

When being hospitable hurts (staff experiences of bullying from hotel guests)

Staff
experiences of
bullying

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Abstract

Purpose – The hospitality industry is one of Ghana’s key economic contributors. It is an industry that has significant indigenous investment. The sector also brings in foreign exchange for Ghana. In 2019, it generated \$325 m through tourist visits. This makes the hospitality industry critical for the attraction of foreign direct investments. The research was therefore aimed at examining the business environment of the hospitality industry for evidence of negative factors that can hamper its greater contribution to the attainment of Goal 8 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the UN such as guest-bullying and the incivility in hospitality occupations.

Design/methodology/approach – A convenience sampling method was used to select 346 samples out of the accessible 3,500 targeted population from 38 hotels in the capital city of Ghana, Accra, comprising of junior to senior employees of various departments. The questionnaires were scripted from a paper-based to digital format supported by the Opine software installed on tablets and smartphones, to enable complete adherence to all coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) safety protocols. The study used a regression to ascertain the relationships between the dependent variables and the independent variables.

Findings – The study found the “Level of Permissiveness for Guests” positively and significantly “encouraged” guests to bully staff, while “Management and Staff Laxity” negatively but significantly explained guest bullying behaviour.

Originality/value – The study makes the first attempt in context to shed light on workplace bullying which represents one of the main factors that can inhibit or erode any gains or attempts to foster the achievement of Goal 8 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the UN which is to create “Decent Work and Economic Growth”.

Keywords Hotels, Bullying, Hospitality, Sustainable development goals, Guests, Decent work

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The hospitality industry is one of Ghana’s key economic contributors (Ampofo, 2020). It is an industry that has significant indigenous investment. Evidently, Ghana’s economic prosperity hinges heavily on the aggregate performance of its indigenous businesses. Closely tied to the success of businesses, is the country’s ability to create the enabling investment climate to power the economy for growth in line with Goal 8 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the UN.

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals were promulgated by global leaders on January 1, 2016 and implemented effective September 2015. The 17 goals (SDGs) were crafted to guide the UN towards a 15-year development agenda known as 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Goal 8 is captioned “Decent work and economic growth” with decent work defined as “opportunities for everyone to get work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration” (UN, 2021). Goal 8 has among other targets:

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8.5 “By 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value”

8.8 “Protecting labour rights and promoting safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, in particular women migrants, and those in precarious employment” by 2020.

This makes the hospitality industry a critical sector for the attraction of foreign direct investments, which is quintessential in increasing the capacity of local businesses to make significant contributions to the country’s Gross Domestic Product.

The hospitality sector also harnesses the benefits of tourism by bringing in foreign exchange for Ghana. According to the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Creative Arts (MoTCCA) of Ghana, the sector contributes 4.8% to Ghana’s GDP annually and generated \$325 m to Ghana’s GDP in 2019 (ILO, 2020). This is an indication of the increasing significance of the hospitality sector. Some of the key players in hospitality are the hotels and related service providers.

In spite of the significance of the hospitality industry as a whole and hotels in particular, there is evidence about how guests, especially international tourists, take undue advantage of the proverbial hospitality of Ghanaians (Ghanaweb, 2021; Yamoah, 2015) and abuse, and in some cases, sexually harass the staff. Unfortunately, empirical evidence to support the above is lacking thus relegating these stories to the rumour chamber. The ultimate aim of this research is therefore to examine the business environment of the hospitality industry and the level of civility in hospitality occupations and based on findings of the research output, make proposals for policy development and implementation. The study will provide evidence within context to support claims made in the media and via the grapevine that hotel guests bully staff, identify the predictors of guest bullying in Ghanaian hotels and propose solutions to this enigma in Ghanaian hotels.

Whereas bullying behaviour and research into the phenomenon has in the past focused primarily on inter-staff relations, research interest in the shift from inter-staff bullying to client/guest–staff bullying has seen a steady rise with guests being found more and more to be the culprits of bullying especially in the service industry. Consequently, several researchers have trumpeted the call for policy to deal with customer-originated workplace bullying in the hospitality industry in countries such as the UK (Guerrier and Adib, 2000); Australia (Bratuskins *et al.*, 2013; Good and Cooper, 2014, 2016; Kensbock *et al.*, 2015); China (Liu *et al.*, 2014); New Zealand (Poulston, 2008), Taiwan (Liu-Ming, 2014; McDonald, 2012; Poulston, 2008), etc. However, though the hospitality industry in Ghana has spanned several years, there is a woeful dearth of research into guest-bullying behaviour and how it affects organisational outcomes, business performance as well as its impact on the proverbial Ghanaian hospitality (Ghanaweb, 2021; Yamoah, 2015).

Hence, the study makes the first attempt in context to shed light on workplace bullying which represents one of the main factors that can inhibit or erode any gains or attempts to foster the achievement of SDG 8 in the hospitality industry. The overarching aim of SDG 8 is “Decent Work and Economic Growth”. Decent work is found in an environment where staff are protected from abuse and where their voice is given a platform (Burchell *et al.*, 2014; Finstad *et al.*, 2019).

Literature review and hypothesis development

Bullying in hotels

Bullying is not a recent managerial concern nor is it an unknown feature in society and the workplace. Very early researchers such as Brodsky (1976), Björkqvist *et al.* (1994) were the

pioneers in putting the spotlight on bullying. The phenomenon has since received attention from academic researchers and international organisations such as the [International Labour Organisation \(ILO\)](#) (2006, 2016). The nature of bullying varies from organisation to organisation but broadly encapsulates all behaviours towards colleagues and or subordinates which are considerable as inimical to their physiological, psychological, social, emotional and even economic wellbeing. Data in the field suggest that bullying may take the form of violence and harassment (verbal and sexual) (Doe, 2016; Doe *et al.*, 2020; Ram, 2018), coercion and embarrassment (Patterson *et al.*, 2018), making offensive remarks about a person, ostracizing a person, withholding information relevant for the effective execution of a person's job, discriminating against the person because of their colour or race or gender; "public criticism, angry tantrums, rudeness, inconsiderate action and coercion" (Bloisi, 2018, p. 250). There are so many other acts of bullying as identified in Einarsen and Raknes (1997) and Hoel *et al.*'s (2001) "Negative Act" scale.

Bullying acts have been found to be prevalent in hotels too. Hotels are the first and last places where tourists, other visitors and local customers stop. Also, tourists and business visitors are the main customers of hotels and restaurants and the primary drivers of their business. Consequently, it is expected that hotels and their staff extend all the courtesies they can afford to make the stay of guests comfortable and profitable. Hotels and restaurants are high service-oriented organisations. Consequently, staff will bend over backwards in the process to make tourists happy and thus guarantee repeat visits. Being hospitable, however, has been found to draw out the worst of behaviours in some guests leading to incidence of harassment and bullying meted out on staff. According to Grandey *et al.* (2007), hotel staff frequently encounter hostile guest behaviour which manifests by way of profanity, derision, shouting and patronizing with sexual harassment being the most dominant bullying act suffered especially by front of office staff (receptionists, room attendants). Other forms of bullying include unwanted sexual attention; spreading of gossip and rumours about you; having insulting or offensive remarks made about your person; being shouted at or being the target of spontaneous anger; intimidating behaviour such as finger pointing, invasion of personal space, shoving, blocking/barring the way; threats of violence or physical abuse; insulting messages, telephone calls, or e-mails; practical jokes carried out by people you do not get on with; insulted/verbally abused by guests, etc (Aslan and Kozak, 2012; Karatepe, 2011; Karatepe *et al.*, 2009; Kensbock *et al.*, 2015).

In addition to the above, the researchers conceive that staff may also suffer the following acts of bullying from guests which form contributions by the researchers. These are making sexual advances/passes; being overly demanding and difficult; badmouthing staff to management; guests making work difficult by refusing to comply with rules and regulations; violently attacking staff; making derogatory or racially-laced remarks; raping or sexually molesting staff while they are providing service; shouting at staff; gossiping about targeted staff with other staff or other guests; intentionally creating more work for staff in their rooms; stealing the hotel's stuff and asking staff to make errands or provide services outside their job roles.

However, isolated incidence of any of the above cannot be construed as bullying. Most researchers in the field agree that Einarsen *et al.*'s (2003) criteria for categorisation of bullying acts or behaviour should be evidenced by the said act or behaviour against the victim being consistent and recurrent (on weekly basis) for a period of half a year. This criterion also suggests that the perpetrator be one and the same person over the six-month period. However, this criterion is weak in not being able to take into consideration situations such as isolated incidences of bullying that may be meted out on staff by guests. Guest stay in hotels is transient and may not last for the period of maturity that Einarsen *et al.*'s (2003) stipulate. Secondly an act of bullying from a guest may not be repeated more than twice, and a guest can use a combination of acts or behaviours to bully a staff.

Again, from the intentionality perspective, it is difficult to be conclusive that a bullying act by a guest was intentional. This is because most hotel guests are out-of-town guests, especially international guests, who come into a community or country to transact business, attend conferences or visit. The exigencies of business such as glitches in transactions, frustrations resulting from excessive bureaucracy and other factors can make guests behave in awkward ways, sometimes as a way of venting their frustrations, without intention to hurt or bully a staff. This resonates with Bloisi's (2018) argument that the traditional views of the bully, as that of a hostile person who has entitlement behaviour, lacks emotional sensitivity towards others and is domineering, may not necessarily fit in with the bully-guest, since there is inadequate weighing criteria of guest character and personality away from their own or home setting. This alibi is however not applicable to guests who may sexually harass hotel staff as the act is often very intentional, calculated and targeted (Nimri *et al.*, 2020).

Nonetheless, since bullying is often defined from the perspective of the victim (Bloisi, 2018) and reasonably so, this research will be based on accepted labelling criteria. Future research into the viability of the Einarsen *et al.* (2003) criterion will be useful to refine the definition of bullying for the hospitality context.

Harassment versus bullying. Harassment has most often been twinned with sexuality and thus referred to as sexual harassment. Matulewicz (2016) therefore defined sexual harassment as "a demeaning practice, one that constitutes a profound affront to the dignity of the employees forced to endure it. By requiring an employee to contend with unwelcome sexual actions or explicit sexual demands, sexual harassment in the workplace attacks the dignity and self-respect of the victim both as an employee and as a human being (p. 130)".

Consequently, sexual harassment tends to take various forms which include but are not limited to the following:

Differential treatment on the bases of sex; use of sexist objects (graphic) to tease or cajole a person, verbal and visual expressions aimed at getting the attention of the victim which are offensive; coarse jests that have sexual overtones; cat calls, physical attempts at touching a part of the body in a carnal way, staring in a pervasive way, coercing or courting a person for sex, directly or indirectly threatening a person with a punitive sanction if they refuse one's sexual advances, etc (La Lopa and Gong, 2020).

Generally speaking, harassment can be classified as a form of bullying in the sense that it involves the perpetrator having more power over the victim to be able to sexually harass the victim although in some cases harassment has been known to involve people of equal power or leverage.

Bullying on the other hand denotes a situation where a person or group of persons are subjected to severe pain, anxiety and negative behaviours by another person who has more power than the victim. It is generally used to describe negative interpersonal relationship but can be extended to describe all manners of human interactions that produce a negative outcome for the underdog. It is conceived as a wrongful display of power and might on the part of a person who has an upper hand by way of authority. It can also be understood as "an insidious form of "coercion" meted out on an individual's psyche and emotions which violates the will, emotional well-being and readiness of an employee" (Doe, 2018). This "coercion" is conducted via words, glares, insinuations, threats, acts of incivility, acts of denial or refusal and overly stringent application of procedures and policy especially when it is intended to disadvantage an individual or groups of individuals with whom the leader has a negative dyadic relationship. In the context of this research, it is a display of deviant behaviour on the part of the guest towards the staff.

Causes of guest-bullying in hotels

Several reasons have been adduced for the occurrence of bullying of staff by hotel guests. Some of the causes include permissive customer-service norms that elevate customer needs

above their behavioural repertoire and dim staff responses, licensure for alcohol abuse by guests (Aslan and Kozak, 2012) and poor understanding of service standards by staff (Kensbock *et al.*, 2015; Ram, 2018). These behaviours may be tolerated by staff because of what Giorgi *et al.* (2020, p. 1) have described as “Fear of Non-Employability and of Economic Crisis”. Bloisi (2018) explains that staff may “tolerate” bullying for fear of losing their jobs. Taken individually, the causes of bullying need to be delved into.

High service-oriented nature of hotels

Orientation towards high customer service has been attributed to the prevalence of guest-bullying in the hospitality industry (Ariza-Montes *et al.*, 2017). This orientation stems from traditional notions of the rightness of the customer. This traditional notion of the customer presents an environment which puts excessive pressure on staff to exceed customer expectation and needs no matter the cost (Gettman and Gelfand, 2007). Thus, the bid to grant customer gratification to meet Management's high expectations of customer satisfaction can overtly excuse customer excesses (Karatepe *et al.*, 2009; Poulston, 2008).

The kingship of the customer is thus authenticated giving clients an upper hand in the client–staff relationship and thus putting power in the hands of guests to enact behaviours that are inimical to the welfare of the staff. This confirms earlier research that established a relationship between high service-oriented nature of the industry with emotional abuse of staff (Di Martino *et al.*, 2003).

The economic security of any hotel staff is in the repeated patronage of their organisation's accommodation and restaurant services, which ensures continuity of revenue to pay salaries. Thus, the satisfaction of the customer is tantamount to the survival and continuous sustenance of hotels and restaurants. In some cases, the retention of staff is incumbent on customer rating of the quality of service received at the hands of individual staff. This creates a huge dependency on client satisfaction, thus resulting in some staff tolerating bullying especially sexual harassment and unnecessary client outbursts against staff. This is particularly frequent towards staff of lower status such as cleaners, room attendants, porters, etc. (Aslan and Kozak, 2012; Karatepe, 2011; Karatepe *et al.*, 2009; Kensbock *et al.*, 2015).

As a result of the conferment of “kingship” on the customer, customer complaints against staff who displease them can cost that particular staff their jobs or a demotion. This is what Ram (2018) refers to as “host-guest imbalance” (p. 764).

This implies that traditional notions of customer satisfaction such as the “the customer is king”, “the customer is right”, “the customer is the reason for our being” make the hospitality industry a high service-oriented industry. While these service mantras have been widely accepted in business globally and the adherence to them have proven to result in positive outcomes for the bottom line, they have nevertheless produced negative outcomes for staff especially in the hospitality industry resulting in staff becoming victims of guest bullying.

Level of Permissiveness of Guests

The “Level of Permissiveness of Guests” (LPG) is another factor attributed to the occurrence of guest bullying in the hospitality industry. Permissiveness refers to the level of tolerance given to hotel guests in a bid to provide satisfactory service and value for money. Researchers have established that bullying behaviours have to a certain degree been given an endorsement in the hospitality industry (Bloisi and Hoel, 2008).

Researchers such as Aslan and Kozak (2012), Ariza-Montes *et al.* (2017), etc. promulgate that client freedom to consume alcohol and/or drugs engenders bullying behaviour. This permissiveness is exhibited in management's attempts at providing high customer satisfaction by overtly excusing problematic client conduct, in environments where clients

are allowed to be anonymous and freedom to indulge themselves in alcohol (Poulston, 2008; Karatepe *et al.*, 2009). Indulgence in alcohol and other behaviours leads to violent behaviours that result in irritation and strain in employees leaving some employees feeling humiliated. This can result in feelings of degradation, humiliation, disrespect and emotional exhaustion (Yagil, 2008).

This level of permissiveness also fails to provide a safety net for staff from bullying, who are encouraged to endure the “misbehaviour” of guests on account of “customer being the king”. Another aspect of permissiveness of guests is imbedded in what Kim *et al.* (2020) describe as “employee’s acquiescent silence behavior”. Acquiescent silence refers to a situation where an employee fails or refuses to report unruly behaviour of guests. Such a behaviour thus gives guests an impression that they can get away with anything since they will not be reported, and consequently, no action will be taken against them. This creates a culture of impunity.

Management and Staff Laxity on appropriate behaviour

A third cause of bullying identified in the literature is Management and Staff Laxity (MSL) on appropriate guest behaviours. Each organisation has social norms that dictate what acceptable or unacceptable behaviour is. In the hospitality industry, female staff (especially) are compelled to bear denigrating remarks, stroking, etc. from guest because of a perceived lack of control (Poulston, 2008; Rosenthal *et al.*, 2008). This is because of extant social norms that blur the lines between acceptable behaviour and unacceptable behaviour.

This laxity creates blurred perimeters between staff and lodgers or customers (Kensbock *et al.*, 2015). The key cause of staff laxity has been identified as management’s turning of blind eye to varied customer behaviour because of the penchant to exceed customer satisfaction (Ram, 2015). This is indexed to the high-service orientation of the hospitality industry. Managers feel compelled to provide customer satisfaction and would bend over backwards to do so even at a cost to staff and their facilities.

Management’s laxity has also been identified in terms of their relinquishing control over what may be acceptable behaviour of guest towards staff. Managers have relinquished control to staff to self-manage on the premise that it is easier to control staff behaviour through policy than it is to control guest behaviour. In many instances, management leave the definition and enforcement of personal space (Einarsen *et al.*, 2009) because of inability to determine the severity of guest actions in order to report or take action against it. This leaves acceptance or otherwise of guest behaviour at the discretion of the staff. This creates a conducive environment for guest-bullying to occur, as there are no clear codes on what acceptable or unacceptable behaviours are. The blurred perimeters, attributed to norms (Good and Cooper, 2016) make it difficult for staff to decipher correctly where to draw the line between being nice and being assertive in relation to customer behaviour. The undocumented nature of these norms makes it possible for customers to enact behaviours which initially appear harmless. Measures of acceptable behaviour consequently became ambiguous, as staff are expected to satisfy the customer. Hence, bullying acts such as harassment tend to be unqualified and left to the discretionary delineation of affected staff. Confronted with the obligation to treat the customer as king, the staff are often misunderstood by the guest who interpret staff courtesy as enticement to be licentious towards them (Good and Cooper, 2016). With regards to sexual harassment in particular, the extant literature establishes that in female-dominated workplaces, especially in the services sector, such as in the hospitality industry, there is a quasi-conscious sexualization of the work context thus making staff enact unspoken sex role behaviour. Female staff in particular nurture unwritten obligations that management expect them to act sensually (Waudby and Poulston, 2017). Following from Tangri *et al.* (1982) and Gutek and Morasch’s (1982) sex role spillover model, management expectation of female workers to act sensually will result in the work environment becoming “sexualised” thus creating a situation where flirtatious behaviour may be exhibited by workers especially the

female staff who are required “to be friendly”, thus consequently generating a reciprocation by guests and resulting in sexual harassment. This tacit expectation of management may coerce female staff, particularly in the hospitality industry, to endure sexual harassment, flirtatious behaviour and even physical harm from clients because they feel obliged to satisfy management’s expectation by bending over to accommodate the clients’ pleasures (Poulston, 2008; Rosenthal *et al.*, 2008). Warhurst and Nickson (2009) believe the tacit expectation of managers is the rationale behind management’s efforts at delighting the customer through enhanced staff appearance. Thus, the personal service that characterises the work of hotel staff engenders bullying from clients who vent their frustrations and sensual impulses on frontline staff such as those in front office and room service. Added to management expectation of a sexualized worker behaviour, there is also the problem of climatization of sexual harassment of the work environment by management. Management is responsible for creating the work climate. Where managers actively investigate and prosecute sexual harassment, it sets the tone for the bastardization of the enigma. The reverse happens however when management turns a blind eye and a deaf ear to complains of the occurrence of sexual harassment (Madera *et al.*, 2018).

Management’s laxity on guest sexual harassment behaviour incapacitates staff repudiation of unwanted guests’ advances. This is because attempts by staff to spurn such advances can be reported as being unfriendly and can be damaging to staff’s ratings when reported to management through customer feedback. However, management’s refusal or laxity about reported or observed guest behaviours that border on harassment has also been identified as another reason why guests may be confident in enacting bullying behaviours in hotels (Aslan and Kozak, 2012; Ariza-Montes *et al.*, 2017). This has led to advocacy efforts in Australia dubbed the “Know the Line” awareness-raising campaign (AHRC, 2008 in Good and Cooper, 2016, p. 2).

While the LPG and MSL share common outcomes in that they both lead to guests having a field day to bully staff, they differ diametrically in the way that while LPG is an informal approach to client service management, the latter is or should be a formal approach towards client service management involving the drafting and implementation of policy.

These concepts have, however, not been tested in the Ghanaian hospitality context.

The causes of guest–staff bullying are however not a one-size-fits-all, as hotels vary in their structure and organisation. According to Samnani and Singh (2012), cultural differences and national guidelines can determine the differences in the causes and nature of bullying in hotels. For instance, sexual harassment may not be reported in some countries as women do not work in hotels, for example, Arab and Islamic nations. Again, differences in technological advancement may provide some hotels with technology such as AI for business and service delivery such that customer–staff contact is very limited or eliminated totally. In such cases, certain staff such as porters may avoid any contacts with customers. For instance, [revive.com](https://www.revive.com) reveals that many hotels have engaged AI technology to deliver on service objectives including dealing with various service products. Examples of hotels deploying AI technology include Henn-na Hotel in Nagasaki, Japan, where AI technology is used in place of humans at the reception to offer information and booking as well as in front desk services, luggage carriage, etc. Another hotel that uses AI such as Connie, an automaton doorman, is Hilton (Revfine, 2021). Obviously for such hotels, “guest–host imbalance” (Ram, 2018, p. 764) is totally eliminated. The same will apply in cases where hotels use the automated janitors. The machines will not be subjected to sexual harassment.

Theoretical underpinnings of the causes of guest bullying in the hospitality industry

The Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) is an important theory underpinning the comprehension of the occurrence of guest-bullying behaviour in the

hospitality industry. The theory advocates that every individual upholds the economic theory of scarcity of resources and thus are naturally inclined to not only acquire more but also to protect and conserve the little they have. This includes time, energy, money, opportunities, love, fame, etc.

Hence, it can be argued that economic reasons explainable through the COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989) account largely for both LPG and MSL on appropriate behaviour. The COR theory explains that a person's tolerance of unfavourable situations and discourteous behaviour is influenced by the fear of the loss of resources at their disposal. It is akin to what Giorgi *et al.* (2020, p. 1) describe as "Fear of Non-Employability and of Economic Crisis". In other words, a bullying victim may tolerate the bully if and when the victim's economic sustenance depends on the perpetrator's largess or financial contribution to their source of income. The "resource conservation" tenet of the COR theory is particularly pertinent to the MSL variable, while the resource acquisition tenet of the COR theory is germane to the LPG variable. The resources conservation tenet of COR theory is an inconspicuous negative intrinsic motivation that compels victims of bullying in workplaces to endure bullying behaviour from others. In the case of hotels, satisfied guests imply repeat visits, and this translates into continuous revenue streams for hotels, thus ensuring the hotel's ability to meet its overheads including payment of salaries.

The "resource acquisition" tenet also explains LPG. It explains staff allowing guests to get their way. In anticipation of tips, recommendation and even better employment opportunities from clients, bullying victims may consciously or unconsciously "allow" guests to have their way with almost anything, in so long as it does not border on criminality. Thus, the COR theory holds huge corroboration for guest-bullying behaviour in the hospitality industry.

Effects of bullying in the hospitality industry

Countless effects of bullying have been found by researchers to include employee intention to leave and exclusion from work (Berthelsen *et al.*, 2011; Sims and Sun, 2012). Berthelsen *et al.* (2011) and Mathisen *et al.* (2008) found that there was a direct connection between bullying and employees' quit intentions. They found that victims of bullying had changed jobs more frequently than those not exposed to bullying. Other effects established in the extant literature include employee strain, decreased productivity, frequent malingering and withdrawal intentions (Bentley *et al.*, 2012). The above effects are usually preceded by reported decreased employee satisfaction, increased suspicion and reduced dedication (Alexander *et al.*, 2012; Mathisen *et al.*, 2008), and motional exhaustion (Karatepe, 2011). Other effects include reduced perception of justice (Tepper *et al.*, 2017). Beyond these effects, individuals suffer several psychosomatic conditions such as sense of being waylaid and extreme emotional stress, tension, depreciated value of self, despair, as well as post-traumatic stress disorder. These effects have ripple effects on the victims, their families and ultimately the organisation because of associated costs such as cost of medical refunds, cost of replacement of staff and costs of training of new staff, etc. For the victim, research has established that they eventually suffer economic losses due to inability to work or for some loss of additional income such as overtime, target-based bonuses (Gregory *et al.*, 2013), etc. Other areas of organisational life affected by bullying include bottom-line performance problems for the organisation such as low motivation and low commitment (Gregory *et al.*, 2013). These have a roll-on effect on a hotel's profitability, as victims perform poorly.

Based on the review of the extant literature, this research hypothesizes the following:

- H1. High service orientation nature of hotels predisposes staff to guest–staff bullying.
- H2. Nature of the LPG, predisposes staff to guest–staff bullying.
- H3. Both MSL on guest behaviour facilitates guest–staff bullying.

Hence, a conceptual framework is proposed (see [Figure 1](#)).

In view of the above, the research will be guided by the following objectives:

- (1) Determine the significance of the relationship between the high service orientation nature of hotels and staff exposure to guest bullying in the Ghanaian context.
- (2) Determine the relationship between permissiveness for guests and their predisposition to acts of bullying.
- (3) Identify the relationship between both MSL and guests' tendency to act as bullies.

Methodology

Setting and sample

The tourism and hospitality (T&H) sector was selected as the setting of this research for the following reasons: Firstly (a) the sector plays an important role in employment. World Travel and Tourism Council ([WTTC, 2021](#)) reported that in 2019, the sector generated approximately 742,500 jobs representing 6.0% of employment nationally. Secondly, the sector generates enormous revenue to the government. It is the fourth most profitable sector in Ghana ([Mensah-Ansah et al., 2011](#)). Thirdly, Ghana's T&H sector is ranked among other leading destinations in the world. According to the World Bank data, Ghana ranked 120th on World Economic Forum (WEF) *Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index* ([World Bank, 2021](#)) but though bullying has been researched in other sectors such as educational institutions ([Doe, 2018](#)) and health, there is a dearth of research of the phenomenon in the tourism and hospitality sector ([Ram et al., 2016](#)). This research utilized the convenience sampling with the aim of ensuring a balanced composition of respondents ([Finn et al., 2000](#)) from the junior to senior employees of various departments of the "lodging" subsector of the T&H in context. This subsector was chosen due to the focus of this study. Again, this subsector employs over half a million jobs ([Ampofo, 2020](#)). The accessible study population was 3,500 out of which 346 samples were drawn using the sample size determination table suggested by [Krejcie and Morgan \(1970\)](#). The researcher added 15% (52) to the estimated

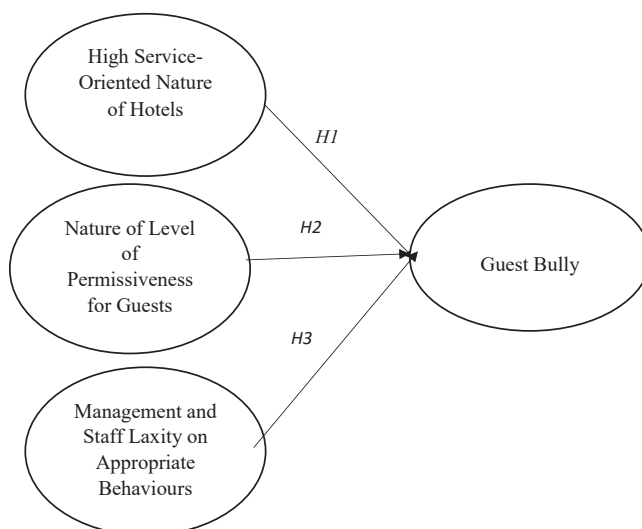


Figure 1.
Conceptual framework

sample to cater for the non-response rate. This summed up to 398 samples. So approximately 400 questionnaires were administered and 346 were usable. Specifically, the 346 respondents were conveniently drawn from 38 hotels in the capital city of Ghana, Accra, where majority of the hotels are situated. A letter was sent to the hotels to seek permission to conduct the research. Then an independent data collection firm was also contacted to recruit 15 enumerators for the purposes of gathering data. Importantly, the researcher educated the enumerators on the aim of the study and also explained the content of the questionnaire to the data collectors. These exercises were done to enhance smooth and quality data collection. This was done to enable complete adherence to all coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) safety protocols. Using the convenience sampling approach, the enumerators employed digital format data collection supported by the Opine software installed on tablets and smartphones to collect quantitative data from staff present at post. Furthermore, a screening question in the questionnaire was utilized to solicit information from only respondents who had experienced or evidenced bullying in their various workplaces.

Measures and validation

Two scales were employed in this study, one each for measuring dimensions of bullying and causes of bullying. Twelve (12) items for measuring dimensions of bullying as the independent variable (IV) of the study were adopted from Hoel *et al.* (2001) and modified to suit the hotel work environment to measure guest-bullying behaviour. These include: “*guests asking me to make errands or provide services outside my job roles;*” *guests being overly demanding and difficult;* *guests badmouthing me to management or my superiors;* *guests intentionally creating more work for me in their rooms;* and “*Being shouted at by guests;*” “*guests making my work difficult by refusing to comply with rules and regulations;*” “*being violently attacked by guests;*” “*guests making derogatory or racially laced remarks at me;*” and “*guests gossiping about me with other staff or other guests;*” “*being raped or sexually molested by guests while providing them service;*” “*insulted/verbally abused by guests;*” and “*guests making sexual advances/passes at me*”. Additional ten scale items for measuring causes [the three dependent variables (DV) in the study] were developed using items from prior studies (Aslan and Kozak, 2012; Johnson and Madera, 2021; Karatepe, 2011; Karatepe *et al.*, 2009; Kensbock *et al.*, 2015) – [High service-oriented nature (HSON) of hospitality industry] (Aslan and Kozak, 2012; Ariza-Montes *et al.*, 2017); LPG (Good and Cooper, 2016; Cheung *et al.*, 2018; Kensbock *et al.*, 2015; Madera *et al.*, 2018); MSL on appropriate behaviour) (MSL).

The HSON items included “*the customer is king*”, “*the customer is right*”, “*the customer is the reason for our being*”. The LPG (Aslan and Kozak, 2012; Ariza-Montes *et al.*, 2017) was measured on four items. These included “*client freedom to consume alcohol and/or drugs*”; “*Management excusing problematic client conduct*”, “*clients permission to be anonymous*” and “*employee’s acquiescent silence behavior*”, while “MSL” on appropriate behavior (Good and Cooper, 2016; Cheung *et al.*, 2018; Kensbock *et al.*, 2015; Madera *et al.*, 2018) was measured with three items: “*lack of clear policy guidelines on appropriate guest behaviours*”; “*abandonment of guest management to staff discretion*” and “*blurred lines of behaviour expected of guests*”.

A pilot test on 30 participants was conducted to check for suitability of the questions, reliability and face validity, and the instrument was revised accordingly before administering the final survey instrument. However, the study was done using data collected from 346 respondents. This research assessed the survey instrument on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 = strongly agree and 5 = strongly disagree.

The demographic results indicated that 65.02% of the respondents were female and 75.34% were married. Majority (65.11%) of the participants were aged 40 years and above. In terms of education, 20% of the workers were university graduates, 34.66 were holders of Higher National Diplomas and the remaining 45.34% were high school graduates. As a result

of the screening question used in selecting the sample, all 346 (100%) had experienced guest-bullying. Of the 346 participants, 60% had been working in their positions for five years, 25% had worked for ten years and 15% had worked for more than ten years.

Data analysis

A thorough screening method was employed on the data to enable the verification of missing values (Hair *et al.*, 2017), outliers, common method bias and normality. To avoid common method bias, the mean substitution method was preferred and employed to assign the missing values. Next, to ascertain outliers, the Mahalanobis distance was used and no outliers were found (Mahalanobis D (10) 15.524, $p < 0.001$) (Hair *et al.*, 2013). Finally, in order to establish the normality of the distribution, the researcher verified the skewness and kurtosis values. The thresholds were found to range from -1.5 to $+1.5$ which showed that there was no digression from normality (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2012). The data collection was cross-sectional using the same questionnaire. A total variance of 23% (<50%) was established as the tolerable limit, thus using the concurrent load of all the items through exploratory factor analysis. This prevents common method bias (Heppner *et al.*, 2008), which results in measurement error and distorted interpretations which this approach introduces, from the data set.

Factor analysis

The study also deployed the principal axis approach to factorisation coupled with the varimax rotation technique in order to recognise the fundamental factor structure of the adapted constructs (Table 1).

Of the 23 items loaded, four factors were identified where Factor I was a multidimensional factor that explained 32.44% of variance, with 13 items which was labelled as “guest bullying”. Factor II explained 22.13% of variance, with 3 items related to how guests are treated as customers, labelled as “HSON” (unidimensional factor). Factor III explained 15.15% variance, with 4 items related to behaviour of guests, was labelled as “LPG” (unidimensional factor). Finally, factor IV explained 8.23% of variance, with 3 items related to guest policy, so it was labelled “MSL”.

The hypotheses in exploratory factor analysis were satisfied [Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) = 0.787; Bartlett’s test of sphericity $\chi^2 = 1,544.54$, Sig. < 0.001] (Hair *et al.*, 1998) signifying the suitability in performing a factor analysis.

Next, the study ran the Cronbach alpha reliability test for internal reliability of the items (see: Tables 2 and 3).

The confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) helped to determine the validity of the key constructs deployed within this research. The preliminary measurement model, made up of all the key constructs resulted in an adequate fit indices ($\chi^2 = 171.33$, df = 56, CFI = 0.97, GFI = 0.97, NFI = 0.98 and RMSEA = 0.06) with a significant regression weight at 0.01. As a result of the regression weights being significant at 0.001 level, the model was maintained. In Table 2, all the AVE scores were more than 0.50 for all the constructs and the CR values were also more than the 0.80 cut-off point confirming convergent validity.

Constructs	Mean	SD	AVE	CR	1	2	3	4
HSON	2.95	1.14	0.81	0.93	0.89	0.624**	0.413**	0.312**
LPG	2.74	1.11	0.82	0.93	0.624**	0.90	0.479**	0.428**
MSL	3.06	1.09	0.70	0.87	0.413**	0.479**	0.84	0.823**
Guest bullying	2.11	1.21	0.77	0.76	0.312**	0.428**	0.823**	0.87

Note(s): ** $p \leq 0.01$

Table 1.
Inter-factor correlation
matrix

Items	Mean	SD	Loading	AVE	Reliability
<i>HSON</i>	<i>2.95</i>	<i>1.14</i>		<i>0.808</i>	
The customer is king	2.73	1.30	0.882		0.956
The customer is right	3.06	1.08	0.825		0.988
The customer is the reason for our being	3.06	1.04	0.719		0.987
<i>LPG</i>	<i>2.74</i>	<i>1.11</i>		<i>0.824</i>	
Guest freedom to consume alcohol and/or drugs	2.82	1.10	0.873		0.987
Management excusing problematic guest behaviour	2.76	1.22	0.865		0.995
Guests permitted to be anonymous	2.62	1.07	0.782		0.894
Employees not speaking their mind about bad guest behaviour	2.78	1.07	0.760		0.857
<i>MSL</i>	<i>3.06</i>	<i>1.09</i>		<i>0.701</i>	
Lack of clear policy guidelines on appropriate guest behaviours	2.74	1.03	0.718		0.879
Leaving guest management to staff discretion	3.22	1.12	0.705		0.987
Blurred lines of behaviour expected of guests	3.22	1.13	0.677		0.985

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of independent variable

Note(s): The Italic values, specifically under the AVE are the values indicating the validity of the construct and it shows the validity to be above the threshold of 0.5

Items	Mean	SD	Loading	AVE	Reliability
Insulted/verbally abused by guests	2.12	1.15	0.834		0.987
Guests making sexual advances/passes at me	2.08	1.19	0.844		0.954
Guests being overly demanding and difficult	2.75	1.13	0.854		0.955
Guests badmouthing me to management or my superiors	2.10	1.13	0.851		0.887
Guests making my work difficult by refusing to comply with rules and regulations	2.10	1.18	0.835		0.882
Being violently attacked by guests	2.22	1.27	0.777		0.922
Guests making derogatory or racially laced remarks at me	2.10	1.26	0.764		0.914
Being raped or sexually molested by guests whiles providing them service	2.16	1.26	0.738		0.957
Being shouted at by guests	1.92	1.25	0.733		0.944
Guests gossiping about me with other staff or other guests	2.12	1.38	0.682		0.865
Guests intentionally creating more work for me in their rooms	1.98	1.27	0.68		0.884
Guests stealing the hotel's stuff, so I end up being punished for it	1.96	1.16	0.665		0.875
Guests asking me to make errands or provide services outside my job roles	1.88	1.11	0.662		0.866
Overall mean	<i>2.11</i>	<i>1.21</i>		<i>0.763</i>	

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the dependent variable

Discriminant validity was also verified to establish the latent instruments' dissimilarity from others. For discriminant validity to be ascertained in a data set, the square of average variance extracted (AVEs) should be more than the correlations between the instruments in a model (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). This is shown in Table 3.

Findings and discussion

To establish the conceptual propositions of this study, a regression was run to ascertain the relationships between the dependent variables and the independent variables.

The results of regression (Table 4) show that whiles HSON has been indicated to influence guests towards bullying staff in hotels, this study found that HSON did not positively impact on the behaviour of guests and does not significantly explain guest bullying in context, thus, do not support H1.

This is an indication that the service culture of hotels is not to blame for guest bullying behaviour. This implies that there are particular traits in guest bullies not characteristic of other guests that need to be investigated. Following from the perpetrator characteristics framework, further studies will be needed to ascertain if the psychological framework could moderate guest appreciation of high service orientation in the hotel.

However, the study showed that nature of the LPG, positively and significantly predisposes guests to enacting acts of bullying thus confirming hypothesis two (H2) of the study. This also agrees with what researchers (Aslan and Kozak, 2012; Ariza-Montes *et al.*, 2017; Poulston, 2008; Karatepe *et al.*, 2009) have already established. This shows that the LPG as argued by prior researchers is a universal problem and the African or indeed the Ghanaian context is not different. This finding also presents management in hotels as very challenging. The challenge is presented in the dilemma that emanates from wanting to be hospitable and at the same time wanting to secure the wellbeing of staff. Being hospitable in the Ghanaian hospitality industry stands on two legs: First, Ghanaians are historically known and expected to be hospitable and second, it is a core component and sine-qua-non of the industry, thus placing staff, within context, in a precarious situation. From the theoretical perspective, it implies that in the context of the hospitality industry, the resource conservation tenet of the COR theory is a viable explanation for the level of permissiveness that emboldens guests to enact bullying behaviours.

The study also found that within context, MSL about acceptable guest behaviours negatively but significantly explained guest bullying behaviour, thus partially confirming the hypothesis (H3). This gives credence to what prior research (Good and Cooper, 2016; Kensbock *et al.*, 2015; Kim *et al.*, 2020; Madera *et al.*, 2018; Poulston, 2008; Ram, 2015; Rosenthal *et al.*, 2008; Warhurst and Nickson, 2009) has proposed and confirms the resource acquisition tenet of the COR theory.

The above causes are therefore revealed in this study as the strongest determinants of staff exposure to guest bullying. They are also indicators of the organisational context of work in Ghanaian hospitality firms and give a fairly accurate picture of the level of decency of work within context. The precarity of work in the sector has potential to derail the gains of the sector in the long run as strain and associated psychosomatic conditions are bound to surface with time.

The prevalence of guest bullying is indicative of a dearth of appropriate policy framework to guide service delivery in the hospitality industry and this cascades further into managerial incompetence to safeguard the safety and well-being of their staff from guest excesses (Aslan and Kozak, 2012). This has consequence not only for staff who will suffer the stated effects evidenced in the literature and from the findings of the research but also for the industry. For the industry, it paints a negative picture of the sector and projects the industry as a place for people who are a little less scrupulous than the average worker.

As evidenced in the literature and confirmed in this research, employees ultimately suffer emotional exhaustion, decreased employee satisfaction, increased suspicion and reduced

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients		
	<i>B</i>	SE	Beta	<i>t</i>	Sig.
(Constant)	2.868	0.521		5.509	0.000
HSO	-0.439	0.248	-0.396	-1.773	0.083
LGP	0.623	0.228	0.578	2.733	0.009
MSL	-0.383	0.185	-0.342	-2.073	0.044

Note(s): Dependent variable: dependent

Table 4.
Regression analysis

dedication resulting in decreased productivity, frequent malingering and withdrawal intentions (Alexander *et al.*, 2012; Bentley *et al.*, 2012; Karatepe, 2011; Mathisen *et al.*, 2008). For the hospitality industry, decreased productivity will affect the sector's contribution to GDP and ultimately hamper the development of a vibrant investment climate.

Conclusion

This research is a very significant contributor to the literature on the hospitality industry. This study makes the first attempt to explore the occurrence of bullying in the hospitality industry in Ghana and to fill the dismal gap that existed in the field prior to this study. Prior research in bullying in the industry were done in other countries, usually in Europe, Asia and America. Consequently, reticence on a significant phenomenon such as bullying, particularly emanating from guest, is therefore not only an impediment to business development and organisational performance but also an antithesis to any meaningful efforts at enhancing stakeholder values in the hospitality industry, within context. This study is therefore a vital contribution to the field and places Ghana within the geographical coverage of research on bullying in the hospitality industry.

The findings of this research depict an unwholesome business environment in the hospitality sector thus shedding light on the quality of human resource management practices in the sector. Human resource management practices (HRMP) are essential in shoring up an organisation's corporate social responsibility index. Research by Welford *et al.* (2008) identified HRMP as significant to an organisation's CSR efforts. It is a given that through good HRMP, positive organisational outcomes are engendered by business-friendly work climates that result in employee empowerment as well as employee engagement and ultimately affect the triple bottom-line for the organisation.

As found in the research, there is cause for concern about the negative ramifications of bullying in the hospitality industry (Van Der Wal *et al.*, 2020), as it impacts on employee retention and engagement. In the Ghanaian context in particular, the effects of bullying are graver as the force and fear of unemployment suppresses turnover intentions and compels victims to continue suffering the psycho-emotional effects of the phenomenon. In Ghana, the unemployment rate among young people is 12 and 50% of the population are under-employed, according to a World Bank report (World bank, 2020). Consequently, the fear of unemployment produces in victims, what Giorgi *et al.* (2020, p. 9) describe as "lack of coping success and control" which further results in a cyclical enactment of "counterproductive workplace behaviors" (CWB) (Giorgi *et al.*, 2020, p. 9) among the staff. Victims of guest bullying thus suffer emotional labour deriving from the uncertainty of the future, following the uncertainty management theory (Lind and Van den Bos, 2002). Emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) refers to "... the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display" (p. 7). Emotional labour forces workers particularly in the service industry to modify or hide their true emotions in order to appear nice before or to customers through a process Hochschild (1983) refers to as "transmutation". This gives managers the power to manipulate employees' feelings and in the process, subject workers to the whims and caprices of guests.

The findings further highlight the need to re-examine and redefine the LPG. The average Ghanaian is bequeathed with two legacies that permeate social and business. These are the proverbial Ghanaian hospitality and a residual respect for non-Africans especially of European and American descent (vestiges of the colonial relationship). In the hospitality industry in particular, it becomes problematic to draw the line as to what constitutes standard courtesy and what can be categorised as acceptable guest behaviours. This also ties in with MSL confirming prior research (Good and Cooper, 2016; Kensbock *et al.*, 2015; Kim *et al.*, 2020; Madera *et al.*, 2018; Poulston, 2008; Ram, 2015; Rosenthal *et al.*, 2008; Warhurst and Nickson, 2009).

Implications

The findings have implications for policy makers. Policy has been silent on this dangerous phenomenon in the hospitality industry. Since bullying has serious ramifications on decent work, placing high premium on the decency of work in the policy agenda is critical for achieving Goal 8 of the Sustainable Development Goals. There is therefore the need for stakeholder consultation on acceptable guest behaviours and management prerogatives in dealing with unwanted guest behaviours. This will strongly invigorate staff tackling of bullying behaviours from guests and enhance their stake in the power relationship with clients.

The findings also have implications for management in Ghanaian hospitality firms. Because the trauma of being bullied has a roll-on effect on families of staff, co-workers and other guests, there is the need for managers to effectively take active charge of the guest-relation management and to shrink guests' capacity to silence staff grievance about their bullying and harassment behaviours in the name of customer feedback and evaluation. Freedom from the fear of a negative appraisal will embolden staff to report behaviours that bother on bullying and help management enact practical policy to deal with this phenomenon in the hospitality industry. Hotel managers should promote and uphold staff right to decent work and a bully-free environment. Employees should be trained on ways of handling unruly guests and bullying situations so as to enhance their capacity to continue providing high quality service.

Similarly, acceptable guest behaviour should be explicitly documented and made available at visible places for guest education to forestall behaviours that are welcome.

Limitation

This work will have benefited greatly from a qualitative investigation which could have captured the lived experiences of hospitality staff particularly their responses. However, this study was done during the COVID-19 pandemic with its attendant restrictions on movement. Thus, conducting interviews was not feasible since most hotels run shift systems to avoid overcrowding and forestall spread of the virus. A qualitative investigation in future will be significant in bringing out the voiced quintessence of experience of hotel bullying victims. Again, the study was limited to hotels only. A study of the other sectors of the hospitality industry, that is, restaurants, tour companies and sites, and entertainment centres will greatly enhance knowledge on the prevalence of the phenomenon in the entire industry.

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