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Whom to Punish? Examining Observers' Reactions to Customer Mistreatment by Hospitality Employees

Abstract

Purpose

This study explores how witnessing a hospitality employee mistreating a customer impacts observers' revenge-seeking behavior, directed not only at the offending employee but also at innocent employees.

Design/methodology/approach

This study conducts four online experiments to test the proposed relationships, involving 881 UK adults.

Findings

Observing hospitality employees mistreating customers prompts observers to view the guilty employee as harmful, triggering revenge-seeking behavior. This perception of harmfulness also extends to innocent employees, leading observers to seek revenge against them. However, empowering fellow customers during the recovery process reduces observers' intent to seek revenge against both guilty and innocent employees. Additionally, our results reveal the black sheep effect, where shared group membership between the observing customer and the guilty employee results in harsher punishment for the latter, particularly when the mistreatment targets an out-group customer.

Practical implications

The findings offer practical guidance for hospitality companies on how observers' perceptions of employees can reshape service evaluations and influence restorative approaches. Service recovery efforts should extend beyond directly affected customers to include those who witnessed the incident.

23 **Originality/value**

24 This study is among the first to explain how observers appraise the mistreatment of fellow customers
25 and how this influences their perceptions and revenge-seeking behavior towards both guilty and
26 innocent employees.

27 *Keywords:* Customer revenge; Spillover effect; Service recovery; Customer empowerment

1. Introduction

Imagine being a hotel guest who witnessed a receptionist being rude to another guest. You are likely to develop a negative attitude toward that receptionist and potentially seek revenge. But how will you perceive other hotel employees who were not involved in the incident? Will you also perceive them more negatively, or even seek revenge on those innocent employees? And how would your behavior change if you knew that the customer actually had a degree of power in that situation?

This scenario, though hypothetical, is common in tourism and hospitality settings and highlights the spillover effects of observing negative incidents on subsequent service experiences. Therefore, the notion of always treating customers with respect is a mantra in the tourism and hospitality industry in particular (Lee *et al.*, 2021) and 74% of customers believe that employee behaviors and attitudes have an impact on the customer experience (Cogito, 2022). Unfortunately, incidents of mistreatment by employees still occur, as exemplified by the widely shared episode of United Airlines staff dragging a passenger from an overbooked flight, leading to negative electronic word-of-mouth and marketplace aggression (Zdanowicz and Grinberg, 2018).

While managerial focus often centers on the mistreated customer, the experiences of those who observe such mistreatment (hereafter, “observers”) are equally critical. Research increasingly shows that consumers who witness staff treating other customers with incivility experience heightened negative emotions, including anger, reduced satisfaction, lower likelihood of returning, and even desires for revenge (e.g., Van Vaerenbergh *et al.*, 2013; Karabas *et al.*, 2019). These outcomes are influenced by factors such as social distance, traits and moral (see Web Appendix A for key studies of consumers as “observers”). Despite acknowledging the role

of observers in service marketing, there remains limited research into how observers' revenge-seeking behavior is triggered.

Tourism research has largely focused on mistreatment from the perspective of the employee being mistreated, whether by a supervisor, another employee, or a customer (Boukis *et al.*, 2020; Porath *et al.*, 2010, Ye *et al.*, 2024). While these lines of research offer important insights into the negative consequences of mistreatment, they mainly focus on the employee who is being mistreated. Less attention has been paid to the impact on customers who observe mistreatment. Observers are more numerous than mistreated customers (Béal *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, their negative attitudes and behaviors are potentially much more harmful to providers in the tourism and hospitality industry than any negative attitudes and behaviors displayed by mistreated customers alone.

With that in mind, by explaining how *observers* appraise the mistreatment of fellow customers and how that appraisal process influences observers' perceptions and behaviors, our research contributes to both service theory and practice in at least three ways. First, while previous research assessed the effect of being mistreated by customers on employees' well-being and also on those employees' tendency to mistreat other customers (Boukis *et al.*, 2020; Shi and Huang, 2022), we supplement this stream of research by applying appraisal and social identity theory to explain how observers' revenge-seeking behavior extends not only toward employees who have mistreated customers (the "guilty" employees) but also toward employees who have not engaged in mistreatment (the "innocent" employees).

Second, our research expands existing research on social identity in tourism by highlighting the critical role of the observer. Prior research has indicated various ways in which perceptions of one service encounter can "spill over" into subsequent engagement (Wang *et al.*,

2020). Taking the observer's perspective, our research provides insights into this novel conception of a spillover effect. We find that when employees mistreat fellow customers in tourism and hospitality settings, observers perceive both guilty and innocent employees as harmful, often prompting revenge-seeking behaviors toward both groups of employees. Furthermore, we document the "black sheep effect" (Marques and Paez, 1994), where shared social group membership between the observing customer and the guilty employee results in harsher punishment for the latter, especially when the guilty employee mistreated the out-group customer. This study is one of the first to demonstrate the black sheep effect within a hospitality and tourism context, revealing how customer-employee dynamics are shaped by social group membership.

Third, our findings serve as guidelines for overcoming the harmful effect of employee incivility in the tourism and hospitality context: when employees mistreat customers, the management should empower the victim to avoid the spillover effect that causes observers to engage in revenge-seeking behaviors. This finding also contributes to the literature on customer empowerment (Rucker *et al.*, 2012; Wang *et al.*, 2020) by showing how empowering fellow customers can influence the behavior of observers.

2. Employee mistreatment in tourism and hospitality service

In tourism and hospitality settings, customers and employees expect respectful behavior, adhering to societal norms (Torres *et al.*, 2017). Having someone break those norms and rules leads to the perception of being mistreated. This mistreatment not only affects the victim but also those who witness it. Observers can feel the victim's devaluation and loss of identity, influencing their attitudes and behaviors toward the perpetrator (Kim and Baker, 2019; Porath *et al.*, 2010,

2011). For example, Wan *et al.*, (2011) found that when observing an employee mistreating a fellow customer, observers were more likely to blame the service provider and have lower satisfaction if the victim is similar (vs. dissimilar) to the observer. Web Appendix A highlights studies that take a third-party perspective.

Furthermore, the literature (e.g., Anderson and Galinsky, 2006; Shin *et al.*, 2023) suggests that customer empowerment may mitigate the negative impact of mistreatment, as perceived power can influence the observer's response. However, it remains unclear whether such observer responses are positive or negative. Although some studies have identified that empowerment reduces revenge-seeking behavior (Li, 2019; Pranić and Roehl, 2013), Antonetti and Crisafulli (2022) recently showed a negative effect and called for more research on the role of customer empowerment in the recovery process. This gap in understanding, coupled with a lack of focus on the observer's perspective, highlights the need for more research and a comprehensive conceptual model.

3. Theoretical foundation and hypotheses

3.1 Appraisal theory in observing employees' mistreatment

This research adopts appraisal theory, which examines how individuals evaluate and cope with events/situations (Cai *et al.*, 2018). In our research, we consider situations in which observers assess the employee-customer interaction. If the behavior is perceived as harmful and conflicting with the observers' goals, it triggers a secondary appraisal. In this phase, the evaluative process encompasses cognitions, responsive behaviors, and/or negative emotions to further integrate the evaluation attributes revealed from the observation to establish a judgement. Furthermore, if injustice still exists, in the final stage, observers evaluate different coping

strategies and select the most suitable ones as their behavioral reaction (Lazarus, 1991; Min and Joireman, 2021). Consequently, the outcome of this appraisal process, initiated with an initial cognition (i.e., primary appraisal) and processed through subsequent cognitive assessments (i.e., secondary appraisal), shapes an observer's behavioral intentions (Cai *et al.*, 2018).

In the context of tourism and hospitality, our model suggests that when employees mistreat customers, observers will view both guilty and innocent employees negatively, triggering revenge-seeking behaviors. However, when mistreated customers are empowered, this reduces observers' revenge-seeking behaviors. The following sections outline the hypotheses that support our conceptual model (Fig. 1).

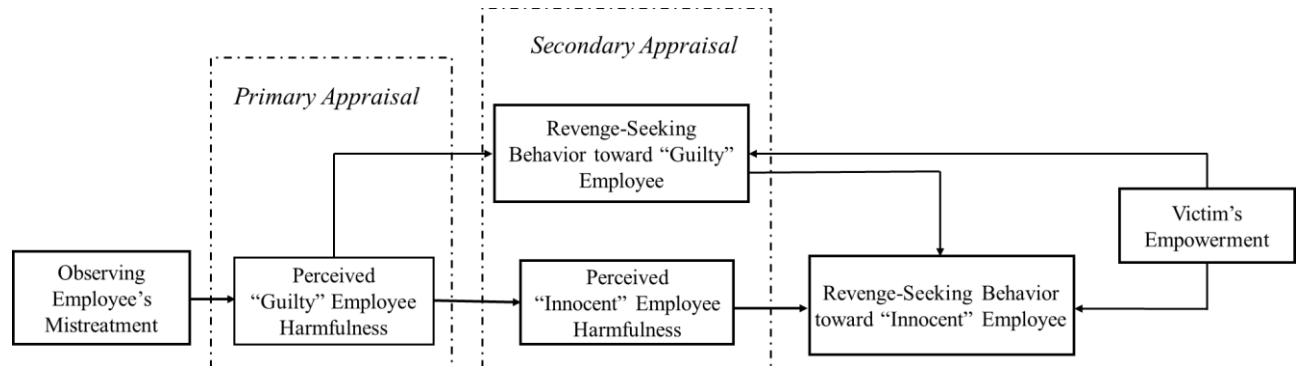


Fig. 1: Conceptual framework (Source: Authors own work).

3.2 Primary appraisal – perception of a guilty employee as harmful

Primary appraisal involves assessing the personal relevance of an event based on beliefs, including moral values and fairness (Cai *et al.*, 2018). In our study, this process focuses on the observer's perception of employee harmfulness. In tourism and hospitality settings, customers expect fair and appropriate treatment from employees (Torres *et al.*, 2017). Building on the idea that all parties should possess a clear understanding of appropriate behavior (Lee *et al.*, 2021), the uncivil behavior of an employee toward a customer not only contradicts that customer's pre-

existing beliefs about how they expect to be treated, but also challenges the observer's own experience. This deviation from the expected norms shapes an observer's perceptions of that employee.

When an employee mistreats a customer, observers view this as a violation of social norms, leading to harm to the victim (Rotman *et al.*, 2017; Schein and Gray, 2015), reinforcing negative deductive inferences (Porath *et al.*, 2010). In the realm of harm pluralism, we employ the term "harmful" to signify the recognition of diverse forms of harm. This may encompass breaches of fairness, loyalty, or purity, underlining the legitimacy of these distinct facets of harm (Rotman *et al.*, 2017). Observing mistreatment challenges the observer's expectations of appropriate behavior, leading them to view the responsible employee as a significant source of harm.:

H1: Observing an employee mistreating a customer leads the observer to perceive the guilty employee as harmful.

3.3 Secondary appraisal – perception of innocent employees as harmful and revenge-seeking toward a guilty employee

Secondary appraisal involves evaluating coping options, resources, and prospects in response to an event (Lazarus, 1991). It helps individuals rationalize possible responses, considering factors like their internalized moral code and group norms. The intensity of this appraisal varies based on the event's characteristics and social context (Cai *et al.*, 2018).

In our context, we propose that witnessing an employee mistreating a customer not only fosters a perception of the employee as guilty, but also negatively affects the perception of other,

innocent employees. We ground this prediction in social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974) and investigate the possibility of a “harm spillover effect.” We define the “harm spillover effect” as a phenomenon in which witnessing just one instance of harmful behavior by a particular entity taints individuals’ views of other entities within the same group, making these “others” appear harmful as well.

Social identity theory posits that people categorize themselves and others into in-groups and out-groups based on shared characteristics (Lee *et al.*, 2021; Tajfel, 1974). This categorization can lead to in-group bias, where individuals prefer their own group over others (Lee *et al.*, 2021). In our context, observing customer-employee interactions can have profound implications for the observer’s perceptions and group affiliations (Cai *et al.*, 2018). Specifically, when a customer observes an employee behaving uncivilly toward another customer, it can lead to a sense of shared group identity among the customers. This dynamic can cause the observing customer to align more closely with fellow customers, viewing them as part of their own in-group. Conversely, all employees might then be viewed as part of an out-group.

Directly relevant to our research is also the notion that people often see their in-group as diverse, but the out-group as homogeneous (Simon, 1992). This bias can cause observers to perceive an employee’s mistreatment as a characteristic of the entire employee group. In line with this, Chou *et al.* (2022) demonstrate that people who feel betrayed by a group member are less likely to trust others from that group. Similarly, we argue that witnessing service failure can lead observers to attribute blame to the entire establishment (Schumann *et al.*, 2014), reinforcing the harm spillover effect. Thus, the evaluation of a guilty employee can negatively affect the perceptions of their co-workers. Wan and Wyer (2019) state that when consumers witness service failure, they may hold the service provider responsible, and this attribution of blame can

subsequently affect their perception of the entire establishment. Therefore, the “harm spillover effect” would lead to the perception that other innocent employees within the same service organization are also harmful. We hypothesize:

H2: Perceiving a guilty employee as harmful also leads the observer to perceive an innocent employee as harmful.

Secondary appraisal involves evaluating potential responses to an event or situation, including decisions on how to react to harm. The inclination to punish those who cause harm is widespread, even when there is no direct personal transgression (Cai *et al.*, 2018). In the context of service failure, revenge-seeking behavior is a central theme in the literature. Customers have been shown to engage in various vengeful activities directed at a service firm, including giving negative word of mouth (McColl-Kennedy *et al.*, 2009), switching behavior (Strizhakova *et al.*, 2012), and punishing employees (Komarova Loureiro *et al.*, 2018). According to appraisal theory, these revenge behaviors serve as coping mechanisms for observers. Viewing a guilty employee as harmful justifies moral judgment, which is typically based on quick, automatic evaluations. It is only in situations where there is no evident moral intuition concerning the appropriateness of a behavior, such as in more intricate ethical dilemmas, that a more deliberate form of moral reasoning may become necessary.

In the context of punishing a guilty employee following their mistreatment of a customer, perceived harmfulness is likely to form such an intuition and signal that punishment must be used in responding to the offense (Karabas *et al.*, 2019). Witnessing injustice can threaten the observer’s sense of self, making them feel like a potential victim and triggering concerns about

their personal and social identities (Skitka, 2003). Research has shown that when in-group members are harmed by an out-group, it induces a social identity threat, leading to a heightened desire for retaliation (Doosje and Haslam, 2005). Therefore:

H3: Perceiving a guilty employee as harmful increases the observer's revenge-seeking behavior toward the guilty employee.

3.4 Outcome of appraisal – revenge-seeking behavior toward an innocent employee

Individuals engage in revenge-seeking behaviors for two main reasons. First, they seek retribution against wrongdoers to ensure justice. Second, they may punish innocent individuals simply due to their affiliation with a group that includes the actual offender, a phenomenon known as collective punishment (Falomir-Pichastor *et al.*, 2007). As previously noted, out-groups are often viewed as a homogeneous set of similar individuals. This heightened perception of homogeneity within the out-group increases the perception of collective responsibility for the group's actions and wrongdoings, thereby giving rise to the act of collective punishment (Pereira *et al.*, 2015). This perception of a group as highly cohesive and similar can also lead to increased support for collective punishment when some members of the group commit an offense (Pereira and Van Prooijen, 2018). Furthermore, collective punishment may occur by deeming innocent out-group members as "guilty by association" (Komarova Loureiro *et al.*, 2018), wherein the innocent members are perceived as bearing responsibility solely due to their affiliation with the out-group.

In the context of mistreatment in tourism and hospitality, we argue that the perceived harmfulness of the perpetrator group (employees) influences the likelihood of displaced revenge.

The greater the perception of harm from the perpetrator group, the more likely observers are to direct retaliatory actions to the entire group, regardless of individual involvement in the original offense (Stenstrom *et al.*, 2008). Consequently, observers of mistreatment may, driven by a “harm spillover effect,” exhibit a heightened inclination to seek retribution against innocent employees, just as they seek retribution against a guilty employee:

H4: The positive effect of observing an employee mistreating a customer on an observer’s revenge-seeking behavior toward an innocent employee is serially mediated by the perception of the guilty employee as harmful (+) and by the perception of the innocent employee as harmful (+).

H5: The positive effect of observing an employee mistreating a customer on an observer’s revenge-seeking behavior toward an innocent employee is serially mediated by the perception of the guilty employee as harmful (+) and revenge-seeking behavior toward the guilty employee (+).

3.5 Impacts of a victim’s empowerment on the observer’s perception

Prior research highlights that when observing mistreatment, empowering the vulnerable party (i.e., the victim) could shape the observer’s reactions to the mistreatment (Ng *et al.*, 2020). Power refers to a psychological state of “*perceived asymmetric control such that one individual has, or feels as if he or she has, more or less control relative to another*” (Rucker *et al.*, 2012, p. 354). Power influences individuals’ evaluation of a situation and shapes their actions (Rucker and Galinsky, 2016).

In a service recovery context, Sembada *et al.*, (2016) suggest that empowering customers as a recovery strategy following a service failure reduces the likelihood of their revenge-seeking behaviors. Therefore, customer empowerment could be leveraged as an effective recovery strategy to reduce revenge-seeking behaviors (Li, 2019; Pranić and Roehl, 2013). However, recent research highlights that customer empowerment could also backfire since it could enhance the perception of manipulative intent (Antonetti and Crisafulli, 2022). Applied to our context, when observers witness mistreatment, their response toward the employee is influenced by how empowered they perceive the victim to be (Cranham and Carroll, 2003). If the observer believes the victim has sufficient power to address the mistreatment, they are less likely to seek retribution. However, if the victim is seen as powerless, the observer may engage in revenge-seeking behavior to restore justice (Bone and Raihani, 2015). This suggests that victim empowerment can either mitigate or intensify observers' desire to punish the guilty employee:

H6: The observer's perception of the victim's empowerment reduces the observer's revenge-seeking behavior toward the guilty employee.

Observers may seek revenge against innocent employees due to the perception that they are harmful by association, viewing punishment as a way to restore justice. However, power imbalances influence reactions (Bone and Raihani, 2015). Victim empowerment can mitigate these negative reactions (Karabas *et al.* 2019). Perceiving an innocent employee as harmful is just one aspect of the cognitive influences involved in secondary appraisal. Specifically, observers' perception of the victim's empowerment also plays a crucial role as a cognitive factor in this process (Nascimento *et al.*, 2023). This perception helps observers shape their reactions to

prevent potential harm. When observers perceive that the victim has been empowered, it reduces their moral justification for punishing an innocent employee:

H7: The observer's perception of the victim's empowerment reduces the observer's revenge-seeking behavior toward an innocent employee.

4. Study 1: Effects of observing an employee mistreating a fellow customer

4.1 Objective and procedure

Study 1¹ focused on examining the effects of observing an employee mistreating a fellow customer on observers' perception of guilty (H1) and innocent (H2) employees, which further influences their revenge-seeking behaviors toward the guilty (H3) and an innocent employee (H4 and H5).

A sample of 151 UK adults from Prolific participated in Study 1 ($M_{\text{age}} = 40.61$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 14.11$, 61.1% females). The participants, who were all put in the role of observers of an interaction, were assigned to a mistreatment or a non-mistreatment condition randomly. We identified a hotel setting as the context for investigating the effect of observing mistreatment because it is an environment in which employees have been found to mistreat customers (Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara *et al.*, 2013).

All participants were asked to imagine that they were staying at a hotel where they witnessed a conversation between a receptionist and a fellow customer. In the mistreatment condition, the receptionist *ignores the customer and uses unfriendly language to talk to that*

¹ The study received ethics approval before data collection and complies with all regulations for research involving human participants. All participants provided informed consent after being informed about the study's purpose, data confidentiality, storage, use, and any associated risks.

individual. In the non-mistreatment condition, the receptionist uses more friendly and supportive language to respond to the customer. Participants then have some interactions with other (innocent) employees (see Web Appendix B for the scenarios).

After reading the scenario, participants were asked to answer an item as a manipulation check of mistreatment (“The employee mistreats the customer”). Participants then rated the perceived harmfulness of the guilty employee (5-item, $\alpha=.92$; adopted from Piazza *et al.*, 2014); perceived harmfulness of an innocent employee (5-item, $\alpha=.83$; adopted from Piazza *et al.*, 2014), and indicated their revenge-seeking behavior toward the guilty employee (3-item, $\alpha=.93$; adopted from Grégoire *et al.*, 2010) and an innocent employee (3-item, $\alpha=.91$; adopted from Grégoire *et al.*, 2010). Next, participants provided demographic information. All variables were measured on 7-point Likert scales. The measurement items are detailed in Web Appendix C.

Participants were also asked to rate the realism of the scenario on a single-item realism scale adapted from Hoang and Tran (2022). Results showed that participants rated the mistreatment and non-mistreatment scenarios as equally realistic ($M_{\text{mistreatment}}=5.13$, $SD_{\text{mistreatment}}=1.29$; $M_{\text{nonmistreatment}}=5.24$, $SD_{\text{nonmistreatment}}=1.06$; $F(1, 149)=.28$; $p=.59$) and that the standard of realism was high with the mean of realism being statistically higher than the midpoint (4.0) of the realism scale ($M=5.19$, $SD=1.18$; $t(150)=12.28$, $p<.001$).

Furthermore, ANOVA showed that participants perceived the employee in the mistreatment condition to have significantly mistreated the customer compared to the employee in the control condition ($M_{\text{mistreatment}}=4.88$, $SD_{\text{mistreatment}}=1.62$; $M_{\text{nonmistreatment}}=2.99$, $SD_{\text{nonmistreatment}}=1.62$; $F(1, 149)=51.30$, $p<.001$). This indicates that the manipulation worked as intended.

4.2 Results

The ANOVA results indicated that compared to participants who were told that they had observed mistreatment, those who did not observe mistreatment rated the guilty employee as significantly less harmful ($M_{\text{mistreatment}}=5.86$, $SD_{\text{mistreatment}}=.97$; $M_{\text{nonmistreatment}}=3.30$, $SD_{\text{nonmistreatment}}=1.08$; $F(1, 149)=233.94$, $p<.001$), supporting H1.

Our regression result showed a positive association between the perceived harmfulness of the guilty employee and the perceived harmfulness of an innocent employee ($\beta=.19$, $p<.001$), supporting H2. Web Appendix D shows a comparison of all the study means. Furthermore, the finding supported our prediction (H3), showing a positive association between perceived harmfulness and revenge-seeking behavior toward the guilty employee ($\beta=.56$, $p<.001$).

Furthermore, we tested the serial mediating effects of perceived guilty employee harmfulness and perceived innocent employee harmfulness on the relationship between observing mistreatment and revenge-seeking behavior toward an innocent employee using PROCESS, Model 6. Results indicated significant indirect effects of observing mistreatment on revenge-seeking behavior toward an innocent employee, mediated via both perceived guilty employee harmfulness and perceived innocent employee harmfulness ($\beta=.23$, 95% CI=[.06; .45]), supporting H4 (see Web Appendix E).

Second, we conducted a full mediation model test whereby perceived guilty employee harmfulness and revenge-seeking behavior toward the guilty employee were highlighted as serial mediators (PROCESS, Model 6). The results showed significant indirect effects of observing mistreatment on revenge-seeking behavior toward an innocent employee, via both perceived

guilty employee harmfulness and perceived innocent employee harmfulness ($\beta=.38$, 95% CI=[.12; .70]), supporting H5 (see Web Appendix E).

4.4 Results and discussion of Study 1 and its replication

The results from Study 1 and its replication² highlight the importance of the harm spillover effect: observing mistreatment not only has an impact on the observer's negative attitudes and behaviors toward the guilty employee but also extends to an innocent employee. This finding suggests that one appraisal spills over to subsequent appraisals that are not necessarily related.

5. Study 2: Minimizing revenge-seeking behaviors: the role of victim empowerment

5.1 Objective and procedure

Study 2 aimed to examine whether empowering the victim of mistreatment would minimize observers' revenge-seeking behaviors toward both guilty and innocent employees after observing the mistreatment (H6 & H7).

We conducted a single-factor (victim empowerment: low vs. high) between-subject scenario-based experiment. We recruited 249 UK participants ($M_{age}=42.92$; $SD_{age}=14.14$, 62.70% female) using Prolific. Participants were asked to imagine that they were staying at a hotel where they witnessed a conversation between a receptionist and a fellow customer. All participants were shown a scenario in which an employee mistreats a fellow customer. The mistreatment scenario is the same as that used in Study 1. Thereafter, participants were randomly assigned to one of two scenarios. In the high victim empowerment condition, participants were

² The replication study is reported in Web Appendix F.

presented with information that the hotel manager approaches the victim telling them that they apologize for what happened and, as a customer, the victim has the power to determine what the hotel does. In the low victim empowerment condition, the hotel manager just apologizes for what happened. This method of activating perceived power is in line with Sembada *et al.*, (2016) (see the detailed stimuli in Web Appendix B). Participants then answered questions based on a manipulation check of victim empowerment (3-item, $\alpha=.83$; adopted from Sembada *et al.*, 2016). They then answered questions about guilty and innocent employees' perceived harmfulness and their own revenge-seeking behaviors toward them, similar to those used in Study 1.

The manipulation of victim empowerment was successful ($M_{\text{empower}}=4.70$, $SD_{\text{empower}}=1.09$; $M_{\text{noempower}}=4.33$, $SD_{\text{noempower}}=1.13$; $F(1, 247)=6.49$, $p=.011$). Participants perceived the scenarios as realistic and no differences were found across conditions ($M_{\text{empower}}=5.35$, $SD_{\text{empower}}=1.21$; $M_{\text{noempower}}=5.20$, $SD_{\text{noempower}}=1.28$; $F(1, 247)=.82$, $p=.36$). A sample *t*-test confirmed that the mean realism score was greater than the scale mid-point of 4 ($M=5.28$, $SD=1.26$; $t(249)=16.03$, $p<.001$), confirming that the scenarios were seen as realistic.

5.2 Results and discussion

The ANOVA results demonstrated that participants exposed to the high victim empowerment condition showed lower levels of revenge-seeking behavior toward the guilty employee compared to those in the low victim empowerment condition ($M_{\text{empower}}=2.55$, $SD_{\text{empower}}=1.46$; $M_{\text{notempower}}=3.16$, $SD_{\text{notempower}}=1.69$; $F(1, 247)=9.34$, $p=.002$), supporting H6.

The results further showed that subjects exposed to the high victim empowerment condition exhibited lower levels of revenge-seeking behavior toward an innocent employee

compared to those in the low victim empowerment condition ($M_{\text{empower}}=1.61$, $SD_{\text{empower}}=1.03$; $M_{\text{notempower}}=2.05$, $SD_{\text{notempower}}=1.50$; $F(1, 247)=7.61$, $p=.006$), supporting H7.

The results of Study 2 highlight the importance of empowering the victim following mistreatment by an employee to minimize observers' revenge-seeking behaviors toward both guilty and innocent employees.

6. Study 3: Exploring the black sheep effect

6.1 Objective and procedure

We previously suggested that observers may align more readily with mistreated customers, viewing them as in-group members, while perceiving employees as out-group members. This dynamic reflects broader societal patterns of discrimination, dehumanization, and stigmatization in intergroup conflicts. To expand on these findings, the experiment examined how group affiliations, such as ethnicity, influence revenge-seeking behavior toward guilty in-group or out-group employees in cases of mistreatment.

The tendency to favor in-group over out-group members is common but not universal (e.g., Mullen *et al.*, 1992). In cases where in-group members engage in norm-violating behavior, they may be judged more harshly than out-group members—a phenomenon known as the black sheep effect (Jetten and Hornsey, 2014). This effect refers to the stricter punishment of deviant in-group members, especially when the group's image is at stake (Marques and Paez, 1994). Research shows that while in-group members are generally viewed more favorably, this does not apply to those seen as anti-normative (Abrams *et al.*, 2000). In-group deviants are judged more harshly to protect the group's positive image, particularly when their deviance targets an out-

group member, as this damages the group's reputation (e.g., Eidelman and Biernat, 2003; Travaglino *et al.*, 2014).

Applying this insight to the hospitality and tourism context, we examined interactions between frontline employees and mistreated customers, focusing on natural social group dynamics. Specifically, we explored responses of White British adults observing mistreatment by either an in-group (White British) or out-group (Pakistani) employee toward an in-group (White British) or out-group (Pakistani) customer. Using a 2×2 between-subjects design, we manipulated victim group membership (in-group vs. out-group) and employee group membership (in-group vs. out-group). Our sample included 281 White British adults ($M_{age}=41.21$; $SD_{age}=12.22$, 60.85% female) recruited via Prolific. An attention check was included, with survey termination for participants who failed it.

6.2 Manipulation of the independent variables

We used the mistreatment scenario and hotel context from Study 1, manipulating the victim's and guilty employee's group memberships. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two victim conditions: in-group ("a fellow Briton, a white individual with a familiar British accent") or out-group ("a person of Pakistani descent with a recognizable Pakistani accent"). Similarly, the guilty employee was described as either in-group (white British) or out-group (Pakistani). Full scenarios are in Web Appendix G.

6.3 Measures

We used manipulation checks to ensure the effectiveness of group membership manipulations. For example, participants rated statements like "The guest was white British" on

a 7-point Likert scale (1 = "strongly disagree"; 7 = "strongly agree"). For the dependent variables, we measured perceived harmfulness of the guilty employee ($\alpha = .84$), revenge-seeking behavior toward the guilty employee ($\alpha = .91$), and emotional hostility toward the guilty employee ($\alpha = .84$). Additionally, several control variables were included: firm's blame ($\alpha = .60$), situation severity ($\alpha = .85$), perceived unfairness ($\alpha = .60$), and group identification ($\alpha = .88$). A single-item measure was used to assess blame specifically attributed to the receptionist (guilty employee). All measures are reported in Web Appendix C. The measures appeared in randomized order, and participants subsequently reported their age and gender.

6.4 Results and discussion

We confirmed the success of the group membership manipulations, the realism of the scenarios, and the strength of participants' identification with their own group (see Web Appendix H).

Perceptions of the guilty employee's harmfulness and emotional hostility were analyzed using 2×2 (victim group membership: in-group vs. out-group) $\times 2$ (guilty employee group membership: in-group vs. out-group) between-subjects ANCOVAs, controlling for the firm's blame, blame attributed to the guilty employee, situation severity. Full results and details for these dependent variables are provided in Web Appendix I. In sum, participants perceived the guilty employee as more harmful and felt greater emotional hostility when the victim was an out-group member (vs in-group). Emotional hostility was also higher when the guilty employee was an in-group member. No significant interactions between victim and employee group membership were observed.

Similar 2×2 ANCOVA was conducted to examine revenge-seeking behavior toward the guilty employee. Results revealed a significant main effect of the victim group membership, with participants reporting higher levels of revenge-seeking behavior towards the guilty employee when the victim was from the out-group ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 1.65$) compared to the in-group ($M = 2.38$, $SD = 1.39$), $F(1, 272) = 11.23$, $p < .001$. There was a significant main effect of guilty employee group membership on revenge-seeking behavior. Participants reported higher levels of revenge-seeking behavior when the guilty employee was from the in-group ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 1.64$), compared to the out-group ($M = 2.41$, $SD = 1.42$), $F(1, 272) = 8.68$, $p < .01$. A significant interaction was found between the victim group membership and the guilty employee group membership, $F(1, 272) = 7.26$, $p < .01$ (see Fig 2).

Followed up pairwise comparison with an LSD test revealed that, when the victim was from the out-group, participants reported higher levels of revenge-seeking behavior toward an in-

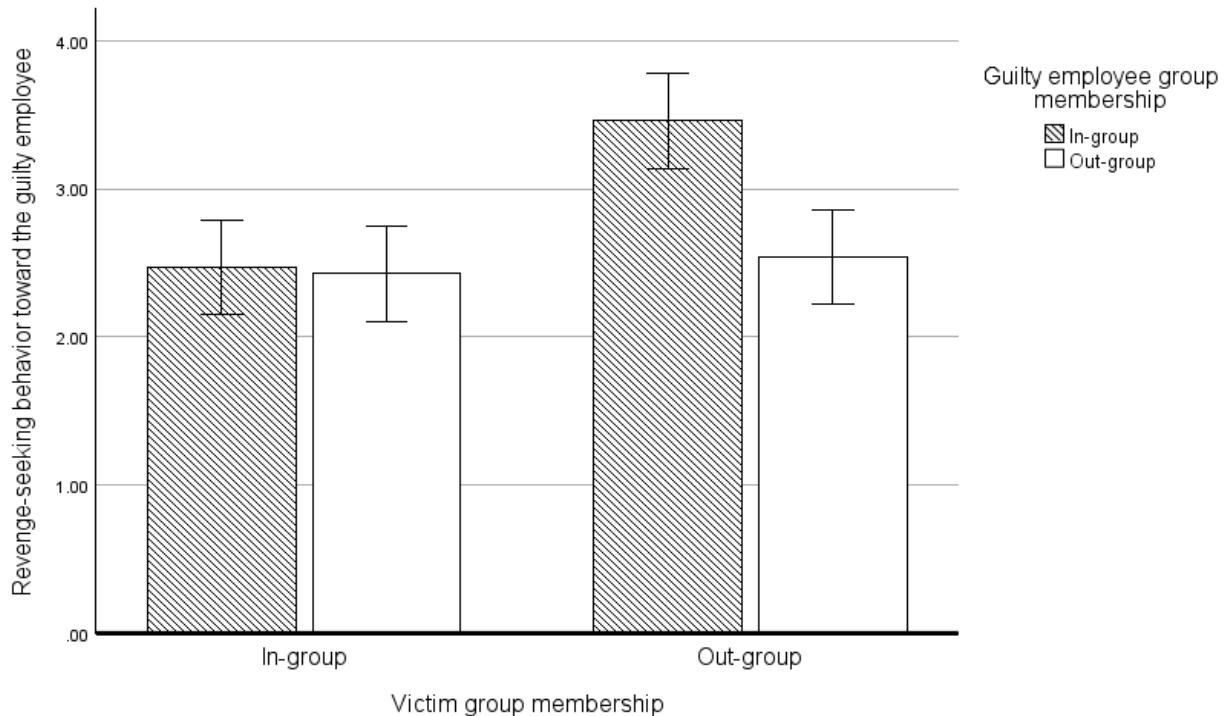


Fig 2. Revenge-seeking behavior towards the guilty employee as a function of victim group membership and guilty employee group membership (Source: Authors own work).

group guilty employee ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.57$) than toward an out-group guilty employee ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 1.53$; $F(1, 272) = 15.69$, $p < .001$). In contrast, when the victim was from the in-group, there was no significant difference in reported levels of revenge-seeking behavior toward the in-group ($M = 2.44$, $SD = 1.48$) versus the out-group guilty employee ($M = 2.32$, $SD = 1.31$; $F(1, 272) = 0.04$, $p = .84$).

The results of Study 3 demonstrate that group membership shapes observers' responses to norm violations in hospitality. White British participants viewed an employee as more harmful and expressed greater hostility when the victim was Pakistani (out-group) versus White British (in-group). Consistent with the black sheep effect, they sought more revenge against an in-group guilty employee, especially when the victim was out-group.

7. General discussion

The present work departs from previous studies on mistreatment by taking the observer of the mistreatment in focus. By integrating the appraisal process with SIT, we examined observers' revenge-seeking behaviors toward guilty and innocent employees, uncovering a harm spillover effect. Observing mistreatment influenced negative attitudes and behaviors not only toward the guilty employees but also towards innocent ones. Empowering the mistreated customer reduced observers' revenge-seeking behaviors toward both guilty and innocent employees. Additionally, we demonstrated that shared group membership between the observing customer and the guilty employee led to stricter punishment for in-group offenders. Web Appendix J summarizes the findings of our studies. Our inquiries result in several theoretical and managerial contributions.

7.1 Theoretical contributions

Findings from our research contribute to the literature on incivility, tourism and hospitality, and customer-employee interaction in several ways. *First*, to the best of our knowledge, our research offers the first empirical examination of the consequences of employee mistreatment of customers in different settings in tourism and hospitality practices through the perspective of observing customers. We contribute to tourism and hospitality research, which primarily examines the impact of customer mistreatment on employees' well-being (Boukis *et al.*, 2020; Shi and Huang, 2022), by exploring the observer's perspective. Building on appraisal theory and SIT, we explain how witnessing employee mistreatment of customers drives revenge-seeking behavior toward both guilty and innocent employees. While customer behavior is often self-focused (Folger and Greenberg, 2001), our findings highlight the emergence of other-focused social concerns in such scenarios, offering new insights into the social dynamics of customer-employee interactions (Boukis *et al.*, 2020; Shi and Huang, 2022).

Second, this research advances the literature on spillover effects in tourism and hospitality by documenting a harmful spillover effect that influences collective punishment. While prior studies have explored spillover effects between employees' work and non-work environments (Leung *et al.*, 2023), customer and employee incivility (Chen *et al.*, 2021), or across brand portfolios (Wang *et al.*, 2020), our findings focus on inter-group dynamics (Chou *et al.*, 2022). Specifically, we show how harm perceptions can spill over from one individual to their entire social group. Witnessing a single employee mistreating a customer can tarnish the reputation of all employees within the organization, regardless of their actions, demonstrating how wrongdoing by one group member can unfairly extend to others based on shared group identity. Supporting Simon's (1992) concept of out-group homogeneity, we found that

employees are often viewed not as individuals but as a unified collective, indistinguishable in their group identity within service contexts.

Our findings show that perceptions of harmfulness escalate revenge-seeking behaviors toward both guilty and innocent employees, driving collective punishment. Aligning with previous studies (e.g., Falomir-Pichastor *et al.*, 2007; Pereira and van Prooijen, 2018), negative sanctions in the form of revenge-seeking behaviors from an external agent can extend to an entire group, including innocent individuals, for the misdeed of a few group members. Our research adds to Komarova Loureiro *et al.* (2018) by demonstrating that collective punishment may occur by deeming innocent out-group members as harmful by association. Therefore, our findings highlight the potential for innocent individuals to be unfairly punished due to the actions of a few group members. By examining the harmful spillover mechanism of punishment, we echo the call for more research on how observing a service experience in tourism and hospitality settings affects customer behaviors (Cai *et al.*, 2018).

Our findings further demonstrate the “black sheep effect” (Marques and Paez, 1994), where shared group membership between the observing customer and the guilty employee leads to harsher punishment for deviant in-group members. This study extends the black sheep effect to a hospitality and tourism context, showing how social group affiliations shape customer-employee interactions during mistreatment. Consistent with prior research (e.g., Su *et al.*, 2023; Travaglino *et al.*, 2014), individuals punished in-group deviants more severely, with this effect intensifying when the in-group deviant targeted an out-group member, reflecting a need to protect the in-group’s image (Eidelman and Biernat, 2003). Additionally, in-group members perceived the guilty employee as more harmful and expressed greater hostility when the victim was an out-group member, possibly due to individuals from the majority group

overcompensating to avoid appearing biased against the minority out-group (e.g., Trawalter *et al.*, 2012).

Third, our study contributes to the debate on the role of customer empowerment in the recovery process (Antonetti and Crisafulli, 2022; Sembada *et al.*, 2016) and extends the discussion on remedies and preventive measures (Cugueró-Escofet *et al.*, 2014). Although there is evidence that empowering customers minimizes their dissatisfaction following a service failure (Sembada *et al.*, 2016), recent research has shown that customer empowerment could backfire as it enhances customers' inference of being manipulative (Antonetti and Crisafulli, 2022). Our finding answers the call for more research on the role of customer empowerment during the recovery process, especially in tourism and hospitality settings, by focusing on the effect of the customer's empowerment as a recovery strategy that minimizes observers' revenge-seeking behavior. Our finding aligns with literature showing that third-party punishments are harsher for those who harm vulnerable victims who evoke empathy, compassion, and likability (Pfattheicher *et al.*, 2019; Schwartz *et al.*, 2022).

7.2 Managerial contributions

Service providers in the tourism and hospitality industry, such as restaurants, hotels, and airlines, need to pay particular attention to employees who mistreat customers. To mitigate these effects, firms should invest in training programs on civility, morality, and ethics to standardize service processes. Managers should actively monitor employee behavior and its impact. Our research emphasizes the importance of understanding observers' perceptions, which can reshape service evaluations and restorative actions. Firms should gather customer feedback on

harmfulness through ongoing surveys and promote a culture of mutual support within teams to minimize the effects of incidents.

Our study reveals that consumers who witness mistreatment may seek revenge against both guilty and innocent employees due to a shared group identity. Therefore, service recovery efforts should address not only the victims but also the observers. Service recovery actions should be communicated transparently to observers, enhancing fairness perceptions and reducing negative reactions.

Our findings imply that service recovery must not be limited solely to the customers involved in the service failure (i.e., the victims), but also extended to those who witness it. Service recovery actions on social occasions have ripple effects (Yuksel *et al.*, 2006). Firms that wish to minimize observers' revenge-seeking behaviors should try to empower the victim during the recovery process. After all, empowering victims enables observers to feel less motivated to take further actions in order to restore justice in such situations. More importantly, it is essential to showcase the positive attitude of the service provider when it comes to incident handling – instead of hiding from the incident, we advise service providers to confront the issues if such an incident is discussed in public.

Managers can implement training programs that address the “black sheep effect” observed in our findings, where customers tend to judge ingroup employees more harshly, particularly when an outgroup guest is involved. By increasing staff awareness of how social group affiliations shape customer responses, employees can navigate interactions with diverse customer groups more effectively and minimize behaviors that may trigger heightened judgments or hostility. Additionally, it is crucial to foster a deeper understanding of both intergroup and intragroup dynamics. This understanding should extend beyond the main actors in

each interaction to also encompass third parties and their social group memberships, as these affiliations significantly influence perceptions, reactions, and overall group interactions.

Finally, hospitality firms can benefit from the findings of this study by providing psychological protection and support for innocent employees. Our study evidenced that observers may seek revenge on innocent employees after witnessing mistreatment by another colleague. Creating psychological safety can help maintain employee morale, even when employees are unfairly targeted by customers. This approach not only shields employees from undue stress but also promotes a healthier and more resilient workplace.

7.3 Limitations and future research

Despite the contributions described above, our research has several limitations. First, the research focuses on the effect of observing employee mistreatment of a customer but does not explore different types of mistreatments. Future studies could investigate how various forms of mistreatment (e.g., being ignored or humiliated) affect observers' reactions (Boukis *et al.* 2020). Second, while we explore how providers can minimize revenge behaviors, we do not examine boundary conditions that could strengthen or weaken these effects. Future research could consider factors like the observer's relationship with the service provider. Research on service recovery has shown that relationship quality influences how customers react to service failures (e.g., employee mistreatment) (Grégoire *et al.*, 2009). Future research could consider the observer's relationship with the service provider and explore how it influences their reactions to employee mistreatment. Third, while our findings support the black sheep effect, we did not manipulate the group membership of innocent employees, leaving room to explore a "black

600 sheep” spillover effect. Future research could investigate why revenge-seeking behavior might
601 extend to in-group innocent employees, considering factors like empathy or perceived threat.

602 Moreover, our study shows that victim empowerment can reduce revenge-seeking
603 behaviors, but future research could examine whether empowering the observer influences their
604 reactions. Additionally, incorporating service recovery efforts (e.g., apology with compensation;
605 Joireman *et al.*, 2013) might impact observers’ perceptions of harmfulness and revenge-seeking
606 behaviors (Joireman *et al.*, 2013). Finally, experiencing and observing mistreatment in the
607 service setting might bring ripple effects to the customer perception and shape their future
608 service experience and decision-making. Therefore, future research could take a longitudinal
609 approach to identify and differentiate the long-term effects of experiencing and observing
610 mistreatment in shaping customers’ coping behaviors in the service setting.

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