack of trust in the efficacy of reporting procedures may underlie this lower probability to report incidents from more experienced hospitality workers.

### **5.5. Managerial tolerance of abuse and harassment incidents**

The results presented in Column 3 of Table 5 show that employees who have been subjected to abuse or harassment by their supervisors or managers are more likely to fear job loss if they report incidents of customer abuse or harassment. These findings suggest that supervisors and managers may be morally disengaged by holding employees accountable for the inappropriate behaviour of customers, instilling their feelings of fear, guilt, and insecurity, rather than addressing the underlying issues and protecting their employees from customer mistreatment. This type of behaviour not only undermines moral values, but also creates a culture that promotes and tolerates unethical practices, which can have significant negative consequences for both individuals and organisations.

Participants that did not perceive any significant increase in customer abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic, tended to view abuse and harassment as a regular part of their job, especially during extreme times of stress. Moreover, they believed that the pandemic had raised more pressing social and economic issues than those related to abuse or harassment. Indicatively, a male porter stated:

'Abuse and harassment come as part the job. I am not trying to excuse those committing it, but there are other more important issues to consider right now such as increased job insecurity, high cost of living, uncertainty etc'. (Porter)

The belief that other issues take priority over abuse and harassment during the pandemic is a false dichotomy. This perspective is concerning as it normalises abusive behaviour towards hospitality and tourism employees and implies that such behaviour is acceptable under certain circumstances. Furthermore, the acceptance and tolerance of abusive behaviour towards workers is not only immoral but also has negative consequences for the mental health and well-being of the workers.

In contrast, individuals who perceived an increase in customer abuse or harassment during the pandemic felt that they were in a weaker position without any viable options, given the repercussions of the pandemic. These individuals expressed the belief that employers are more likely to tolerate abusive behaviour as they expect employees to be more receptive to such behaviours, fearing the possibility of being laid off. Consequently, participants who perceived an increase in customer abuse or harassment were less likely to report such incidents, and they saw little room for managerial intervention that could improve the already problematic conditions in the hospitality and tourism sector. A female restaurant waiter argued:

'Managers are nothing less than employees themselves. Job insecurity is a key concern for them as well in such unprecedented times. That might be the reason of their increased tolerance of customer misbehaviour. Yet, that do not constitute a valid excuse for silencing relevant incidents considering the power, the responsibilities, and the moral duty of care their position holds'. (Restaurant waiter)

Another employee (male hotel receptionist) also noted that:

'Most managers are unaware of the relevant organisational policies to addressing customer misbehaviour. In other occasions, they may also not have the power to do so in fear of losing their work'. (Hotel receptionist)

Those who have experienced or witnessed abuse and harassment further argued that managers never liaised with them to addressing such delinquencies. Representatively, a male hotel restaurant bookings employee argued that:

'Managers and employees should spend quality time together, and the former should always seek the latter's input. Compassion is also important, especially in volatile and uncertain periods such as those brought forward by the pandemic'. (Hotel restaurant bookings employee)



Appropriately, a female hotel restaurant waiter argued that employers and managers should continuously liaise with their employees towards improving working conditions and employment relationships by suggesting that:

'Employers should respect and treat their employees better. More economic and ethical support from the state is also needed'. (Hotel restaurant waiter)

The research findings suggest that managerial inaction towards customer misbehaviour may be related to various factors. Firstly, it may be attributed to the dominant culture within the sector that prioritises customer satisfaction above employee welfare. In addition to this, it can be a strategic decision aimed to ensure business survival and profitability, especially during times of uncertainty, as the pandemic. Secondly, it could be attributed to a lack of established policies and procedures for managing such incidents. Nonetheless, managers have a professional and moral responsibility to address instances of customer misbehaviour in a prompt and effective manner to safeguard the well-being of their employees in the workplace.

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1. Theoretical implications

Research findings, worryingly, confirm that customer abuse and harassment were intensified during the pandemic (Booyens et al., 2022; Robinson et al., 2022), as well as that the phenomenon remains uncontrolled despite violating employees' well-being and dignity at work (Hadjisolomou et al., 2022; Lloyd, 2020). Particularly for female and transgender employees, such misbehaviours are part of their daily working reality (Booyens et al., 2022). Informed by the GST we argue that customer abuse and harassment intensification are the outcome of the pandemic being an additional social strain that lead to employees underreporting these (mis)behaviours, due to increased job insecurity (Nimri et al., 2021), while management further neglects and tolerates these issues in favour of business prosperity. This study confirms the lack of managerial support in protecting employees, thus demonstrating a failure to fulfil their care of duty for workers' safety by addressing customer abuse and harassment incidents. This results in reinforcing the problematic culture within the sector and conforming to the sustainment of these everyday workplace crimes (Schindeler et al., 2016).

We describe customers' abuse and harassment as an everyday workplace crime. Our recommendation confirms key theoretical underpinnings of the GST, arguing that in times of uncertainty, as the unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic, higher rates of misbehaviour can be noticed (Barlett et al., 2021; Nimri et al., 2021). Yet, this can neither stand as a justification to customer abuse and harassment, nor as an alibi for management to ignore such (mis)behaviours, as the data reveals. This research confirms the work of Vo-Thanh et al. (2022) who suggest that customer misbehaviour negatively affects hospitality front-line employees' mental health and well-being. However, the latter authors' study, in contrast to the findings discussed in this article, outlines the existence of managerial support and psychological resilience as tools to ameliorate employees' mental health and well-being problems. Our data clearly reveals the managerial inaction in relation to customer misbehaviour, and the disregard of the harm it causes on workers' well-being, suggesting the normalisation of such everyday workplace crimes in service organisations (Schindeler et al., 2016). Management inaction, leaving such crimes unresolved and unaddressed, legitimises (mis)behaviours that can harm individuals (Taylor, 2019). This raises a moral concern regarding managements' ethicality and accomplice to workplace violence as an everyday crime. Overall, customer abuse remains as an uncomfortable truth in service work which challenges moral boundaries in the workplace (Sayer, 2000; 2007). Consistent to the GST propositions (Barlett et al., 2021), customer abuse and harassment intensify as strains appear, leaving employees subjected to customer misbehaviours as an outcome of the tolerance of those by managers in favour of business prosperity and the consequent underreporting of such crimes.

Additionally, the study outlines that employees under-report such incidents in fear of job loss, especially during business and economic uncertainty, as well as lack of trust on management, the precarious nature of hospitality work and managerial inaction as impeding factors for reporting such incidents. This aligns with Booyens et al.'s (2022) concept of 'social washing' and the problematic culture existing in the hospitality and tourism sector, which reinforces the notion that customers are superior to workers, providing space to the former to abuse the latter, without evident penalties for their (mis)behaviour.

Customer incivility was also reported as a contagious problem in the service context (Zhan et al., 2023); a proposition supported by our research findings. This problematic sectoral culture confirms Agnew's (2001) GST proposition that in certain subcultures, individuals would react in a specific way to specific strains to cope with them. We argue that as an outcome of the pandemic, as a strain, customers increasingly abuse and harass workers who, respectively, underreport these behaviours, whilst management remains inactive. Eventually, customer abuse and harassment, as an everyday workplace crime, jeopardises hospitality workers' safety, dignity, and fair treatment. It constitutes a violation of dignity at work (Bolton, 2007), undermining the principles of decent work and contravening fundamental human rights for health and safety, as stipulated by the United Nations and the ILO's agenda for decent work (Winchenbach et al., 2019). Such instances of abuse and harassment create a hostile work environment, eroding the dignity to which every worker is entitled (Barrett & Thomson, 2012), whilst challenging the morality of management practice in the hospitality sector (Sayer, 2007). The United Nations emphasises the importance of decent work, advocating for fair treatment, safe conditions, and respectful treatment of all workers (Winchenbach et al., 2019). Abuse and harassment not only compromise the dignity of service workers but also violate the moral, and legal, employment obligation to ensure workers' health and safety (Boyd, 2002).

Overall, customer misbehaviour has been mainly examined from a sociological perspective (Booyens et al., 2022; Jung & Yoon, 2020). We argue that customer abuse, as a form of an everyday workplace crime, which has been further intensified because of the Covid-19 pandemic, should not be silenced, or tolerated neither because of employees' job insecurity, nor due to their lack of trust in managers' power and/or willingness to deal efficiently with the perpetrator. As Grosser and Tyler (2021) argue, customer abuse and harassment represent a human rights violation act that needs to be considered as a source of victimisation and a matter of justice (Schindeler et al., 2016). Therefore, such unwelcomed phenomenon should also be of top priority within society to ensure a fair, safe, and respectful workplace for all.

## **6.2. Practical and social implications**

This study provides useful insights and calls for the development of appropriate strategies and policies to tackle customer abuse and harassment within the workplace and other social contexts. Crucially, a change in the service culture is required, along with proactive interventions by management and other stakeholders on four different levels: individual, organisational, social, and legal.

At the individual level, Voorhees et al. (2017) argue that it is imperative to educate employees, managers, and customers on the social norms governing service encounter relationships. This is essential for developing positive and fruitful social exchanges. For the latter actor, organisations should develop, supply, and display informational materials (e.g. brochures, signs, online resources) that outline expected and unexpected behaviour during service delivery. This proactive approach aids in managing customer expectations and, potentially, contributes to conflict-free service encounters (Bell et al., 2017).

For employees and managers, organisations should implement comprehensive bystander training programmes aimed at improving relationships between individuals and cultivating empathy within the workplace (Pant et al., 2023). These programmes focus on equipping individuals with the essential knowledge, capabilities, and behaviours to proficiently intervene in

circumstances where potential harm may arise or where societal norms of considerate engagement are violated (Van Erp et al., 2018). The introduction of bystander education, through interactive workshops (e.g. role plays, simulations) to impart knowledge regarding social norms, has the potential to foster favourable social exchange relationships (Roberts & Marsh, 2022), as well as to address issues such as harassment and incivility within service settings. These workshops will offer participants, such as managers and employees, the opportunity to experience diverse scenarios and engage in the application of suitable reactions. Accordingly, individuals can develop an awareness of situations that demand intervention and acquire the skills to respond accordingly. As Liang and Park (2022) argue that bystander training can positively impact individuals' attitudes towards intervention, it can increase their confidence and ability to intervene, as well as raising the likelihood of intervening in challenging situations. This, eventually, will promote a culture that revolves around the notions of responsibility and reciprocal respect (Kang et al., 2020; Tuomi et al., 2021).

At the organisational level, a multifaceted strategy that prioritises cultural transformation within organisations should be placed at the forefront. This requires management to foster an environment that encourages open lines of communication and offers mechanisms for support, to reinforce a culture that upholds respect and responsibility (Pina et al., 2009). For this to happen, managers should consistently seek feedback, through employee voice mechanisms (see Marchington, 2007; Townsend et al., 2022), and regularly assess employee performance to ensure that they remain sensitive and equipped with the necessary skills to effectively handle challenging and abusive behaviours. In addition to the interactive workshops and scenario-centered training discussed above, we recommend cultural sensitivity training, leading by example, and consistent reinforcement of organisational policies as necessary tools for organisations in creating an environment that values, respects, and supports individuals' safety. As Ziegler (2014) and Yee et al. (2013) argue, empathy, the main focus of the cultural sensitivity course, plays a crucial role in service encounter relationships by enhancing the ability of all the actors to understand each other's experiences and challenges within service work. This is particularly important for managers, especially front-line service managers who are expected to lead by example (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). Therefore, we propose integrating cultural sensitivity courses into the developmental plans of both employees and managers, as this can significantly impact the way abusive behaviour is perceived and reacted (Mishra & Davison, 2020).

On the social level, it is imperative for employers to invest in educating customers about an unwavering stance against customer abuse and harassment, but also further fostering collaboration with key stakeholders such as Trade Unions. A notable example is USDAW's (2022) 'Freedom from Fear' campaign within the UK retail sector, which emphasises that abuse is not a part of the job. This initiative aims to prevent violence, threats, and abuse against workers by actively engaging the public, workers, and the Government. Hospitality employers can find value in adopting and adapting such initiatives, leveraging them to address the pervasive issue of abuse and harassment within the industry.

On the legal level, the activities initiated by USDAW to promote this campaign have, importantly, paved the way for legislative measures to criminalise anti-social behaviour against retail workers by third parties (Gov.Scot, 2023). It is crucial, however, for such protective measures to be expanded beyond the retail sector to encompass the entire service industry (Booyens et al., 2022). Collaboration among employees, employers, and customers, alongside policy makers, is indispensable in nurturing a culture of respect and absolute intolerance towards maltreatment within the context of the hospitality industry. In this way, employers will fulfil their moral and legislative duty of care towards their staff, contributing to a safer and more supportive working environment. This ensures that every individual in the sector experiences a workplace free from fear and intimidation and attains dignity in and at work, a fundamental principle outlined by the International Labour Organization's (ILO) decent work agenda (Bolton, 2007; Winchenbach et al., 2019).

## 7. Conclusion

By incorporating key theoretical underpinnings of the GST into our research design, we gained a deeper understanding of the relationship between various strains (e.g. the Covid-19 pandemic) and the committed workplace crime(s) (i.e. customer abuse and harassment). Examining customer misbehaviour from a criminology perspective enabled us to further understand employees' and management's actions to managing the strain-workplace crime interplay.

We argue that workplace crimes, such as customer abuse and harassment, continue to be present, and intensify during crisis periods, whilst continue to be tolerated due to the managers' moral disengagement following the problematic customer-centric culture within the sector. That confirms the key theoretical proposition of the GST suggesting that the greater the strains experienced by individuals, the higher the likelihood to commit and/or accept and tolerate a crime. Research findings question existing anti-abuse and harassment policies, as well as management teams' moral responsibility in dealing with customer misbehaviour. This comes in line with criminology scholars who argue that having policies and procedures to deal with workplace violence provides no guarantee of either protection of individuals, or accountability by organisations (see Schindeler et al., 2016, p. 375). Instead, a fundamental change in culture is required through proactive engagement of management to address organisational cultures within which customer misbehaviours are normalised. Therefore, we propose that management teams should educate their employees and customers on the social norms that should govern their service relationship, and we suggest interventions on four different levels: individual, organisational, social, and legal.

Even today, as the world returns to 'normality', customer abuse and harassment remain worrying, with underreported issues not only in the hospitality and tourism sector but also in other service sectors. Therefore, the study's findings remain relevant and applicable, serving as an alarm to policy-makers and management teams to address customer misbehaviour and secure their employees' mental health and well-being.

## 8. Limitations and directions for future research

Since our study was conducted within the Greek hospitality and tourism sector, research findings are limited, yet are relevant, to the particular national and industrial contexts, and eventually these cannot be directly generalised to other sectors and/or national contexts. However, following extensive reports of similar cases globally (Booyens et al., 2022; Curran, 2021; Hadjisolomou et al., 2023; Robinson et al., 2022; Williamson et al., 2021), we confidently argue that our data could highly inform management teams and policy makers as to how to cope with this endemic and unwelcomed phenomenon in the sector. Future studies would also benefit from a larger scale project to compare the living experiences of hospitality and tourism workers in different national contexts to raise awareness of the challenges faced by workers in this sector, in relation to their workplace safety and dignity at work. Further multi-stakeholder research is also needed to suggest strategies and policies to address customer misbehaviour. Lastly, future research could incorporate and test our criminology perspective into different geographical and industrial contexts. Further strains, as for example the current cost of living crisis, should be considered by scholars to further understand how the social and economic dynamics impact on service workers' experiences and how they shape management practice.

## Note

1. We have excluded from our regressions, one participant that preferred not to declare their gender.

## Disclosure statement

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