

**Behind the smile:
Exploring the verbal harassment of
front office employees by guests**

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Abstract

Guest verbal harassment is an increasingly recognised challenge in frontline hospitality work, yet its impact on hotel front office employees remains underexplored. Existing research on customer misbehaviour in hospitality has predominantly focused on the food and beverage, kitchen, or housekeeping departments, overlooking the front office despite its high visibility, emotional demands, and constant guest interaction. This qualitative interpretivist study examines how front office hotel staff in New Zealand perceive and respond to verbal harassment from guests, with a particular focus on gendered perceptions, emotional reactions, and motivational outcomes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with front office personnel working in New Zealand hotels, and the data analysed using a reflexive thematic analysis approach. The findings indicate that verbal harassment is often embedded in routine guest interactions and frequently normalised as part of service work. However, employees' interpretations and coping strategies were significantly influenced by gender. Women participants reported cumulative emotional strain more frequently than did male participants, which was linked to sustained emotional labour and feelings of professional devaluation. The male participants revealed challenges related to authority, role legitimacy, and confidence during guest interactions. Overall, the study demonstrates that guest verbal harassment has profound emotional and motivational effects on front office staff and underscores the need for greater organisational recognition and support of affected staff. By emphasising the front office perspective in a New Zealand hotel context, this research extends knowledge of hospitality scholarship on customer misbehaviour and offers practical insights for hotel management and staff wellbeing.

Keywords: verbal harassment, hospitality, front office, gender, guests

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed:s

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Date: 30th January 2026

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to examine how front office employees in New Zealand hotels experience and respond to verbal harassment from guests, with a particular focus on the gendered nature of these experiences. This chapter introduces the research by outlining the hospitality industry in which guest-initiated verbal harassment of front office employees occurs, and explaining why this form of workplace mistreatment is an important issue for the sector. It then presents the research aim and questions, followed by an explanation of the significance of the study. An overview of the qualitative methodology, research methods, and data analysis approach used is then overviewed. The chapter concludes by outlining the structure of the dissertation and the content of the chapters that follow this introductory chapter.

1.1 Research background

Workplace mistreatment has become an increasingly critical concern in the hospitality industry, as it directly impacts on employee well-being, service quality, and staff retention. In guest-facing roles, such as in a hotel front office, employees routinely manage intense, emotionally charged interactions, making them particularly vulnerable to harmful behaviours such as verbal harassment (Jung & Yoon, 2018). In the hospitality industry, verbal harassment, (defined as hostile, demeaning or aggressive speech directed at workers), has emerged as a widespread yet often normalised form of staff mistreatment in hotels and other service environments (Mitsakis et al., 2025). Studies report that hospitality employees exposed to verbal aggression frequently experience emotional strain, stress, and reduced job satisfaction, which can impair performance and contribute to high turnover intentions (Booyens et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2021). Unlike physical or overtly abusive actions, verbal harassment is often subtle, episodic, and difficult to regulate, allowing it to persist as an everyday feature of front-line work (Keashly & Harvey, 2005). The cumulative nature of these encounters can erode employees' confidence, sense of professional identity, and their long-term well-being. Importantly, international research consistently shows that the effects of verbal harassment are not gender-neutral, as women often report more emotionally taxing encounters, whereas men report threats to competence or authority (Mefteh et al., 2022; Mills & Owens, 2023).

Growing international research (Booyens et al., 2022; Daunt & Harris, 2011; Mitsakis et al., 2025) has documented a pattern of customer aggression in hospitality, noting that frontline employees frequently become the focal point of guest dissatisfaction, frustration,

or entitlement. Scholars of organisational behaviour and service-work research, have argued that hospitality is uniquely susceptible to customer aggression due to service norms that require employees to remain polite, composed, and emotionally controlled, even when confronted with behaviours that breach professional boundaries (Grandey et al., 2007; Yagil, 2008). This customer-employee power imbalance dynamic creates an inherent imbalance in interactions; guests possess the power to criticise, complain, and demand, while employees have limited capacity to challenge inappropriate conduct (Brinker & Cain, 2011). Studies in a hospitality context show that these pressures play out differently accordingly to gender. Women in customer-facing roles often experience intensified scrutiny of their emotional behaviour, tone, and demeanour, making them more vulnerable to comments that undermine their professional or personal worth (Mefteh et al., 2022). Conversely, men, may experience verbal harassment that questions their authority or ability to manage guest interactions (Booyens et al., 2022). In combination, these gendered patterns point to an important gap in existing knowledge: the hotel industry still lacks a clear understanding of how men and women experience verbal harassment differently.

Despite increasing scholarly attention to customer misbehaviour, important gaps remain in relation to understanding how verbal harassment unfolds in specific hotel roles. Existing studies often examine customer aggression in service settings, offering limited insights into the distinct pressures encountered by front office employees, who constantly manage potentially difficult situations such as guest interactions, billing disputes, procedural explanations, and moments of service breakdowns (Booyens et al., 2022; Mitsakis et al., 2025). While some research acknowledges that gender shapes customer aggression, only a small body of work had examined how these dynamics manifest in hotel environments, with even fewer studies capturing the perspectives of those directly experiencing the encounters (Mefteh et al., 2022; Mills & Owens, 2023). As a result, the gendered dimensions of verbal harassment are underexplored, particularly regarding how employees interpret disrespectful or hostile guest behaviours, and how such incidents influence their confidence, motivation, and emotional resilience. This research gap is significant, because front office roles are highly visible, emotionally demanding, and central to guest satisfaction, yet, the current literature offers a limited understanding of the burdens placed on men and women in these positions.

The New Zealand hotel industry provides a useful context for exploring these issues. Within this context, the hospitality industry is characterised by ongoing labour shortages,

a young and diverse workforce, and strong reliance on migrant employees (Williamson, 2017), many of whom hold frontline roles with substantial emotional demands. Local research over the past 20 years has documented patterns of bullying, rudeness, and guest incivility in New Zealand hospitality settings, noting that such behaviours contribute to employees' stress, burnout, and turnover (Poulston, 2008; Williamson & Rasmussen, 2022). This study offers a new perspective by examining verbal harassment in New Zealand hotels through a gender-informed lens, addressing another gap in current hospitality research.

1.2 Research questions

Against the background of lack of research on guest-initiated verbal harassment, the aim of this study was to examine the verbal harassment experienced by front office employees, with particular attention given to how such incidents differed for women and men. The study explores the types of verbal harassment commonly directed at front office staff, how employees of different genders perceive and interpret these encounters, and the perceived effects on motivation. It also investigates how employees cope with such situations and manage their roles within a workplace environment that prioritises guest satisfaction. To achieve the research aims, three research questions were proposed:

Q1: What types of verbal harassment do front office employees experience from guests?

Q2: How does gender identity influence how employees perceive incidents of verbal harassment by guests?

Q3: In what ways does verbal harassment influence the motivation of front office employees and what role does gender identity play?

1.3 Significance of the research

This research aimed to offer both theoretical and practical contributions to the New Zealand hospitality industry. First, the study extends existing hospitality research by providing empirical evidence of front office employees' experiences of guest-initiated verbal harassment, addressing a neglected area in the literature and offering insights into how gender shapes employees' interpretations of such encounters. Second, instead of focusing on general accounts of customer misbehaviour, this research provides in-depth, individual perspectives that reveal the emotional, motivational, and workplace consequences of verbal harassment, and clarifies the types, sources, and patterns of behaviour that front office employees commonly face from guests. Third, the study makes

a practical contribution to New Zealand's hotel sector by identifying coping strategies used by employees and highlighting organisational measures that managers can adopt to better support staff and reduce risks associated with guest harassment.

1.4 Research methodology and methods

The study adopts a qualitative interpretivist approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect primary data from front office employees working in a range of hotels in New Zealand. Participants were recruited using snowball sampling, allowing access to employees with relevant front office experience of verbal harassment. The data were then analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis approach, allowing key patterns and meanings to be identified amongst participants' descriptions of harassment incidents, emotional responses, and coping strategies. The findings were discussed alongside and compared with those in the extant literature to reveal significant findings and implications.

1.5 Dissertation structure

This dissertation is organised into six chapters, beginning with the introduction and followed by the literature review, methodology, findings, discussion and conclusion.

Chapter 2: Literature review. This chapter provides an overview of the issue of verbal harassment by reviewing the relevant literature. Firstly, definitions of verbal harassment are outlined. The chapter then reviews key sources of verbal harassment in hospitality, from co-workers, supervisors, and customers, and outlines the contextual factors that shape these behaviours. It also considers how harassment manifests in different hotel departments, how employees experience harassment incidents, and the organisational and individual consequences. Literature addressing managerial responses and coping strategies used by employees is also reviewed. The chapter concludes by identifying significant gaps in the existing research and linking these to the aim of the study.

Chapter 3: Methodology. This chapter outlines the methodology used in this study. It first presents the research aims and questions, followed by an explanation of the qualitative interpretivist approach, and describes the use of semi-structured interviews and snowball sampling. The chapter also introduces reflexive thematic analysis as the method used to interpret the data.

Chapter 4: Findings. This chapter presents the findings of the research, beginning with an overview of the participants' demographic characteristics, followed by a description of the themes identified in the analysis, illustrated with supporting quotes.

Chapter 5: Discussion. The discussion chapter discusses the study's findings in relation to the research aims and the wider academic literature. It examines the types of triggers of verbal harassment, considers how gender shapes employees' interpretations of guest behaviour, exploring the impacts of these encounters on front office staff. The chapter then highlights the key patterns that emerged from the analysis and explains their significance to understanding verbal harassment in hotel work.

Chapter 6: Conclusion. This final chapter concludes the dissertation by revisiting the research aims and summarising the key findings of the study. The chapter outlines the study's theoretical and practical contributions, acknowledges its limitations, and presents recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This literature review chapter provides an overview of verbal harassment by reviewing the relevant literature. Firstly, definitions of verbal harassment are outlined. The chapter then reviews the main sources of verbal harassment in hospitality (i.e., co-workers, supervisors, and customers) and examines contextual factors such as customer power and intoxication. Subsequent sections consider how harassment manifests in different hotel departments, the experiences of individuals who are targeted, the roles of bystanders, and the organisational and individual impacts. Literature addressing managerial responses and coping strategies used by employees is also reviewed. The chapter concludes by identifying significant gaps in the existing research and linking these to the aim of the study.

2.2 Definitions

Although the term “verbal harassment” is not always directly defined in literature, it can be understood through related concepts such as harassment, verbal abuse, psychological violence, bullying, and emotional abuse. *Verbal abuse*, for instance, refers to “the use of words that are personally insulting, such as generally abusive spoken obscenities and foul language, or indicating a lack of respect for the dignity and worth of an individual” (Aytac et al., 2011, p. 387). One of the key characteristics of verbal harassment is its strong psychological impact. This behaviour is often examined as part of psychological violence, a broader category of non-physical aggression that targets a person's emotional and mental well-being (Dokkedahl et al., 2019). *Psychological violence* includes “behaviours which are harassing, bullying, threats, verbal abuse, isolating and alienating and are designed to intimidate the target of such abuse” (Schindeler & Reynald, 2017, p. 25).

A closely related concept is emotional abuse, which is more narrowly defined than is psychological violence, and therefore more easily measurable. Emotional abuse is “repeated hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviours (excluding physical contact) directed at one or more individuals over a period of time such that the target's sense of self as a competent worker and person is negatively affected” (Keashly & Harvey, 2005, p. 205). Bullying, on the other hand, highlights the role of power. It has been defined as “repetitive and intentional aggressive behaviour by one individual or group against another in situations where there exists some sort of power differential between the bully and the victim in terms of physical size, social status, or other features” (Rettew & Pawlowski,

2016, p. 236). Such conduct can include persistent insults, derogatory remarks, constant criticism, or intentional exclusion, and is aimed at, or results in, repeatedly humiliating, intimidating, frightening, or punishing the victim (Einarsen et al., 2003).

Employment New Zealand's workplace bullying guidance for employers defines "bullying" as "repeated and unreasonable behaviour directed towards an employee or a group of employees that can cause physical or mental harm" (Employment New Zealand, 2024). "Bullying can be physical, verbal, psychological, or social and can include victimising, humiliating, intimidating or threatening a person". According to the New Zealand Law Society (2024), "harassment" refers to behaviours that intimidate, threaten, or demean an individual or group in ways that are likely to cause harm, and may consist of repeated actions or a single serious incident.

These definitions highlight common core elements, but differ in emphasis and scope. They are similar in that all terms describe non-physical behaviours that undermine an individual's dignity and psychological well-being, often through intimidation, humiliation, or repeated hostility. However, they differ in scope and emphasis. Verbal abuse focuses specifically on language, whereas psychological violence is broader, encompassing both verbal and non-verbal acts designed to cause emotional harm. Emotional abuse narrows this focus again, highlighting repeated behaviours that erode a victim's sense of self and competence. Bullying introduces the element of power imbalance, making explicit the ways differences in social status or authority shape harm. Legal definitions in New Zealand further extend this discussion by recognising that harassment may not always require repetition, as even a single severe act can be sufficient for legal action. Understanding these similarities and differences fits within a wider spectrum of workplace abuse while also underscoring the need to study it in its own right.

2.3 Verbal harassment in the hospitality industry

Verbal harassment in the hospitality industry is a global issue affecting employees in different countries. According to the New Zealand Human Rights Commission (2022), the hospitality sector in New Zealand experienced some of the highest rates of harassment and bullying claims when compared to other sectors. Hospitality workers often endure hostile remarks, shouting, and demeaning language, which can originate from colleagues, supervisors, or customers (Ram, 2018). Empirical research on frontline hotel employees in South Korea demonstrated that workers are frequently subjected to mistreatment, such as verbal abuse, incivility, and bullying, largely due to the hospitality industry's high

levels of stress and customer-facing environment (Jung & Yoon, 2020). This section reviews the literature on verbal harassment in the hospitality industry, which primarily arises from three sources: co-workers, managers/supervisors, and customers.

2.3.1 Verbal harassment by co-workers

The hospitality industry is widely recognised as a high-pressure working environment where close teamwork is vital for smooth operations (Durão et al., 2024). It is strongly influenced by a culture of service excellence, where employees are expected to prioritise guests' satisfaction, display consistent courtesy, and regulate their emotions in stressful situations (Radojevic et al., 2019). However, despite this culture of service excellence, hospitality employees can also face hostile interactions from colleagues. Dalgıç (2022) examined the effects of both customer and employee incivility on hotel workers' depersonalisation, using survey data from 352 employees in five-star hotels in Antalya, Turkey. He argued that behaviours such as shouting, failing to use polite expressions, ignoring or excluding colleagues, or making hostile remarks about peers, can cause employees to detach emotionally from their work and the people with whom they interact, leading to impaired performance. Such negative behaviours are frequently dismissed as playful teasing, making them harder to identify and confront. Employees' unkind verbal or non-verbal behaviours to each other, social exclusion, and overt hostility, have been shown to heighten stress, lower job satisfaction, and reduce cooperation (Lim & Cortina, 2005). According to Hur et al. (2016), employees who encounter abuse from their colleagues can suffer adverse effects, both on a personal level and within the wider organisation.

2.3.2 Verbal harassment by supervisors/managers

Verbal harassment by supervisors and managers is well-documented as a harmful form of workplace harassment in the hospitality industry. Einarsen et al. (2003) argued that it involves hostile and demeaning behaviour, supported by the power imbalance between supervisors and employees, which enables those in authority to target those staff who have little ability to defend themselves. Through an empirical analysis of data collected in high-pressure service environments in Israel, Ram (2018) found that verbal harassment often manifests as severe or abrupt tones, persistent public reprimands, humiliation during training, name-calling, mockery, offensive jokes, and inappropriate remarks, with the harm intensifying when such actions occur in front of others. In combination, these studies illustrate how verbal harassment in hospitality is normalised through authoritarian

leadership styles and managerial exploitations of authority Çıvık et al. (2024), producing outcomes such as humiliation, disengagement, and a hostile workplace culture.

In a New Zealand hospitality career study, Mooney (2018) pointed out that the intersection of gender with age and occupational class intensifies harassment, as supervisors and managers hold higher status, whereas young hospitality interns occupy lower-status positions, making them more vulnerable to manipulation, bullying, and harassment. Xu et al. (2018) contextualised such conduct as being abusive supervision, manifesting public ridicule, negative commentary to others, and other belittling acts. Therefore, it appears that supervisory harassment is reinforced not only by hierarchical power imbalances but also by intersecting social identities, creating a systematic pattern of control and subordination.

2.3.3 Verbal harassment by customers

Exploring verbal harassment by customers in the hospitality industry is crucial because understanding the nature and drivers of such behaviour can inform the development of strategies to protect employees and enhance a safe workplace culture. The hospitality sector is built around delivering exceptional guest service, and it is this emphasis that frequently exposes some employees to uncomfortable and even unsafe circumstances (Hedlin & Klope, 2023). Lin et al. (2022) defined “customer verbal aggression” as socially improper behaviour that uses offensive words, sarcasm, ridicule, or a raised voice, to undermine employees. In their study of luxury hotels, such aggression was the most common form of customer misbehaviour, with guests often using harsh language to demand faster service or express dissatisfaction. They identified that hotel settings in cultures where social hierarchies are strictly respected and authority is rarely questioned, employees often tolerate customer verbal aggression without challenge, as confronting customers is seen as socially inappropriate. Similarly, Huang and Kwok (2021), observed that customers may use aggressive language to assert control over service encounters, interrupting staff, communicating in a demeaning manner, or making personal comments that cross professional boundaries.

Mitsakis et al. (2025) argued that customer abuse and harassment, especially through verbal behaviours such as insults, rude comments, and aggressive tone, are common in the hospitality sector and often seen as a normal part of the work. Their research in the Greek hospitality industry showed that this kind of mistreatment continues because of the belief that the customer is always right, which positions the customer as superior to

employees and legitimises verbal aggression. Booyens et al. (2022) reported that verbal abuse was one of the most frequently experienced forms of customer misbehaviour in the Scottish hospitality industry. Workers in their study described this behaviour as a routine part of their jobs, with many recounting incidents of customers shouting, swearing, or making demeaning remarks. The authors introduced the concept of "social washing" to highlight how employers may publicly denounce abuse while allowing these behaviours to continue, reinforcing the message that customer aggression is acceptable. Rout et al. (2025), in their review of international research on customer incivility in the hospitality sector, argued that industry norms and service expectations give customers a sense of authority over staff, which makes verbally aggressive conduct appear natural and even justified during service interactions. In these studies, customer verbal harassment emerges as a systematic feature of hospitality work, rooted in service norms that elevate customer authority and enable behaviours that demean and disrespect employees.

2.4 Influences of verbal harassment in the workplace

This section examines the contextual influences that contribute to guests' verbal harassment in hospitality settings. The literature highlights two prominent factors that increase the vulnerability of employees: the unequal power dynamic that privileges the customers over the staff, and the role of customer intoxication in triggering abusive behaviour. The literature provides insights into how structural and situational conditions in the industry create environments where verbal harassment is more likely to occur.

2.4.1 Customer power

"Power" can be defined as something widely by "a person or group that exercises control, influence, or authority" (Collins Dictionary & Thesaurus, 2004, p. 932). Similarly, Kunstman and Maner (2011) described holding power as having the capacity to influence others by controlling resources and determining access to them within the workplace. Hadjisolomou et al. (2023) argued that harassment typically arises when the perpetrator holds power over the victim, enabling the misuse of the imbalance. Hotel employees are at risk of harassment due to their low social status in comparison to customers (Lin et al., 2022), and they believe that customers hold complete authority during service encounters to enhance the experience and create a sense of power for the customer (Korczynski & Evans, 2013). Due to power imbalances, there are moments when guests push the boundaries of what is reasonable, or demand more than what can be fairly provided. Brinker and Cain (2011) argued that in hospitality, customers hold disproportionate levels

of power because their satisfaction largely defines service success. They noted that even when organisations invest in strong service standards, a dissatisfied guest can reduce all efforts to failure. This imbalance not only grants customers the authority to judge service quality but also enables some to misuse the power.

In hospitality, financial power shapes customer-employee relationships, as customers pay for the services they receive, and may feel entitled to treat employees as inferior, reinforcing any gap in power and social status between them (Yagil, 2008). One of the most significant ways in which customer power manifests in hospitality, is through tipping. Hospitality jobs are characterised by low wages, which increases workers' reliance on tips for their income (Mensah et al., 2020). According to Mefteh et al. (2022), this dependency creates a power imbalance in which customers effectively control employees' financial security. As a result, customers hold disproportionate influence over how workers behave and how much abuse they are forced to tolerate. Together, unequal power dynamics illustrate how customer power in hospitality extends beyond service evaluation to shape employee vulnerability, workplace interactions, and tolerance of verbal abuse.

2.4.2 Customer intoxication

Customer intoxication is recognised as a major driver of abusive behaviours in the hospitality industry. According to Lac and Brack (2018), intoxication reduces attention control, which can restrict individuals' ability to think broadly and lead to behaviours ranging from relaxation to aggression. They further argued that in hospitality environments, particularly those where alcohol is served, intoxication frequently emerges as a catalyst for customer harassment of employees. Research by Booyens et al. (2022) highlighted that alcohol consumption can exacerbate negative behaviours, often bringing out hostility and aggression that employees are routinely subjected to. This creates difficulties for hospitality workers in managing customers and maintaining a safe and respectful service environment. Other forms of misbehaviour by intoxicated individuals involve the use of offensive language, belittling frontline employees in front of others, and making inappropriate sexual remarks towards staff (Harris, 2004). Together, these studies demonstrate that customer intoxication not only heightens the risk of abusive encounters but also poses significant challenges to employee well-being and organisational efforts to maintain a safe and professional hospitality environment.

2.5 Departmental contexts of verbal harassment in hotels

This section examines how verbal harassment is shaped by the specific contexts of separate hotel departments. While hotels operate a network of clearly defined departments, such as kitchens, housekeeping, food and beverage, and front office, each is shaped by distinct operational demands, physical environments, and cultural norms (Kokt, 2015). A departmental perspective, therefore provides a useful foundation for understanding the diverse ways in which verbal harassment is experienced in different departments.

2.5.1 The kitchen

The kitchen has long been characterised in hospitality literature as an intense, male-dominated department (Guerrier & Adib, 2000). In hotel kitchens, verbal harassment often arises within hierarchical relationships, where supervisors, sous-chefs, and executive chefs abuse their authority over subordinates (Cooper et al., 2017). Hoel (2003) argued that high temperatures, extended working hours, demanding workloads, and strict performance expectations contribute to significant stress for head chefs, a strain that is further reinforced by the rigid hierarchy of professional kitchens and the enduring perception of the chef as an “artist” whose temperament and outbursts are seen as idiosyncratic expressions of creativity under pressure. Building on this, Arnoldsson (2015) highlighted how harassment is normalised as part of a toughening-up process, in a culture that discourages employees from challenging authority or recognising harassment as unacceptable. The endurance of these practices was further legitimised by celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay, who claimed that “a kitchen has to be an assertive, boisterous, aggressive environment, or nothing happens” (Giousmpasoglou et al., 2020, p. 7).

Ram (2018) argued that abusive practices can become embedded in a chef's work culture, where verbal harassment and bullying are normalised within the broader hospitality organisation environment, making them entrenched practices that require organisational attention due to their causes and effects on employees. Jennings (2017) observed that young or inexperienced staff may view verbal aggression as a normal industry practice, with kitchen culture framing such behaviour as a sign of competence and authority, thereby reinforcing its acceptance and ensuring it continues through socialisation.

2.5.2 The housekeeping department

Similar to kitchen roles, room attendants' work of cleaning rooms and public areas is recognised as a highly gendered environment (Kensbock et al., 2015). Housekeeping is widely viewed as a women-dominated occupation, a perception that influences both the nature of the work and the vulnerabilities faced by its employees (Guerrier & Adib, 2000). In the housekeeping department, the most common verbal harassment comes from customers. According to Chela-Alvarez et al. (2024), such abuse can range from lewd or sexualised comments to aggressive criticism of service, often occurring when employees are alone in guest rooms or corridors. Many housekeepers are migrant women from low-income backgrounds, and they frequently face additional barriers such as language challenges and fear of losing their jobs, making it difficult to report incidents (Poulston, 2008). Although awareness of workplace harassment has increased in recent years, incidents involving customers often go unreported. They are sometimes perceived as an unavoidable part of the job, driven by the belief that the customer is always right (Oriade et al., 2024). The lack of clear reporting procedures and weak policy enforcement reinforces a culture of silence, in which enduring harassment becomes normalised as part of the job (Booyens et al., 2022). This culture of silence is intensified by the absence of witnesses and recording in organisational reporting systems.

2.5.3 The food and beverage department

Food and beverage operations involve frequent, high-pressure interactions with guests, often in public settings. Bi et al. (2021) argued that verbal harassment in this context is strongly associated with alcohol consumption, with intoxicated guests those more likely to engage in loud, aggressive, or sexually suggestive commentary towards staff. These abusive interactions may also stem from dissatisfaction with service, manifesting as verbal aggression in response to service delays, heightened by the public nature of dining spaces, which increases embarrassment for the victim (Harris, 2004). Waitresses in particular, are expected to perform high levels of emotional labour, maintaining a friendly and welcoming demeanour while simultaneously enduring verbally abusive treatment from guests (Hasbrouck, 2018; Li et al., 2018). Such abuse is often unrelated to poor performance and instead reflects displaced frustration or customer entitlement (Burton & Piercy, 2013). Unlike kitchen harassment, which is influenced by internal hierarchies, verbal abuse in food and beverage (F & B) departments is predominantly guest-driven, but reinforced by economic dependency on tips, and the prioritisation by businesses, keeping customers happy (Mefteh et al., 2022).

2.5.4 Front office

In hotels, verbal harassment manifests differently across departments. In the kitchen, it is sustained by hierarchical discipline; in housekeeping, it arises from isolated guest encounters in which employees are vulnerable, and in food and beverage, it is frequently linked to alcohol-related guest misconduct (Bi et al., 2021; Chela-Alvarez et al., 2024; Hoel, 2003). In contrast, employees in the front office are uniquely vulnerable to harassment in highly visible spaces, such as lobbies and reception desks. Unlike the relative privacy from guest view of kitchens or guest rooms, verbal harassment at the front desk occurs in publicly accessible service areas under the observation of guests and colleagues, placing additional pressure on employees to manage abusive behaviour while maintaining their professional composure. Front office employees hold the most visible and guest-facing roles in hotels, serving as the first and last point of contact for visitors. The employees at the front office, such as front-desk agents and concierges, are responsible for delivering excellent service, resolving guest complaints, and ensuring overall guest satisfaction (Wijaya et al., 2024).

Esen (2024) identified verbal abuse as one of the most frequent customer behaviours in five-star hotels in Turkey. Front office employees reported that unreasonable demands such as complimentary upgrades, often escalated into shouting or threats, alongside wider deviant behaviours such as, false accusations and sexually humiliating remarks directed at women, undermining their emotional well-being and job performance. The public nature of these confrontations leaves employees with little opportunity to remove themselves from a difficult situation, forcing them to manage abuse in real-time and maintain composure under pressure.

Although previous research has shown that workplace harassment in hotels varies between departments, most studies have concentrated on areas such as food and beverage, kitchen, and housekeeping (Burton & Piercy, 2013; Chela-Alvarez et al., 2024; Kensbock et al., 2015; Mathisen et al., 2008). These studies have helped explain how the nature of work in these departments creates specific risks and challenges, and how employees interpret and respond to such incidents. However, there is very little research focusing specifically on front office employees, even though they are often the most visible of all staff and frequently deal with verbal abuse from guests. Many studies group front office employees together with those from other hotel departments or classify them as part of the wider group of frontline workers, which makes it difficult to understand the unique

pressures and experiences of front office staff. This gap is even more significant in the New Zealand context, where no studies were found that examine the verbal harassment faced by front office employees.

2.6 Targets of verbal harassment

This section reviews the literature on the targets of verbal harassment in the hospitality industry, focusing on employees who directly experience mistreatment, as well as those who witness it as bystanders.

2.6.1 Gendered experiences

This sub-section examines the experiences of victims of verbal harassment in hospitality, highlighting how gender differences shape the nature, frequency, and impact of these experiences. In the Scottish hospitality sector, Booyens et al. (2022) identified verbal and psychological abuse as the most frequent type of workplace mistreatment, with employees in all genders describing it as an expected part of customer service. Women in their study frequently reported receiving belittling or appearance-based remarks that undermined their competence, reinforcing gendered stereotypes that demand deference and emotional tolerance in service roles. In contrast, men, while equally exposed to customer hostility, more often experienced confrontational aggression in high-conflict situations, such as enforcing rules or managing intoxicated guests.

Mitsakis et al. (2025), in their nationwide study of Greek hospitality workers, further demonstrated that women and transgender employees experience verbal harassment at higher rates than do men. Transgender participants, in particular, reported experiencing physical abuse, harassment, and bullying more frequently than did male participants. The authors argued that women's encounters with guests who verbally abuse, are more likely to intersect with societal expectations of compliance and servility, while men's experiences are often linked to challenges to their authority or competence in the workplace.

Other research reinforces these gender distinctions. Daunt and Harris (2011) for example, categorised “verbal abusers” as a specific type of difficult customer, explaining that women are more often subjected to personal and insulting comments, while men are more frequently targeted with direct verbal aggression when customers resist following rules. Mefteh et al.'s (2022) phenomenological study of waitresses in Ethiopia showed that women often internalise such mistreatment, leading to emotional distress, self-doubt, and

a stronger sense of vulnerability. Men, on the other hand, tend to hide their emotional reactions because of social norms that discourage them from expressing distress. Mills and Owens (2023) offered another perspective by viewing verbal harassment as a way of controlling workers. They showed that customer hostility can influence how employees present themselves, encouraging women and gender diverse workers to change their appearance or seek to avoid further abuse, and prompting men to adjust their behaviour to maintain authority and prevent conflict. Together, these studies suggest that while verbal harassment affects both men and women, it manifests in gendered ways: women are more likely to face comments about their appearance, unwanted sexual comments, and disrespectful language, whereas men are more likely to experience demeaning comments about competence, in aggressive tones, and language that questions their authority; men, have also reported responding to such encounters in different ways.

2.6.2 Bystander effect

Although gender influences how verbal harassment is experienced and internalised by employees, an overlooked dimension involves those who witness such mistreatment. According to Lutgen-Sandvik (2006), harassment incidents involve not only victims and perpetrators, but also bystanders, who play a crucial role in shaping outcomes when they intervene, as intervention can strengthen victims' confidence that such behaviours can be challenged and stopped, whereas non-intervention can reinforce feelings of powerlessness. Bystanders in this context are individuals who witness, but are not directly involved in acts of harassment or aggression (Latané & Darley, 1970). In workplace, co-workers, supervisors, or even customers can observe mistreatment but must decide whether to intervene, ignore, or tacitly condone the behaviour. Nielsen and Einarsen (2013) noted that repeated exposure to workplace harassment over time led to heightened stress for bystanders, with symptoms of depression, and increased intentions to resign. In some cases, Paull et al. (2012) showed that bystanders, fearing they might become targets themselves, sometimes aligned with perpetrators and reinforced the bullying. Therefore, bystanders are not merely accidental observers of workplace harassment; rather, they influence harassment incidents through both action and inaction, contributing in either constructive or harmful ways.

2.7 Impacts of verbal harassment

Verbal harassment in the hospitality sector has significant and complex effects on employees, often extending beyond the immediate incident to cause lasting

psychological, emotional, and professional harm. In various contexts, employees show increased stress responses as a primary outcome, with many reporting ongoing emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and feelings of helplessness after harassment incidents (Bi et al., 2021; Grandey et al., 2007). The impacts can be particularly severe when the abuse relates to a person's identity, such as gender. Women, for example, often describe feeling humiliated, vulnerable, and less confident after unpleasant encounters (Smith et al., 2021). Even when employees try to maintain a professional appearance, the discrepancy between what they display emotionally and what they feel, can lead to emotional exhaustion and detachment over time. Some studies have indicated that a small number of more resilient employees cope through verbal assertiveness or humour, however, such responses are relatively rare and highly dependent on the context. (Karatepe, 2013; Yin et al., 2023).

Negative psychological effects frequently influence how employees approach their work. Verbal harassment can reduce concentration, speed of low decision-making, and render employees less willing to engage with guests (Sansone & Sansone, 2015). When incidents are repeated, workers may adopt defensive communication styles or withdraw emotionally from guests to protect themselves, engaging in behaviours which may reduce the warmth and attentiveness inherent in hospitality service (Redzuan et al., 2023). Physiological stress responses, such as increased fatigue, sleep disturbances, and post-traumatic stress disorder, have also been documented, indicating that the consequences of verbal abuse extend into ill-health (Blackwood et al., 2018). These psychological, behavioural, and physical effects are connected in a cycle. When an employee's well-being is harmed, their work performance can drop, which may lead to increased guest dissatisfaction and verbal abuse, perpetuating the cycle.

2.8 Organisational support and managerial response

Organisational support and managerial response are widely recognised as decisive factors in reducing the negative impacts of verbal harassment on hospitality employees, yet the literature reveals notable differences in how effectively these are applied in practice. Ram (2018) argued that although policies addressing workplace violence, bullying, and harassment are present in many hospitality organisations, they are often fragmented, and fail to provide immediate managerial action at the time of the incident. Such inaction, he noted, erodes employee confidence in organisational protection and can leave frontline staff feeling exposed in critical moments. Mitsakis et al. (2025) echoed this concern, arguing that service culture dominated by the belief that the “customer is always right”

(p. 190) normalises abusive behaviour, with managers prioritising guest satisfaction over employee welfare. In such an environment, one employee explained that, “such behaviours are known and acceptable” (p. 190), while another recalled being told by a manager that ‘this is how things work here, so either take it or leave’ (p. 190). The tolerance for misconduct appears to characterise the industry and perpetuates a cycle of under-reporting and continued harm.

In contrast to accounts of limited or inconsistent support, other studies present a more optimistic view of managerial intervention. Baker and Kim (2020) showed that when offering procedural supports, such as clear reporting channels and consistent enforcement and emotional support, such as empathy, active listening, and validation, employees report significant improvements in psychological well-being and work quality. Such support not only mitigates the immediate distress caused by verbal harassment, but also fosters a sense of being valued by an organisation. Similarly, Chung et al. (2021) found that supportive supervisors reduce turnover intentions among employees facing customer incivility, underscoring its role in promoting both short-term resilience and long-term organisational commitment. Reinforcing these findings, Rout et al.'s (2025) systematic literature review concludes that consistent managerial backing can prevent the escalation of guest incivility into serious withdrawal behaviours, such as absenteeism and resignation.

The importance of both action and trust is reflected in evidence from New Zealand. Based on a survey of 902 tourism and hospitality workers working conditions in New Zealand, the *He Tangata* report (Williamson & Rasmussen, 2022) found that although 54% of hospitality workers who experienced bullying or harassment such as, verbal abuse, reported the incident to a manager or supervisor, 46% did not. Reasons for non-reporting included perceptions that the incident was not serious enough, expectations that no change would occur, fear of retaliation, and lack of confidence in the complaint process (Williamson & Rasmussen, 2022). These findings show that without credible, visible managerial action, employees may choose silence over engagement with organisational channels, even when harm is significant.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that organisational support is most effective when it combines procedural clarity with relational trust. Studies such as those by Baker and Kim (2020) and Chung et al., (2021) show that clear reporting systems, coupled with empathetic managerial behaviours like listening and validation, directly improve employees' psychological well-being, reduce turnover intentions, and strengthen long-

term commitment. Rout et al.'s (2025) review further highlights that consistent enforcement can prevent guests' incivility from escalating into withdrawal behaviours such as absenteeism or resignation. However, these positive examples remain limited when contrasted with evidence of fragmented or absent responses. Ram (2018) pointed out that existing policies often fail to trigger immediate managerial action, while Mitsakis et al. (2025) revealed that a “customer is always right” culture frequently drives managers to align with guests rather than staff, leaving employees feeling disposable. The New Zealand reports by Williamson and Rasmussen (2022) underscore this gap, showing that nearly half of workers refrain from reporting abuse due to fear of inaction or retaliation. Taken together, the evidence makes clear that policies alone are insufficient; what determines outcomes is the visibility and credibility of managerial engagement.

2.9 Coping strategies of individuals subjected to verbal harassment

Verbal harassment in the workplace can be understood as a form of interpersonal conflict, on which employees' responses are shaped by the coping strategies they adopt. Worke et al. (2021) found that hospitality employees commonly rely on protective behaviours such as remaining silent, avoiding their harasser, or emotionally distancing themselves when subjected to verbal abuse, with some employees limiting workplace interactions or physically removing themselves from threatening situations. This tendency towards non-confrontation was also reported by Holm et al. (2023), who noted that employees often downplay incidents to reduce emotional strain, although a smaller group in their study directly challenged the offender or took preventative steps to minimise future occurrences. Seeking interpersonal support from trusted colleagues or friends emerged as a valuable outlet in both studies, particularly by providing emotional reassurance and practical coping advice. Elshaer et al. (2025) described a more isolating response, in which employees avoid giving or receiving feedback, as a way to shield themselves from further mistreatment, a strategy that offers short-term relief but risks reducing professional communication and engagement. These findings collectively show that hospitality employees mainly rely on avoidance as a coping strategy, with social support and direct action used less frequently.

When harassment originated from customers, Yagil (2008) reported that employees may use diversionary tactics such as redirecting conversations, involving a supervisor, or physically removing themselves from the interaction, although escape avoidance was the dominant approach in service cultures that prioritised customer satisfaction over staff welfare. This pattern was echoed in Touni and Mohamed Hussien's (2021) study of

Egyptian hotels, where some victims endured abuse quietly due to fear of retaliation or doubt about managerial intervention, while others chose resignation when a behaviour became intolerable. Dlima et al. (2024) emphasised that access to emotional, informational, and practical support from colleagues or supervisors not only reduced the psychological toll of harassment but also increased the likelihood of constructive coping, such as formal reporting or confrontation.

Evidence from Stockdale (1998) indicated that gender shapes coping responses, with women more likely to draw on social support and emotion-focused strategies, such as venting, expressing emotions, withdrawal, or avoidance. Men tend to rely more on approaches that address the cause of the problem directly through action or problem-solving.

Studies in hospitality have shown that employees often cope with verbal harassment through avoidance, while organisational responses are limited. Although these patterns are well documented, little is known about whether employees in the New Zealand hospitality industry adopt similar or different coping strategies. Moreover, research rarely considers gendered differences, leaving a limited understanding of whether men and women respond differently. Therefore, this gap presents a recommendation to study how front office employees in New Zealand hotels cope with verbal harassment from guests, with particular attention to gender differences.

2.10 Summary

This chapter has reviewed the literature on verbal harassment in the hospitality industry to establish what is currently known, and where significant gaps remain. Three, research gaps exist in the research on verbal harassment. Firstly, while harassment has been examined in the kitchen, housekeeping, and food and beverage departments, there is limited research specifically on front office employees, despite their heightened exposure to guest interactions. Secondly, no study has investigated verbal harassment of front office staff in a New Zealand context. Thirdly, limited attention has been given to gender differences in relation to how verbal harassment is experienced, perceived, and managed. Accordingly, this study aims to investigate the experiences of front office employees in New Zealand, examining the types of verbal harassment they face from guests, how men and women perceive and respond to such incidents, and the roles of coping strategies and managerial support in shaping these experiences.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter explains the methodology used in this study to explore verbal harassment experienced by hotel front office employees in New Zealand. It first presents the research aims and questions, followed by an explanation of the qualitative interpretivist approach adopted for the study. The reasons for selecting semi-structured interviews as the method of data collection and the use of snowball sampling for recruitment are then explained. Thematic analysis is introduced as the approach used to examine the interview data and identify patterns and themes. The chapter also discusses the ethical considerations that ensured participants' rights and well-being were protected, before concluding with a summary of the research methods employed.

3.2 Research objectives and questions

This exploratory qualitative study was designed to capture the lived experiences of front office employees in New Zealand hotels who had encountered verbal harassment from guests. Semi-structured interviews were employed to allow participants to reflect on the types of harassment they experienced, the influence of gender on their perceptions, and the way these experiences shape their motivation. To meet the objectives of the study, three research questions were proposed:

Q1: What types of verbal harassment do front office employees experience from guests?

Q2: How does gender identity influence how employees perceive incidents of verbal harassment by guests?

Q3: In what ways does verbal harassment influence the motivation of front office employees and what role does gender identity play?

3.3 Research paradigm

To identify the research methodology most appropriate for a particular study, it is first necessary to understand the underlying research paradigm. A research paradigm describes distinct perspectives on understanding the world and serves as the foundation on which research is conducted (Davies & Fisher, 2018). It reflects a researcher's assumption about the nature of reality (ontology), the nature of knowledge, and how we know what we know (epistemology), and the strategies used to generate that knowledge (methodology) (Pringle & Booyesen, 2018). Different paradigms guide different ways of seeing and

explaining the world, and include positivist, post-positivist, interpretive, critical, and pragmatic paradigms (Booyesen et al., 2018).

As this study sought to understand how front office employees interpreted and responded to guest verbal harassment, an interpretivist paradigm was considered the most suitable to capture these varied and subjective perspectives. Interpretivism recognises reality as socially constructed and seeks to uncover the depth of human experiences and meanings within specific contexts (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). This orientation was well-suited to explore the way employees made sense of verbal harassment incidents, recognising that men and women may interpret and respond to similar encounters in different ways. By acknowledging gendered differences, interpretivism allowed the research to capture multiple realities shaped by individual perspectives and workplace environments (Ryan, 2018). Thus, it enabled an in-depth understanding of the diverse and socially constructed realities of front office employees' experiences of guests' verbal harassment of them.

3.4 Qualitative research methodology

A research methodology captures the overall approach to a study. It includes the guiding philosophies and the justification for selecting specific research methods and analytical tools (Nunkoo, 2018). It is the science of studying how research is carried out systematically and logically, providing a structured way to solve a research problem (Patel & Patel, 2019).

Research can be conducted using qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods approaches, each shaped by different paradigms in relation to how knowledge is understood and generated (Loseke, 2017). This study adopted a qualitative approach because of the need to use data collection methods that gave participants the opportunity to tell their subjective stories, recognising that qualitative research involves interpreting and creating meaning rather than discovering a single objective truth that exists independently within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). A qualitative approach was particularly well-suited to this study because verbal harassment is a subjective and lived experience that varies according to gender, role, and workplace culture. Qualitative research methods are designed to capture these experiences in depth and include a range of qualitative methods such as ethnography, case studies, focus groups, and in-depth interviews (Berg & Lune, 2017). Among these, interviews were chosen, as they allowed participants to share personal accounts of harassment incidents in their own words, offered the flexibility to probe sensitive topics, and had the potential to generate rich narratives that reflect the

complexity of the participants' lived experiences. A qualitative approach is concerned with understanding how individuals interpret and give meaning to their experiences, rather than reducing behaviour to numerical indicators (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). It fits well with the interpretivist paradigm, as this study did not aim to generalise experiences but to explore how front office employees make sense of guest misconduct, highlighting the complexity and depth that quantitative approaches may overlook.

Quantitative methods would not have been suitable for this exploratory study, as they focus on numerical data rather than textual information, and offer limited depth beyond statistical results (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). An important feature of quantitative approaches is that they are characterised by the development of hypotheses that are grounded in prior theories (Morgan, 2015). However, while this approach is valuable for examining cause-and-effect relationships or identifying trends, it often overlooks the complex social, emotional, and contextual dimensions of human experience (Bryman, 2016). Therefore, a quantitative methodology was considered inappropriate for this study, as the aim was not to test hypotheses or measure variables, but to understand how front office employees experience and make sense of verbal harassment from guests.

3.5 Data collection

3.5.1 Semi-structured interviews

This study employed semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method. Qualitative interviews are well-suited to interpretivist research as they allow in-depth explorations of how participants understand and make meaning of their experiences. As Alshenqeti (2014) explained, interviews are purposeful conversations that allow participants to share their lived realities, offering insights that may be challenging through other data collection methods. In the social sciences, four main types of interviews are utilised structured interviews, unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews, and focus group interviews (Bryman, 2016).

Semi-structured interviews were also chosen because they offer a flexible yet guided format that offers a balance between structure and the freedom to explore emerging topics, are widely used in qualitative research for providing this balance (Alsaawi, 2014). Semi-structured interviews rely largely on open-ended questions (Karatsareas, 2022), which were important for this study because they encouraged participants to speak freely about their experiences of verbal harassment, share their feelings, and describe how they responded. Turner (2010) explained that a semi-structured interview requires topics and

questions to be prepared in advance, although the interviewer retains flexibility to adjust the wording and sequence of questions during the interview. One of the main advantages of semi-structured interviews is that they give participants the chance to respond freely instead of giving brief affirmative or negative answers (Ilovan & Doroftei, 2017).

3.5.2 Question design

Designing interview questions that directly address the research aim and objectives is a key stage in qualitative research. Questions must be carefully structured to be clear, accessible, and relevant, while encouraging participants to share their experiences in depth (Bryman, 2016). In this study, semi-structured interview questions were developed to guide the conversation while allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences in their own words (Creswell & Poth, 2024). The follow-up questions, which build on participants' initial responses with greater detail and targeted prompts, are often used to gain a clear explanation of the topic, elaborate on incomplete ideas, or address gaps in the information provided (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

In this study, the interview questions were carefully designed to align with the research aim and gather detailed information addressing the three key research questions. The first part of the interview focused on understanding the types and nature of verbal harassment experienced by front office employees from guests. Participants were asked to describe specific incidents, the language or behaviours involved, and to reflect on the frequency and context of such encounters, as well as whether factors such as gender or ethnicity influenced them. Building on this, the second part aimed to explore the ways employees of different genders understood and interpreted these experiences, including their emotional reactions, immediate responses, and any effects on their sense of professional identity and self-worth. Finally, the interviews examined employees' perceptions of how verbal harassment affected their motivation and engagement at work across different genders, and how participants understood these implications for their enthusiasm for their roles, thoughts of leaving their jobs, or influenced their views on managerial and organisational support. Through open-ended questions and follow-ups, participants were encouraged to reflect deeply, allowing their perspectives to emerge naturally and providing nuanced insights into the nature, interpretation, and consequences of verbal harassment by guests in the front office.

3.5.3 Sampling and interview process

Snowball sampling was employed in this study to recruit participants. Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling technique often used in qualitative research to access participants who may be difficult to identify or reach through conventional methods (Noy, 2008). This method is recognised as appropriate for research on vulnerable or sensitive topics because it provides access to populations that are hidden, marginalised, or reluctant to volunteer (Parker et al., 2019), which was particularly relevant to this study of front office employees who might hesitate to disclose their experiences of harassment due to fear of stigmatisation or professional consequences. Through referrals from initial participants, this method allows a researcher to build trust and reach individuals who might otherwise remain hidden (Sadler et al., 2010).

To be eligible for this study, participants were required to be employed in front office roles in hotels in New Zealand and to have had at least six months of guest-facing experience. These criteria ensured that participants were likely to have encountered verbal harassment from guests and could reflect on their experiences in depth. The recruitment process for the study began with an advertisement posted on the researcher's personal LinkedIn profile to attract potential participants working in the hotel industry. This advertisement successfully led to the recruitment of the first participants. In addition to this, information about the study was shared through the researcher's professional network, which included duty managers, front office managers, and personal contacts in the hospitality sector. These contacts further disseminated the invitation within their own networks, which helped reach potential participants. At the end of each interview, participants were asked to share the researcher's information sheet and contact details with others who met the study's inclusion criteria. Interested individuals contacted the researcher directly by email to express their willingness to participate. If no response was received, a follow-up reminder was sent one week later. Over a three-week recruitment period, six people responded to indicate they would participate in the study.

Once the participants were confirmed, the researcher arranged for interviews that were convenient for the participants, such as online meetings or in a private meeting room at the researcher's university, Auckland University of Technology (AUT). Before the interviews began, participants were given an information sheet and asked to sign a consent form and complete a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B). This confirmed their understanding of the study, their rights, the voluntary nature of participation, and the conditions of ethics approvals. With participants' permission, all

interviews were digitally recorded to ensure accuracy and to maintain trust between the researcher and participants.

Each interview was conducted using a semi-structured format, allowing the conversation to be guided by open-ended questions while leaving space to explore new topics that emerged during the discussion. Interviews lasted approximately 30-45 minutes and were conducted either face-to-face in a private meeting room or online via Microsoft Teams video conferencing software, depending on participants' preferences and availability. Interviews recordings provided data for accurate transcription and later analysis, and no written notes were taken during the conversation to maintain a natural atmosphere. Participants who felt discomfort at any stage were advised they could access confidential counselling through the Health and Counselling service at AUT.

3.6 Data analysis

This study employed a reflexive thematic analysis technique to analyse the qualitative data and identify patterns in participants' narratives. Reflexive thematic analysis was selected as it is a contemporary and interpretive approach to qualitative analysis, involving active engagement with data and ongoing reflection during the development of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2019). As noted by Braun and Clarke (2022), reflexive thematic analysis is a flexible and systematic approach that can address a wide range of research questions, with a particular focus on understanding people's experiences and perspectives. It does not just focus on what is clearly spoken (the semantic or surface level), but also helps to find the hidden or deeper meanings (the latent level) behind people's words (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This makes the analysis richer and gives a better understanding of the data. One of the key strengths of reflexive thematic analysis lies in its flexibility to draw on diverse theoretical lenses while fostering critical reflexivity throughout the research process, thereby shaping and enriching knowledge production (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase framework offers a clear structure for moving from raw qualitative data to producing meaningful and well-defined themes. The steps are: 1). familiarisation with data, 2). generating initial coding, 3). searching for themes, 4). reviewing themes, 5). defining and naming themes, and 6). producing the report. Following these steps helps to provide a structured, consistent, and rigorous approach to data analysis, thereby supporting the trustworthiness of the findings. Byrne's work (2022) was drawn on as a worked example demonstrating how Braun and Clarke's reflexive

thematic analysis framework can be applied. Each of these six phases, along with their application in this research, is explained in detail in the following section.

Step 1: Data familiarisation

The first phase starts by becoming familiar with the data. In reflexive thematic analysis, familiarisation involves immersing oneself in the dataset through active, repeated engagement to gain a deep understanding of its scope and meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This phase is considered an important part of the analytic process, as it allows the researcher to start noting early patterns, emotional tones, and potential areas of significance that can inform later coding. Familiarisation may involve activities such as listening to audio recordings, transcribing interviews, and re-reading transcripts, which help to build a close connection with the data and acknowledge the researcher's role in interpreting (Byrne, 2022). During this phase, each of the six interview recordings was carefully listened to without note-taking to observe tone, pauses, and expressions, followed by manual transcription to enable deeper engagement with the narratives. Transcripts were read and re-read multiple times, with meaningful sections highlighted and early ideas noted to build interpretive connections with the data. Recordings were revisited when further clarity was required, ensuring that early attempts were identified and meaningfully considered. Throughout this stage, subjectivity was treated as an analytical resource that shaped interpretation, rather than something to minimise, supporting a close and reflexive connection with the data.

Step 2: Generating initial codes

The next phase required the researcher to generate initial codes. In reflexive thematic analysis, coding is an active and interpretive process in which the researcher identifies and labels aspects of the data that are meaningful or relevant to the research focus (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Unlike approaches that treat coding as a purely descriptive exercise, reflexive coding involves the researcher making interpretive decisions and recognising their role in shaping the analysis. Codes are developed systematically across the dataset, focusing on both semantic content and underlying meanings. This phase provides a structured foundation for the later development of broader patterns of meanings and themes (Byrne, 2022).

In this study, each of the six interview transcripts was coded manually using the “comments” function in Microsoft Word. Transcripts were read line by line, and meaningful words, phrases, or sentences describing experiences of verbal harassment,

and emotional or behavioural responses were identified and labelled. For example, when participants described feeling “stressed and discouraged” after an encounter, this was coded as “emotional exhaustion.” Earlier transcripts were revised throughout the process to refine and adjust codes as understanding deepened.

Step 3: Generating initial themes

This phase begins once the data have been initially coded and organised. Theme generation in reflexive thematic analysis involves an active and interpretive process in which the researcher constructs themes by identifying patterns of shared meaning across codes (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This stage requires moving back and forth between coded data, analytical notes, and theoretical positioning, to ensure the emerging themes are conceptually coherent and grounded in the data (Byrne, 2022). In this study, the coded extracts were systematically reviewed and organised around central ideas that represented shared meanings. Codes that conveyed similar ideas, such as “abusive language,” “raised voice,” and “personal comments,” were grouped together to form a potential theme representing guest verbal aggression.

Irrelevant or weakly related codes were refined or excluded through this recursive process, ensuring clear thematic patterns aligned with the analytic framework.

Step 4: Reviewing potential themes

In reflexive thematic analysis, after potential themes have been identified, the next step is to review and refine them. Theme reviewing in reflexive thematic analysis is a reflexive and analytical stage that focuses on testing the strength and clarity of the developing themes (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This process examines how well each theme captures a clear and meaningful pattern across the data, rather than treating themes as fixed or predetermined. Byrne (2022) emphasised the need to move carefully between the dataset, codes, and themes, to refine their boundaries and ensure internal coherence. During this stage, the provisional themes were reviewed in relation to the coded extracts to confirm whether they accurately represented the shared meanings within the data. Themes that overlapped or lacked clarity were refined, with some codes combined to create stronger and more focused themes. For example, codes related to “acceptance,” “emotional distancing,” and perceiving harassment as “part of the job” were brought together under a broader theme relating to normalising guest verbal harassment. In some cases, subthemes were created to give a more precise structure to complex patterns. This

recursive refinement ensured that the themes remained conceptually clear, distinct from one another, and firmly grounded in the data.

Step 5: Defining and naming themes

Once the themes have been reviewed, the next step is to define and finalise them. Defining and naming themes in reflexive thematic analysis is an active and interpretive stage that focuses on identifying the central organising concept of each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This step involves refining the themes to make their core meaning clear, and ensuring they are distinct yet still aligned with the overall story (Byrne, 2022). This process requires careful reflection on how each theme captures shared meaning across the data while contributing to the broader narrative. In this study, the themes were refined and named to clearly express their focus and analysed purpose. For example, codes related to "acceptance," "emotional distancing," and perceiving harassment as "part of the job" were brought together under the theme "normalisation of harassment," reflecting the same experience they represented. This ensured that each theme was conceptually clear, analytically strong, and well connected to the overall story of the data.

Step 6: Producing the report

This stage begins when the themes are fully refined, and involves carrying out the final analysis and presenting the report. According to Braun and Clarke (2019), this stage focused on crafting an analytical narrative that demonstrates how meaning was actively interpreted and constructed through the research process, rather than simply reporting themes as if they existed in the data. The analysis was approached reflexively, showing how interpretations shaped the thematic structure. Byrne (2022) explained that this stage extends beyond summarising, to illustrate the reflexive engagement that underpins each theme, using carefully selected and vivid data extracts to evidence the analytical claims. In the final stage of this study, these extracts were woven into a coherent narrative to explain and interpret the findings in relation to the research questions, ensuring that the report remained concise, logical, and engaging, while clearly showing how analyses were carried out.

3.7 Ethical considerations

As this research focused on human participants and sensitive experiences of workplace harassment, ethics approval was obtained from the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEK). The study was conducted in line with AUT's ethical

guidelines to ensure that participants' rights, dignity, and well-being were respected throughout the process.

Participation in the study was voluntary. Before the interviews began, participants were given an information sheet and asked to sign a consent form and complete a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B). This confirmed their understanding of the study, their rights, the voluntary nature of participation, and the conditions of ethical approval. All questions for the interview were reviewed in consultation with the researcher's supervisor and approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC) to ensure they were ethically appropriate and sensitive. In addition, follow-up and probing questions that emerged during the interviews were directly connected to the main topics and remained relevant to the discussions (see Appendix B for the interview guide). Most of the questions were framed in an open-ended manner, allowing participants to share detailed stories and personal accounts of their experiences. With permission, all interviews were digitally recorded to ensure accuracy and to maintain trust between the researcher and participants. Also, written informed consent was obtained before each interview began, and participants were reminded that they could withdraw at any stage without penalty or decline to answer questions they found uncomfortable. To minimise emotional risks, the researcher was attentive to signs of discomfort and prepared to pause or stop interviews if necessary. Participants who felt discomfort at any stage could access confidential counselling through the Health and Counselling service at AUT. Confidentiality and anonymity were rigorously maintained. Pseudonyms were assigned, and identifying details such as names or workplaces were removed from transcripts and reports.

To reduce workplace pressure and protect privacy, interviews were conducted in neutral and confidential locations chosen by participants, such as AUT meeting rooms, public cafes, or online. These measures ensured participants could share their experiences openly and safely. The ethics approval letter is attached in Appendix A.

3.8 Summary

This chapter outlined the methodology used to explore the way front office employees in New Zealand hotels experience and respond to verbal harassment from guests. A qualitative interpretivist approach was adopted to enable an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences, and the meanings they attached to them. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for flexibility and depth in

capturing individual perspectives. Participants with at least six months of front office experience were recruited through snowball sampling, resulting in six participants. The data were analysed using the thematic analysis technique of Braun and Clarke (2019), following their six-phase reflexive thematic analysis, which guided the process of identifying, developing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within participants' narratives. Ethics approval was obtained from AUTECH, and participants were informed of voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality. The following chapter presents the key findings of this analysis and discusses their implications.

CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the research. It first presents the participants' demographic profiles and an overview of the major categories and themes, followed by an analysis of the main categories generated from the reflexive thematic analysis of interview data. Each theme is discussed in detail, supported by direct quotes from participants to illustrate key experiences and perspectives. The chapter concludes with a summary of the key findings.

4.2 Participants' demographic profiles

This study involved six participants currently working in front office roles in six different hotels in New Zealand. The demographic information collected was participants' gender, age, ethnicity, current role, years of service with their current employer, and geographical location, with the sample comprising six front office employees: four women and two men. Participants represented a diverse workforce in terms of gender, ethnicity, and tenure, reflecting the multicultural nature of the New Zealand hospitality industry. To ensure confidentiality and meet ethical requirements, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to protect their identities. Detailed demographic characteristics of participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 *Participants' Demographic Profiles*

| Name | Age | Gender | Ethnicity | Tenure | Role | Location |
|-------------|------------|---------------|------------------|---------------|-------------------------|-----------------|
| Ethan | 27 | Man | Indian | 2 years | Front Office Supervisor | New Plymouth |
| Sia | 26 | Woman | Thai | 11 months | Receptionist | Auckland |
| Chloe | 34 | Woman | Indian | 7 months | Guest Service Agent | Auckland |
| Ruby | 24 | Woman | Filipina | 1 year | Receptionist | Auckland |
| Chris | 42 | Male | Indian | 1 year | Guest Service Agent | Auckland |
| Ava | 27 | Woman | Indian | 1 year | Guest Service Agent | New Plymouth |

4.3 Types of verbal harassing behaviours experienced by front office employees

4.3.1 Participants' understanding of verbal harassment

Participants were asked to describe what verbal harassment meant to them in the context of their work. They had a common understanding that verbal harassment involved behaviour crossing the boundaries of professional respect. Most described it as language or tone that insulted, belittled, or intimidated them. However, some participants also included non-verbal cues such as body language or gestures as part of harassment, suggesting broader interpretations beyond spoken words (i.e., verbal). Their responses showed that employees viewed harassment as behaviour that went beyond polite guest interaction, using words, tones, or gestures that conveyed disrespect or caused discomfort.

Ethan described verbal harassment as language that crossed a personal boundary:

“Verbal harassment for me would be the use of certain words that personally insult you, abusive spoken foul language which indicates lack of respect.”

Ruby viewed it as speech that belittles or intimidates an employee:

“For me, verbal harassment is like when someone uses some words or some tones that makes someone belittle, insulted, or intimidate.”

Ava mentioned that harassment occurs when guests' cross boundaries of polite conversation in their communication:

“Verbal harassment is when they cross the line as to what they meant to say and not meant to say it.”

Sia highlighted how body language also contributes to harassment, as it can communicate disrespect without words:

*“Of course using bad words like *** but it can also be like the way they speak to us or their body language is like 50% of communication already.”*

Chloe defined it as knowingly making someone feel uncomfortable through words or actions that are morally or ethically wrong:

“Verbal harassment is more of when you are making somebody uncomfortable. You know that this is not right, this is not ethical or morally right, but you're still saying it to make that person uncomfortable in front of you.”

These definitions show that participants considered verbal harassment not only as the use of offensive language but also as any form of communication, verbal or non-verbal, that

crosses professional boundaries and causes discomfort. However, they also recognised a status differential in which guests had more power and expected that interactions should not extend beyond this.

4.3.2 Harassing behaviours from the guests

Participants reported that most guest interactions were professional and routine, but that harassing behaviours occur often enough to be recognised as part of their front office work. These were not described as everyday, all-guest experiences, but more as something that happened once in a while and was memorable when it did occur. From the accounts, two broad forms of harassment were identified as verbal and non-verbal, with some incidents involving both at the same time.

Verbal harassment

The most common verbal behaviour occurred when guests changed to a rude or aggressive tone of voice during a non-problematic service encounter/interaction. Guests apparently raised their voices sometimes, or adopted a curt and unfriendly manner without any apparent reason. Ethan described this shift from polite to rude:

“There have been times when guests spoke in a way that made me feel very uncomfortable. Sometimes they use a rude tone or words that are not respectful. Guests have become aggressive, kind of raise their voice or use insulting language towards me.”

A second verbal pattern involved guests using a sharp or aggressive tone from the start of the communication. Ava described that some guests spoke in a way that felt harsh:

“The tonality was not normal [i.e., there was no apparent reason for the change]. It was curt and a little aggressive.”

A small number of participants reported sexually suggestive tone or words that crossed professional boundaries. As Chloe recalled:

“There was a guest who actually wanted to talk in some inappropriate way. He was behaving a bit inappropriately, which was not correct, not ethical.”

In the context of the interview, this was described as unwanted and outside normal guest-staff conversation, indicating sexualised harassment.

Finally, several participants described verbal undermining of employees' professional competence, with guests refusing to accept staff answers and insisting on a manager even when the staff member was following instructions. Sia explained:

“Sometimes we feel like we’re at the bottom of the chain... solve problems and they’ll just like, I don’t want to talk to you any more. Can you get the manager? But the thing is, all the answers that we’ve been giving them is [after] we consulted with the manager.”

Non-verbal harassment

The participants also described experiencing non-verbal forms of harassment from guests, as in some cases, verbal aggression escalated into non-verbal forms of harassment. These behaviours were expressed through sexually inappropriate gestures, negative or aggressive body language, and physical actions that made participants feel uncomfortable or disrespected. These actions were interpreted as deliberate and unprofessional.

One common example was guests throwing credit cards at a receptionist instead of handing them over, which Sia described as deliberate:

“Sometimes, you know, we talk to them nicely and they just throw the cards at us when we ask for the credit cards.”

Another non-verbal form of harassment was withholding the card in a way that made the interaction uncomfortable, as Chloe explained:

“He was handing over me the credit card... showing and taking it back again and again, not letting me hold it. I could see on his face that this is something which is not normal and it’s not a good gesture as well.”

Overall, the findings show that harassing behaviour from guests was not unusual, though most guests behaved appropriately. The different forms of harassment revealed how guests sometimes used words, tone, or gestures to show dominance or frustration. Verbal aggression and dismissive comments were often aimed at controlling the interaction, while non-verbal actions, such as throwing items, showed disrespect without words. These patterns indicate that guest harassment in hotels can take both direct and subtle forms, each crossing professional boundaries in different ways.

4.3.3 Causes or triggers of verbal harassment

Participants explained that incidents of harassment usually did not happen randomly but were linked to specific situations in service. These were most often moments when guests were dissatisfied with the service outcomes or experienced delays. Such situations began with a disagreement or misunderstanding and then escalated into aggressive or disrespectful behaviour towards front office staff.

Ethan illustrated how unexpected charges could escalate routine interactions into confrontational exchanges:

“So it's generally like not an everyday thing, but once in a while when there's a disagreement between the guest and you... for example parking... they see it on the bill and they start being aggressive. That why is it on the bill?”

Even normal hotel financial procedures, such as asking for pre-authorisation at check-in, could trigger negative reactions from guests. Ava noted:

“A few months ago, I had a guest checking in, and she was just frustrated. So when I asked for the pre-authorisation, she started cussing.”

Chris reported a similar experience when a guest's frustration over a missing reservation led to verbal abuse:

“The guest came so late and I couldn't find his reservation...he got really angry and said some verbal abuse to me because of the frustration.”

Overall, the findings suggest that incidents of guest harassment were not daily occurrences but happened frequently enough to be considered part of front office work routines. The main triggers were financial or service-related issues, failures to meet expectations such as in billing disputes, or unexpected parking or miscellaneous payment charges, and booking errors. These situations often led to visible frustration and loss of composure from guests, expressed through raised voices or cursing. These triggers showed that even routine service tasks involving money, when unfamiliar to guests, could easily provoke disrespectful reactions from them.

4.4 Perceived influence of employee identity on harassment

4.4.1 Perceptions of guests' gender

Most participants observed that guests' gender influenced the nature and tone of guest-employee interactions. Their accounts revealed three distinct themes: interactions between male guests and male employees, between woman guests and woman employees, and reflections on how employees' own gender shaped their interpretations of these encounters.

Participants described negative interactions between male guests and male employees as particularly tense or competitive. Ethan (male participant) observed that male guests were more assertive or aggressive when served by male employees than they were when assisted by women:

“Male guests, especially when they see that (a) male person is assisting them, they try to get a bit aggressive compared to when the same guest goes to a lady.”

Interactions between women guests and women employees could also become challenging. Sia (woman participant) reflected that women guests were occasionally difficult to manage, describing them as more outspoken or demanding with her during interactions, than were male guests.

“For some reason it’s always the female guests. When it comes to the lady, it’s like Karen all the way.”

In contrast to the earlier views, one woman participant suggested that inappropriate guest behaviour was not determined solely by gender. Chloe noted that inappropriate or disrespectful behaviour could come from any gender:

“Even females do the same [bad behaviour] at times.”

Overall, most participants noted that gender influenced how guests showed dissatisfaction or assertiveness during service interactions. One male participant felt that male guests tended to be more confrontational than they usually were, because of their gender. While women participants gave mixed views, one described women guests as demanding, while another pointed out that both men and women could behave inappropriately.

4.4.2 Effects of employees' gender on harassment

Participants discussed whether gender influenced how guests interacted with front office employees. The following accounts are presented under two headings: how men described their experiences with guests, and women’s perspectives on gendered differences in guest behaviour.

Most participants believed that the gender of an employee affected guest behaviour at the front desk. A woman participant said that guests often treated her differently from the way they treated male colleagues, sometimes trying to exert pressure or behaving in a more demanding way. Ava (woman participant) explained that guests seemed to adjust their behaviour depending on whether they were interacting with a man or a woman, noting that gender appeared to influence guest attitudes more strongly than did ethnicity:

“Gender definitely...The way they interact with myself and my male manager could be a little different, they feel like they could pressure me more.”

However, Chris (male participant) believed that gender did not determine guest behaviour, suggesting that harassment usually occurred when guests were dissatisfied:

“Gender or ethnicity doesn’t matter. Harassment comes when guests don’t get what they want.”

Overall, most participants believed that the gender of employees influenced how guests interacted, with women participants reporting that guests often felt more comfortable questioning their explanations of procedures or pressuring them to make different decisions, whereas male participants viewed harassment as occurring when guest expectations were not met, not employee gender or ethnicity. This indicates that male receptionists' decisions on routine procedures were not questioned until there was a problem. Men reported fewer instances of their decisions being questioned, and they were likely to believe that guest behaviour was driven more by situational factors, such as unmet expectations, than by the gender of the employee.

4.4.3 Effects of employee ethnicity

Participants also discussed whether their ethnicity influenced the way guests interacted with them at the front desk. This section presents the experiences of employees who felt that their own ethnicity (i.e., race) shaped guest attitudes and guest communication style, followed by those who believed that ethnicity made little difference.

Sia (Thai) explained that some guests altered their communication style while interacting with her, speaking slowly or with exaggerated clarity in a way that felt condescending. She also mentioned that certain guests appeared reluctant to engage with minority ethnicities and waited until a New Zealand European or non-minority colleague was available:

“They try to speak slow and look at your face as if you don’t understand English. For me that’s very rude. They wouldn’t talk to any of the non-white receptionists until a Kiwi came in and they started talking.”

In contrast, Chloe (Indian ethnicity) believed that ethnicity did not have a major influence on how guests treated employees, observing that all women employees faced similar challenges regardless of their ethnic background:

“Not at all. Other ethnicity girls are facing same problems.”

Overall, participants offered mixed perspectives on the influence of ethnicity, and their gender appeared to influence their beliefs. All participants identified themselves as belonging to ethnic minority groups, yet only the women felt that their ethnic background

negatively affected how guests communicated with them. In contrast, the two male participants believed that harassing behaviours reflected broader challenges experienced by all employees, regardless of their ethnicity or gender. Being a woman of a minority ethnicity may therefore increase the likelihood of receiving harassing behaviours from guests.

4.5 Responses of employees to incidents of harassment

4.5.1 Emotional responses

Participants described a range of emotional reactions following incidents of verbal harassment from guests. This section first presents the experiences of employees who reported strong negative emotions such as anger, sadness, and embarrassment, followed by accounts that show how these emotions were managed or concealed in order to remain professional.

Sia explained that although she often felt angry or hurt, professional boundaries prevented her from responding:

“I feel really angry and sad, of course and sometimes I also want to talk back, but we can't.”

Ethan explained that these encounters left him feeling demotivated and embarrassed, describing how a single unpleasant interaction could affect his entire day:

“You feel sad and angry or discouraged and it's really demotivating when your day is going good but suddenly something like this happens. After such incidents, it's pretty stressful and maybe embarrassing, you feel embarrassed.”

Ava reflected on the inner conflict between maintaining composure and experiencing emotional distress, explaining that her outward calm often masked a strong internal reaction:

“Outside I'm really calm, but inside I'm like really in a frenzy and I'm like, oh my God, what do I do?”

Overall, participants described these experiences as emotionally taxing, often leading to a sense of helplessness and emotional fatigue. Despite feeling angry, hurt, or anxious, most employees reported that they suppressed their emotions to appear calm and professional in front of guests and colleagues.

4.5.2 Normalisation of harassment

Participants discussed how frequent exposure to verbal harassment led them to perceive such behaviour as an ordinary or expected part of their role. This section first outlines the views of participants who described gradual desensitisation, followed by data from those who reflected on how professional expectations reinforced such acceptance.

Several participants described how repeated incidents of guest harassment created a sense of resignation and emotional numbness over time. What initially felt upsetting or unfair eventually became routine, as employees learned to rationalise these interactions as inevitable in hospitable work. Chloe conveyed this acceptance with a tone of quiet fatigue, explaining that she no longer took such behaviour personally and viewed it as a common occurrence across hotels:

“Another day. Just another day of hospitality. Honestly, I don’t take it personally because I know this happens everywhere.”

Sia added that hotel staff were often expected by the management to absorb guests' frustrations without reaction, describing emotional endurance as part of their professional identity:

“It’s considered to be part of your job to be the mental absorption for them.”

4.5.3 Coping strategies to deal with abuse

Participants described a range of strategies used to manage incidents of verbal harassment. These included: 1) remaining calm and emotionally distancing from the behaviour; 2) reinterpreting experiences in a more positive light; and 3) setting boundaries. While most participants aimed to maintain their professionalism, there were subtle differences between how women and men reported their responses these situations.

Chloe (woman participant) mentioned that she coped by emotionally distancing herself from incidents and choosing not to take guests' behaviour personally. She described maintaining composure, ignoring repeated misconduct, and asserting herself only when necessary:

“Honestly, I don’t take it personally because I know this happens everywhere. First I try to be calm and if he continues, I try to ignore, then I firmly say no.”

Sia (woman participant) focused on maintaining optimism by reframing negative experiences and focusing on positive guest interactions:

“I just think it’s a bad day but then a good guest comes along and it’s not that bad.”

Chris (male participant) described a more restrained approach preferring silence to avoid escalation:

“Normally I don’t respond. I just keep quiet, because if you argue, it heats up.”

All employees described strategies to manage harassment through calmness and self-control. The women spoke more of emotional regulation and positive reframing to maintain their composure and morale. In contrast, the men discussed strategies to withdraw or to remain silent to prevent further conflict. The findings suggest that gender shapes how employees managed emotional responses to harassment.

4.5.4 Effects of harassment

Participants discussed how repeated experiences of verbal harassment affected their motivation, emotional well-being, and perception of their professional roles. This section first outlines the perspectives of employees who reported declining motivation and enthusiasm, followed by data from those who described feelings of frustration and emotional strain, and concludes with experiences of diminished professional value.

Repeated incidents of guest mistreatment were described as emotionally draining and discouraging, gradually reducing employees' enthusiasm for their work. Ethan explained how repeated guest interactions affected his engagement at work:

“These experiences lower motivation. It becomes harder to come to work with a positive attitude.”

He further reflected that such experiences often led him to question his self-worth and purpose within the organisation:

“You feel sad and angry or discouraged and it’s really demotivating when your day is going good but suddenly something like this happens.”

“Yeah, sometimes the way guests treat me makes me question the value of my role, makes me feel like I’m only here to serve.”

Chloe echoed these feelings, admitting that guest behaviour could be disheartening, but she tried to remain realistic about the nature of hospitality work:

“Yes, at times it becomes a little demotivating... but then again, work is work.”

Sia shared a similar sense of discouragement, describing how dismissive guest attitudes made her feel undervalued, despite her competence:

“Sometimes we feel like we’re at the bottom of the chain- solve problems- and they’ll just like, I don’t want to talk to you anymore. Can you get the manager? But the thing is, all the answers that we’ve been giving them is [after] we consulted with the manager.”

Ava described the emotional strain that came from concealing stress and frustration while maintaining a calm exterior during guest interactions:

“Outside I’m really calm, but inside I’m like really in a frenzy and I’m like, oh my God, what do I do?”

Overall, participants revealed that verbal harassment had cumulative emotional and motivational consequences. There appeared to be gender differences; the women often spoke about the emotional toll and the internal effort to remain composed, while the men focused more on a loss of motivation and diminishing feelings of self-worth. Collectively, these experiences reflected how persistent disrespect and emotional fatigue undermined employees' professional confidence and diminished their long-term satisfaction in hospitality work.

4.6 Responses of managers/management

4.6.1 Managerial support

Participants discussed how managerial support influenced their ability to cope with guest harassment.

Several participants described receiving direct and consistent support from managers when incidents occurred. Chris highlighted the importance of ethical leadership and fairness as part of his workplace culture:

“My superiors really support me; that’s also part of work ethics.”

He added that managers actively addressed guest complaints, provided constructive feedback, and ensured accountability:

“They analyse and solve the problem and give feedback or positive criticism.”

Ruby emphasised the importance of emotional reassurance, noting that her manager and colleagues often intervened or offered comfort during guest encounters:

“Support usually comes from colleagues and sometimes from the manager. I feel that I’m not alone.”

Similarly, Sia appreciated that her managers acknowledged when guests were at fault rather than placing blame on employees:

“I never get blamed; our team kind of knows it’s the guest.”

Overall, participants described managerial support as a key protective factor in coping with guest harassment. Active involvement, fairness, and empathy from managers reinforced their sense of safety and reduced emotional strain.

4.6.2 Lack of managerial support

Participants also reflected on situations where managerial or organisational responses were inconsistent or unsupportive.

Ethan explained that the level of managerial support varied across situations, describing a workplace where empathy was inconsistent:

“Sometimes managers or colleagues try to comfort or give advice but other times there’s no real proper support.”

Sia described multiple experiences of contradictory and discouraging responses from managers. She felt undermined when her manager communicated differently with guests, creating a sense of blame:

“I felt unsupported by my manager when he told the guest something different and made it look like I was wrong.”

This lack of consistency, she explained, directly affected her morale and trust in leadership:

“I want to quit every day, honestly. Especially from the rooms division manager himself when he does that or he pulls things like this... it just feels like you’re the scapegoat, you’re the bait.”

Sia further expressed frustration that management often sided with guests or shifted responsibility for guests’ complaining or harassing behaviours to employees, which made her reluctant to raise concerns. She explained that such experiences created the fear of being misunderstood or judged rather than supported:

“They should back us up, not twist it around and make it our fault. I don’t like talking to HR [human resources] or management, or else they’ll just look at you like you’re weak or dramatic.”

Across all participants, managerial responses emerged as a decisive factor shaping how harassment was experienced and managed. Supportive and fair leadership helped them recover from difficult encounters, while indifferent or contradictory behaviour intensified the emotional impact, leaving participants feeling blamed or unprotected.

4.6.3 Desired management response

Participants expressed a clear desire for more structured procedures and consistent managerial support when dealing with incidents of guest harassment.

Ethan emphasised the need for clearer guidance and training for frontline employees to deal effectively:

“The workplace should give stronger support and training on handling these kinds of situations.”

Similarly, Sia, who had earlier described feeling blamed by management, said that staff needed stronger managerial support during difficult guest interactions:

“They should back us up, not twist it around and make it our fault.”

She explained that she often avoided approaching HR or management out of fear of being judged:

“I don’t like talking to HR or management, or else they’ll just look at you like you’re weak or dramatic.”

Also, Sia reflected on ways management could promote emotional well-being after stressful encounters. She suggested that even small gestures of care could help staff feel valued and supported, contrasting this with the lack of emotional acknowledgement she had experienced:

“If they could flip it like make it something positive, like chocolate for bad days.”

Although there were many examples of support, there was a need for improvement. They believed that structured training, empathetic leadership, and small morale-boosting actions would strengthen organisational responses to guest harassment and make employees feel more valued and protected.

4.7 Summary

This chapter presented the main findings of the study, which provided empirical evidence of how front office employees in New Zealand hotels experience and interpret verbal harassment from guests. The first key finding revealed that guest harassment was a

recurring workplace stressor that took both verbal and non-verbal forms, including rude or aggressive tones, dismissive language, and inappropriate comments. Such behaviours often occurred during service interactions involving billing disputes, booking errors, or guest dissatisfaction, highlighting how routine workplace situations could quickly escalate into disrespectful treatment.

The second key finding was that aspects of an employee's identity shaped experiences of harassment. Women reported being spoken to in a condescending or pressuring tone during routine service interactions, while men employees described more confrontational behaviours, especially from male guests when a service failure occurred.

The ethnicity of employees also influenced the experiences of some participants, who felt that guests adjusted their communication style when interacting with employees from minority ethnic backgrounds, often assuming limited English ability or reduced competence.

The third key finding illustrated that participants responded to harassment in different ways, which enabled them to moderate the effects in some cases. They described feelings of anger, frustration, and discouragement, with repeated incidents leading to emotional exhaustion and declining enthusiasm for work. Some coped through avoidance or positive reframing, while others normalised harassment as an expected part of hospitality work. Clear gendered differences emerged in these responses: women more frequently described the emotional toll of harassment and the internal effort required to remain composed, often relying on emotional regulation and positive reframing, while men emphasised declining motivation and self-worth and tended to withdraw to remain silent avoid further conflict. The level of managerial and peer support significantly influenced these experiences. Those who received empathy and support from managers felt valued and protected, while others who faced inconsistent responses or blame reported a loss of trust and morale.

Overall, the findings demonstrated that guest verbal harassment in hotel front office departments is not a collection of isolated encounters, but a reflection of a deeper workplace culture that normalises disrespect from guests and demands emotional endurance from the employees. The links between incidents of verbal harassment, gender, emotional effects, and managerial responses showed a repeated pattern in which employees were obliged to remain calm and accommodating, even when mistreated. This cycle of obligatory tolerance and consequent emotional strain appeared to undermine

morale, erode professional confidence, and reinforce unequal power relations between guests and staff. Ultimately, the findings showed that verbal harassment is both a guest behavioural and hospitality industry systemic issue, rooted in hospitality's service ethos and expectations of emotional labour. As participants' accounts revealed, addressing the frequency of incidents will require organisational accountability, consistent managerial support, and a cultural shift that places respect, fairness, and emotional well-being at the centre of service practice.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the study's findings, linking them to the broader academic literature and the research aims. The purpose of the chapter is to explain what the findings mean, why they matter, and how they contribute to understanding verbal harassment in hotel front office work. The discussion follows the order of the research questions, highlighting the key patterns that emerged from the interviews. The chapter starts by analysing the different types of verbal harassment faced by front office employees and the triggers behind these behaviours. It then examines how gender influences employees' perceptions of guest behaviours and highlights the specific gendered aspects present in the data. Lastly, the chapter considers how verbal harassment affects employees, focusing on their emotional reactions, coping mechanisms, and the importance of managerial support. Throughout, the discussion links the study's findings with the extant hospitality literature to demonstrate how verbal harassment in hotels is created by guests, experienced by employees, and dealt with by management.

5.2 Types of harassment faced by front office employees

5.2.1 Triggers of verbal harassment

The findings of this study indicate that verbal harassment is often triggered during service moments when guests' expectations are not met, particularly in relation to financial procedures. This pattern of guests reacting negatively to unexpected financial procedures aligns with the work of Boukis et al. (2023), which found that customers frequently use aggressive language or threats when transactional expectations are not met. Similarly, Esen (2024) reported that hotel employees regularly face shouting and verbal hostility when guests believe they are authorised to receive financial concessions or upgrades, showing such expectations are associated with more aggressive guest behaviour.

The hospitality sector is built around delivering exceptional guest service, yet this emphasis frequently exposes some employees to uncomfortable and even unsafe circumstances (Hedlin & Klope, 2023). In this study, service disruptions, particularly booking-related issues, such as difficulties in locating reservations, led guests to express frustration directly toward front office staff, even when they were not responsible for the error. These findings correspond with research showing that guests often displace frustration on to frontline workers during moments of service delay, uncertainty, or their

perceptions of poor service (Harris, 2004; Lin et al., 2022). This pattern aligns with Brinker and Cain's (2011) argument that customers possess disproportionate power in hospitality, meaning that even robust service practices can be undermined when guests experience dissatisfaction. In such situations, staff become the most visible representatives of the organisation and are therefore positioned to receive anger that stems from broader dissatisfaction with the service process rather than from their individual actions (Tešin et al., 2021).

Overall, the findings of this study suggest that hospitality service norms emphasising guest satisfaction, emotional restraint, and employees' responsibilities for resolving service failures position guests as holding authority in service interactions, encouraging them to view verbally aggressive behaviours as natural or justified when they feel inconvenienced (Rout et al., 2025). In this study, the guests' use of aggression appeared to act as a tool for reaffirming customer dominance within the service relationship, signalling an inequitable service relationship embedded within hospitality interactions. The fact that frustration was directed at staff even when guests recognised that the employees were not responsible for the issue, shows that verbal harassment is tied to hospitality workplace norms; front office employees are positioned as responsible for maintaining guest satisfaction at all times, making them the representatives of an unsatisfactory hotel experience when service processes fall short.

5.2.2 Behavioural aspects of verbal harassment

The behavioural expressions of verbal harassment identified in this study illustrate how guests use tone, language, and gestures to negotiate and assert power in front office interactions. A common pattern in the findings was the abrupt shift from polite conversation to a rude or aggressive tone, with guests raising their voices or reacting negatively without a clear reason. Huang and Kwok (2021) demonstrated that customers sometimes adopt aggressive or interruptive language as a means of regaining control when service interactions do not align with their expectations. In this study, abrupt shifts in tone were understood as expressions of the structural power imbalance in service work, in which guests draw on their privileged positions to influence outcomes and reaffirm their authority within the interactions (Korczynski & Evans, 2013).

Another common behavioural pattern involved guests undermining employees' competence by dismissing their explanations of a problem or insisting on speaking to a manager, despite receiving accurate information. This reflects a sense of customer

entitlement, in which guests challenge employees' authority as a way of reasserting control (Mitsakis et al., 2025). Harassment often arises when the perpetrator holds greater power over the victim, creating opportunities for that imbalance to be misused (Hadjisolomou et al., 2023). Yagil (2008) argued that in hospitality, customers' financial power shapes social interactions and power dynamics, because paying for a service can lead guests to treat employees as inferior, reinforcing social and status gaps. Participants' accounts of guests dismissing staff responses or questioning their competence illustrate how this power imbalance plays out in everyday interactions. Alongside verbal hostility, employees also reported non-verbal actions that conveyed disrespect, such as gestures intended to signal dominance or imply inferiority. Although harassment research has examined non-verbal sexual gestures (Booyens et al., 2022), there appears to be little attention to non-verbal aggression gestures in hotel front office settings. This finding suggests that behaviours such as intentionally throwing or withholding items may be an under-recognised form of hostility, signalling disrespect or dominance in ways that are not yet fully captured in the hospitality harassment literature.

The biological objectification of women emerged in harassing behaviours. Women in the study described instances where verbal harassment crossed professional boundaries, including remarks delivered in a sexually suggestive tone. Although less frequent, these experiences were described as uncomfortable and unwanted, echoing research showing that sexualised verbal conduct can be obvious or concealed in hospitality settings and is often more readily perceived by women (Rotundo et al., 2001). Sexually suggestive remarks towards women underscore how service expectations, such as maintaining warmth, patience, and emotional composure, draw on gendered stereotyping of women as nurturing and accommodating, thereby increasing their vulnerability to unwanted sexualised interactions (Mefteh et al., 2022). Inappropriate comments are a different form of sexual harassment, arising not from service problems, but from the desire to place women in a subordinate position in which the guests feel entitled to speak to women in a negative way (Coffey et al., 2023).

Overall, the behavioural patterns observed in this study showed that guests' verbal harassment extended well beyond explicit insults and was expressed through shifts in tone, dismissive communication, sexually suggestive remarks, and symbolic gestures that breached professional boundaries. These behaviours illustrate the range of ways verbal and non-verbal harassment is enacted in front office interactions, offering insights into

how guests use language and behaviour to assert control or dominance during service encounters.

5.3 Influence of gender on perceptions of guest verbal harassment

5.3.1 Male employees' perceptions

The findings revealed that male front office employees held differing views on whether gender influenced the behaviour of guests during interactions. Men perceived that male guests tended to become more assertive or confrontational when served by a male staff member, compared with when they interacted with women employees. The findings suggest that gender may play a role in shaping interpersonal dynamics (Coffey et al., 2023), particularly through the performance of dominance or competitiveness in male-to-male exchanges. This interpretation aligns with the work of Daunt and Harris (2011), which found that men, as customers, may engage in more forceful verbal behaviour when they feel their authority is being challenged, or when addressing another man in a position of service, reflecting wider societal norms around displays of masculine dominance to indicate their superior social status. While older studies, such as that by Harris (2004), suggested that gender is not a factor in customer abuse, this study suggests that gender does indeed influence customers' deviant behaviours, including harassment.

5.3.2 Women employees' perceptions

The study found that women perceived that guests' behaviour was influenced by gendered expectations, which shaped both the tone and direction of their interactions. A prominent finding was that women guests were perceived as more outspoken, demanding, or difficult by women employees, suggesting that gender similarity did not necessarily lead to easier encounters. Some individuals assume that two women will relate to each other more easily, because research shows that women are often more emotionally attuned and sensitive to others' emotions (Christov-Moore et al., 2014), which could create an expectation of mutual understanding. This heightened emotional sensitivity can make demanding or confrontational behaviour from other women feel more personal or stressful, rather than more relatable, which may help explain why women guests were sometimes perceived as more outspoken or difficult. Previous research has not suggested that women guests are more difficult to handle for women staff. However, longstanding gender stereotypes shape expectations of women working in frontline roles, who are often judged on their ability to remain polite, calm, and emotionally controlled during service encounters (Guerrier & Adib, 2000; Mefteh et al., 2022).

The original findings of this study are therefore important, as they reveal that interactions between guests and employees in front office service encounters are influenced by gendered workplace expectations surrounding emotional expression. The findings showed that women employees expressed anxiety about being perceived as ‘too emotional’ by managers and guests. Therefore, because women are expected to remain calm and polite, demanding behaviour from women guests can feel more personal and more critical.

Building on these findings, the study further indicates that front office service encounters are also shaped by gendered assumptions about authority. The findings showed that women employees experienced guests as being more willing to question or pressure them than did male colleagues, suggesting that their decisions were treated as legitimate. However, the pattern in this study can be understood in light of everyday gender norms in many communities, where women are still expected to hold less authority than men (Benhadda, 2022). Such assumptions can influence how guests interact with women employees, making it more likely that their decisions will be challenged or their competence questioned. As a result, the women in this study faced an extra layer of scrutiny that intensified the emotional strain of already demanding guest interactions.

5.4 Gendered effects of verbal harassment on motivation

5.4.1 Emotional effect

Verbal harassment appeared to have a demotivating effect on front office staff, but the emotional impact of these experiences differed noticeably between women and men. The findings showed that women experienced feeling more emotionally exhausted and more closely judged during hostile encounters than did their male counterparts. This aligns with research showing that women service workers face stricter expectations to maintain a polished composure, resolve conflicts, and maintain team morale, which makes harassment more emotionally demanding for them, and harder to disengage from (Shaikh, 2024). This tension suggests that women experience emotional dissonance due to a disconnect between their genuine emotions and the behaviour they are required to display. Such experiences not only cause momentary discomfort but; also they have a deeper impact on women's emotional stability, and can weaken their desire to remain in front office work (Price, 2008). In this study, the demotivating effect became particularly strong when organisational support was lacking. This aligns with research showing that weak supervisory backing can intensify the emotional impact of customer verbal aggression

and reduce employees' motivation (Mitsakis et al., 2025). As a result, women's motivational decline appeared to stem not only from the harassment itself but from the cumulative emotional burden of suppressing distress, navigating gendered devaluation, and perceiving limited support from managers.

Male employees described situations in which disrespect from guests caused an abrupt drop in their motivation. They explained that such incidents damaged their sense of competence and day-to-day confidence. According to Park et al. (2022), male service workers often experience customer incivility as a threat to professional identity. The lack of respect and acknowledgement of their technical skills evokes embarrassment and loss of face in a public setting, which disrupts the employee's focus and undermines their sustained engagement with their tasks (Mitsakis et al., 2025). This aligns with the study's findings that even minor moments of guest disrespect can disrupt their positive workdays and lead them to question whether their competence and contribution are valued, and contributions were being respected. A study by Bi et al. (2021) supports this finding, showing that customer rudeness triggers psychological strain that weakens motivation and diminishes the positive effect required for service performance. A notable insight from this study, is that, for men, the impact of verbal harassment was linked less to emotional suppression and more to the feeling that such behaviour challenged their legitimacy and authority in a highly visible front office role. This adds a new insight to the literature, which rarely considers how male employees interpret harassment as a threat to their professional standing rather than as an emotional burden.

5.4.2 Coping strategies of employees

The study indicates that repeated exposure to guest harassment gradually shaped how women and men made sense of hostile encounters with guests. The findings suggest a strong pattern of normalisation, in which recurring exposure to rude comments, raised voices, and unfair criticism gradually become embedded in expectations of front office work. Rather than responding with surprise or concern, employees appear to absorb these behaviours as part of the service environment (Ram, 2018). Accepting abuse as an industry norm is described as emotional habituation, a well-documented occurrence in hospitality occupations (Guerrier & Adib, 2000). According to Yagil (2008), when workers are repeatedly confronted by aggressive customers, they often respond by emotionally distancing themselves from the situation, treating hostility as a routine part of their job to maintain professional performance. A similar pattern was noted by Mitsakis et al. (2025), who observed that verbal behaviours such as insults, rude comments, and

aggressive tones are so widespread in hospitality that they are frequently considered as a normal part of the work.

Some gender related differences appeared to emerge among participants. The women in this study explained that they learned not to take interactions personally and instead reframed them as part of an inseparable aspect of service work. Such distancing, although protective during an incident, helping employees stay calm and continue their tasks, carries longer-term motivational costs, because repeated suppression of emotional reactions can gradually weaken their sense of meaning and personal investment in their roles (Elshaer et al., 2025). This was evident in the way participants described feeling drained, wishing to resign from work, or being unable to maintain their usual enthusiasm for their work after an abusive encounter, even when they attempted to balance the number of negative encounters with more positive guest interactions. This ongoing cycle of emotional distancing and suppression ultimately contributes to reduced engagement and a quiet form of emotional fatigue that develops over time (Sliter et al., 2010).

Male participants displayed a related yet distinct form of normalisation. While women often used emotional reframing as a deliberate strategy, men reported remaining silent during hostile encounters to avoid escalation. Worke et al. (2021) similarly observed that hospitality workers often adopt protective strategies such as staying quiet, avoiding the source of abuse, or creating emotional distance to manage verbal hostility, temporarily withdrawing from the workspace when situations feel unsafe. Holm et al. (2023) added that non-confrontation is a common response, as employees frequently downplay incidents to reduce emotional strain, although a small number choose to confront the behaviour directly or take steps to prevent future occurrences. Although silence appeared to help male employees navigate the immediate moment, and any perceived threat to their professional identity was not outwardly visible to onlookers, the findings revealed that this strategy offered limited emotional recovery potential in a front office context; it did not appear to help restore any feeling of being in control again. Although this strategy helped employees navigate a difficult situation, it did little to restore their confidence in their professional role. Over time, the absence of opportunities to regain a sense of control gradually eroded their confidence in their professional skills, making sustained motivation more difficult.

Overall, the findings suggest that employees' use of coping strategies to deal with harassment was designed to preserve their sense of professionalism. However, there appeared to be a gradual erosion of work motivation when hostile interactions became

normalised as part of the hospitality culture. Women tended to internalise the effects of harassment through emotional distancing, while men relied more on withdrawal and silence. Both strategies helped employees to meet the expectations of service work, but they none-the-less reported a decline in their emotional energy, confidence, and engagement, despite attempts to minimise the negative impacts of abuse.

5.4.3 Influence of managerial support on motivation

Managerial support emerged as a critical factor shaping how employees stay motivated after difficult interactions with guests. Many participants described receiving mixed or inconsistent responses from managers, which often intensified the emotional impact of harassment rather than easing it. When managers actively acknowledge what employees have endured, offer reassurance, or provide clear guidance, they can significantly reduce the emotional strain associated with customer mistreatment and help rebuild workers' confidence (El Demerdash & Said, 2018). This protective effect was also reflected in the work of Chung et al. (2021), who found that supportive supervisors can reduce employees' turnover intentions when they face customer incivility, reinforcing the idea that managerial validation plays a central role in sustaining both short-term resilience and long-term organisational commitment. However, Ram (2018) argued that although many hospitality organisations have formal policies addressing workplace violence, bullying, and harassment, these frameworks are often fragmented, and fail to provide timely intervention at the point of an incident. When such policies do not translate into immediate managerial action, employees' trust in organisational protection is weakened, leaving frontline staff feeling vulnerable, precisely when support is most needed. The findings also revealed negative moments when managers contradicted staff in front of the guests or shifted blame, which weakened workers' trust that the organisation would support them when incidents occurred. Mitsakis et al. (2025) noted that hospitality workplaces often place a strong emphasis on keeping guests satisfied, which can unintentionally allow rude or aggressive behaviour to go unchallenged. The findings of this study indicate that when managers act in ways that reflect a power imbalance, employees feel unprotected and undervalued, which increases the emotional impact of harassment and makes it harder to recover afterwards.

Some participants described hesitating to approach HR or management because they feared being judged or dismissed. Williamson and Rasmussen (2022) reported similar reasons for non-reporting, noting that employees often stay silent when they believe their concerns will not lead to a meaningful response, or may even be minimised. When

inappropriate behaviour is treated as harmless or brushed off as humour, it signals to employees that their concerns are unlikely to be taken seriously, which over time, discourages reporting and contributes to a slow decline in motivation (Booyens et al., 2022), as was the case in this front office study. Participants emphasised that even small gestures of acknowledgement from managers can have a meaningful effect on how they coped after stressful encounters. Baker and Kim (2020) similarly, showed that brief recognition can help restore a sense of belonging and enable employees to re-engage with their work.

Overall, this aspect of the findings showed that the type of managerial responses strongly influenced how verbal harassment affected employees' motivation. The findings indicate that employees' motivation is shaped by guest harassment itself and by the consistency and quality of managerial responses. When managers minimise incidents, contradict staff, or fail to provide protection, employees' confidence and motivation are undermined, even though difficult guest behaviour is expected as part of the role.

5.5 Summary

The findings presented in this chapter suggest that verbal harassment in front office work can be best understood by examining how employees interpret guests' verbal and non-verbal behaviour, rather than by focusing solely on what guests say. Participants described feeling harassed when a guest's reaction made them feel their judgment, role, or decision-making was no longer respected. This indicates that verbal harassment in hotels is not merely a communication issue; it highlights a critical point in the relationship between guests and front office employees, in which the balance of authority shifts, making employees feel that their professional standing has been compromised. The interpretivist analysis of employees' lived experiences of harassment used in this study enabled a clearer and accurate understanding of why certain interactions have such a strong emotional effect.

The findings also indicate that employees' interpretations of harassment are shaped by gender. Women in the study more often understood these incidents as gendered, in terms of regulating their emotions, whereas men saw them as challenges to their professional competence and capability, but did not perceive any challenge to their ability to control their emotions. These gendered patterns reveal that harassment does not carry the same meaning for all employees, even in similar situations. These insights add depth to the

existing literature by showing that gender shapes the emotional impact of harassment in ways that have not been previously documented in a front office research context.

Another insight revealed in the findings is that the impact of harassment on employee motivation in a workplace is based on how employees interpret these encounters, rather than the incidents themselves. Participants described their motivation weakening when harassment made them feel that their role, judgment, or competence was being questioned, and when they sensed they were left to carry an emotional burden alone without managerial support. Women tended to experience this as a gradual erosion linked to ongoing emotional pressure, while men described sharper declines when their capability felt undermined. All participants stressed that acknowledgement and support from managers could have helped restore their confidence. This highlights that motivation in front office work is shaped not only by personal resilience but by whether employees feel supported and taken seriously within an organisation.

The study's findings offer new and important contributions to hospitality research on workplace mistreatment. No previous studies have looked specifically at verbal harassment in hotel front office roles, nor have they examined these dynamics in a New Zealand context. This study advances knowledge by showing that harassment is an identity-moderated experience influenced by gender. It also reveals how motivation is protected and damaged through organisational support. These conclusions move beyond understanding verbal harassment in a descriptive sense, describing what guests do, but instead explain that harassment affects employees in significant ways. They provide a strong platform for the next chapter, which discusses the wider significance of these findings and outline their practical and theoretical implications.

CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION

6.1 Introduction

This chapter concludes the dissertation by revisiting its aims, summarising the key findings, and outlining the theoretical and practical contributions of the study. Evidence from semi-structured interviews with front office employees in New Zealand hotels is integrated to provide a coherent synthesis of the findings. The chapter explores the way participants experienced verbal and non-verbal harassment from guests, with particular attention to the gendered patterns that emerged and the implications these encounters had on employees' motivation. The findings are considered in relation to the research aims and questions to clarify their theoretical and practical significance. The theoretical implications of the results are then considered, followed by a discussion of the practical implications for hotel managers seeking to address guest-to-employee harassment. The chapter subsequently acknowledges the limitations of the research and concludes by outlining recommendations for future studies that can build on the findings presented.

6.2 Research aim and objectives

This research aimed to examine how front office hotel employees experienced verbal harassment from guests, with a specific focus on gender differences in these interactions. It examined the types of harassment encountered, how employees of different genders interpreted and reacted to this behaviour, and how these experiences shaped their emotional responses, motivation, and coping strategies. The study also sought to understand employees' perceptions of organisational support following such encounters. To address these aims, a qualitative interpretivist approach was employed, with women and men working in front office departments of New Zealand hotels. Their accounts provide original insights into how women and men perceive and address verbal and non-verbal harassment.

6.3 Key research findings

This section summarises the main findings generated through interviews with six front office employees, identifying patterns in their experiences of guest-initiated harassment. Firstly, the primary finding shows that front office employees encounter a wide range of verbal and non-verbal harassment behaviours during routine service interactions. Participants described guests raising their voices, making accusations, using belittling or condescending remarks and adopting hostile tones, alongside non-verbal behaviours such

as eye-rolling, prolonged staring, mocking gestures, and, on occasion, sexually suggestive gestures. A secondary finding was that these behaviours intensified when employees enacted essential front office procedures, particularly around payment, identification, deposits, and booking conditions. This supports wider hospitality research, which shows that customer aggression often emerges when service expectations are not met (Rout et al., 2025). However, this study extends existing research by demonstrating how such incidents are embedded and triggered in the everyday functioning of a hotel reception desk. The significance of this finding lies in showing that harassment is not an occasional disruption but a routine operational risk that affects both employee well-being and the quality and consistency of front office service delivery.

A second significant finding was that women and men appear to experience guest harassment in different ways, shaped by gendered expectations in front office work. Women characterised harassment as a form of emotional strain, noting that repeated incidents of disrespect and subtle undermining eroded their confidence and sense of professional legitimacy over time. Their interpretations reflected the heightened emotional labour norms placed on women, who are expected to maintain composure and warmth even when encountering belittling behaviour. In contrast, the men in this study perceived harassment as a direct challenge to their professional competence or authority during highly visible interactions in which their ability to manage guests was central to their role identity. These incidents created a sense that their professional status was being questioned, leading to a sudden but temporary decline in confidence rather than incremental emotional exhaustion. A secondary finding was that although both genders recognised guest entitlement and service pressure as triggers of aggression, they understood these encounters differently because gender norms appeared to shape what they experienced either as emotionally harmful or as professionally challenging. Prior hospitality studies have given limited attention to gendered differences in the interpretation of customer aggression, so this finding adds new and valuable evidence to the field. Its significance lies in showing that verbal harassment affects women and men in different ways, which has important implications for staff well-being and the type of support required by employees in front office roles.

Finally, the analysis suggests that verbal harassment had gender-specific effects on employees' motivation to sustain front office performance. Participants of both genders described a reduced willingness to provide discretionary efforts such as personalised service, proactive problem-solving or maintaining a welcoming demeanour, after hostile

encounters, particularly when managerial support was absent or inconsistent. For women, the findings indicate that motivation declines over time as repeated instances of disrespect during routine interactions, such as managing queues, resolving booking issues, or handling payment disputes, made it increasingly difficult to maintain the energy and emotional presence required in front-line work. Women explained that the sustained emotional regulation required to remain calm and courteous left them with little capacity to be warm, enthusiastic, or proactively engaging with guests. For men, motivation was affected when harassment directly challenged their authority or competence during operational decision-making. In these situations, participants experienced a temporary loss of confidence, which led them to hesitate when making decisions, avoid asserting authority, and respond to guests more cautiously in subsequent interactions.

6.3.1 Theoretical implications

This study contributes to theory by directly addressing the gaps in incivility in service work identified in the literature review. First, by examining verbal harassment in hotel front offices, the research extends customer misbehaviour and hospitality interactions into a setting that has been largely overlooked. Existing studies frequently examine kitchen, housekeeping, or food and beverage roles, but rarely the reception desk, where employees engage in prolonged, complex interactions with guests. The findings, therefore, advance theoretical understandings by indicating that front office employees interact repeatedly with the same guests during check-ins, enquiries, complaints, and check-outs, in highly visible public spaces where they must enforce operational policies while remaining calm, polite, and accommodating, even during a conflict. This supports the argument that harassment must be examined within the specific operational contexts in which it occurs.

Second, by examining verbal harassment in the New Zealand hotel sector, the study contributes new empirical evidence to a geographical context that has been under-represented in hospitality research. This is significant, because customer aggression and employee vulnerability vary across national and organisational environments (Booyesen et al., 2018; Dalgiç, 2022; Mitsakis et al., 2025c). The study, therefore, provides context-sensitive evidence that extends theoretical understandings beyond North American and European literature.

Finally, the study makes an original contribution with the finding that the effects of harassment on employee motivation and emotion appear to vary between women and

men. Fresh insights help explain how gendered expectations in hotel service roles shape the outcomes of seemingly similar incidents of harassment for different employees.

6.3.2 Practical implications

The findings demonstrate that guest verbal and non-verbal harassment behaviours are a frequent and often unpredictable feature of hotel front office work, with clear practical implications for those in managerial positions. For operational managers, the findings highlight the need to recognise harassment not only in explicit insults, but also in repeated patterns of dismissive tone, raised or impatient voices, exaggerated politeness, hostile or dismissive gestures, and behaviours that generally undermine employees' authority. Participants described these behaviours as occurring regularly and producing cumulative emotional strain, indicating that managers should be equipped to recognise both the frequency and effects of such encounters rather than treating them as isolated service challenges. Best practices, therefore, involve establishing clear behavioural guidelines that define different forms of customer aggression, systematically documenting their occurrence, and acknowledging their impact on employee motivation, confidence, and service consistency. The findings further showed that employees' motivation was strongly shaped by how managers respond to harassment, making managerial response a critical point of intervention. Effective practices require specific and predictable managerial behaviours, including timely acknowledgement of incidents, validation of employees' professional judgement, clarification that appropriate boundaries were maintained, and brief follow-up conversations after difficult interactions. These actions are consistent with recommendations in the emotional labour literature, which emphasises that organisation recognition and consistent managerial responses are essential for limiting emotional exhaustion and sustaining engagement in customer-facing roles. Human resources managers play a key role in embedding these practices through training and reporting systems that capture tones, delivery, and non-verbal cues, while also accounting for the gendered and racialised ways in which frequent and unpredictable guest aggression is experienced. Implementing these role-appropriate practices is likely to offer organisational benefits by reducing motivational declines, improving the efficiency and emotional consistency of front office service delivery, strengthening service quality, and lowering turnover risks associated with repeated exposure to unacknowledged guest aggression, thereby supporting the long-term sustainability of front-line hotel operations.

6.3.3 Limitations of the research

While this study offers meaningful insights into verbal harassment in hotel front office work, several limitations should be acknowledged. Data collection was constrained by the short time-frame of a master's dissertation and the operational realities of hotel work, which made it difficult to schedule interviews around rotating shifts, night work, and staff availability. As a result, the final sample was relatively small, and opportunities for follow-up interviews were limited. In addition, the sensitive nature of the topic presented an additional challenge, as several potential participants were hesitant to discuss their experiences of guest harassment, reducing the diversity of perspectives available for analysis. Finally, as the research focused specifically on front office employees, the results may not be directly transferable to other hotel departments or to hospitality sectors outside New Zealand.

6.4 Recommendations for future study

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, and given the early stage of research into verbal harassment of hotel front office employees, several recommendations can guide future research. As highlighted in the literature review, verbal harassment of hotel front office employees is an under-researched area in hospitality employment studies, and this research is an initial step towards addressing this gap rather than a comprehensive account. The small number of front office employees limited the range of experiences captured. Further studies could therefore build on this work by recruiting larger samples and including employees from different hotel regions, departments, and organisational levels, to develop a broader understanding of how verbal harassment is experienced across the hospitality sector. In addition, this research provided evidence of gender and ethnicity-based differences in how employees interpreted guests' behaviour, but the complex dimensions underlying these differences were beyond the scope of the study. Further research could therefore explore how cultural background, language confidence, professional identity, and emotional labour expectations shape employees' interpretations of guest harassment and aggression. Finally, the findings showed that organisational support played a critical role in shaping employees' motivation after repeated incidents of harassment; however, this study did not include the perspectives of managers. Further studies may benefit from including managerial views or adopting comparative designs to understand how organisational policies, leadership styles, and reporting practices influence the handling of customer aggression. Such research would deepen the

understanding of both individual and structural factors that contribute to employees' experiences of verbal harassment in hospitality settings.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Ethics approval



Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC)

27 August 2025
Shelagh Mooney
Faculty of Culture and Society

Dear Shelagh

Re Ethics Application: **25/246 Behind the smile: Examining verbal harassment experienced by front office employees by guests in hotels**

Thank you for your responses to AUTEC's conditions.

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 27 August 2028.

Standard Conditions of Approval

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the [Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research](#) and as approved by AUTEC.
2. All public facing documents must have the AUTEC approval number and be of a high standard of spelling and grammar. Dates on the Information Sheet(s) and Consent Form(s) must be consistent.
3. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEC prior to being implemented.
4. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date.
5. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project.
6. Any serious or adverse events must be reported to AUTEC, this includes unforeseen issues that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.
7. AUTEC grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management permission for access from any institution or organisation at which your research is being conducted and you need to meet all ethical, legal, public health, and locality obligations or requirements for the jurisdictions in which the research is being undertaken.

The application number and title need to be referenced on all correspondence related to this project.

All forms are available online <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>

For any enquiries, please contact the Secretariat at ethics@aut.ac.nz
(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTEC Secretariat
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: vmp7474@autuni.ac.nz

Appendix B: Research tools

B.1 Participant information sheet



Participant Information Sheet

Date that data collection will start:

01/09/2025

Project Title

Behind the smile: Examining verbal harassment experienced by front office employees by guests in hotels

An Invitation

Hello, my name is Akshata Gaikwad. I am a master's student in the School of Hospitality and Tourism at AUT University. I am undertaking a research project for a dissertation which is part of my qualification of Master of International Hospitality Management. My research aims to understand how different genders who experience verbal harassment in the hospitality industry react and respond.

I would like to invite you to participate in my research. To participate in the study, you will need to be currently working in the Front Office department of a hotel in New Zealand, with a minimum of six months of experience and should be above the age of 18. Due to a potential clash of interest, employees of the ProInvest Hotels, Auckland City Centre, are ineligible to participate in the study. Your participation is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time during and after the interview without any negative consequences.

What is the purpose of this research?

This research explores how front office hotel employees in New Zealand experience verbal harassment from guests, with a focus on how these experiences may differ based on gender identity. It aims to understand how individuals respond emotionally and mentally, the strategies they use to cope, and the kind of support they receive from their workplace. By sharing your story, you will help highlight the real challenges faced by hospitality workers and contribute to building a safer and more respectful work environment. The study values gender perspectives and seeks to ensure these voices are heard.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

You are being invited to take part in this study because you have responded to a recruitment notice and meet the eligibility criteria. This study also uses snowball recruitment, which means

you may have heard about the study through colleagues or contacts who shared the invitation. Specifically, you are currently employed in the Front Office department of a hotel in New Zealand and have at least six months of experience in this role and should be above the age of 18. Please note that employees of ProInvest Hotels, Auckland City Centre, are not eligible to participate due to a potential conflict of interest.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

If you decide to participate, please email me at vmp7474@autuni.ac.nz. Once we agree on an interview date, you will be asked to sign a consent form before the interview begins. Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice), and whether you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You can withdraw from the study at any time by informing the Researcher. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then the information collected up until the point of your withdrawal from the study will continue to be used and included in the study to protect its quality. However, you can ask for the information collected up until your withdrawal from the study to be deleted. If you withdraw after the study analyses have been completed, then your information will be included. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

What will my participation involve?

This research involves interviewing front office employees about their experiences of verbal harassment from guests in the hotels. Before the interview begins, you will be asked to fill out a short personal details form. This form will collect basic information such as your age, gender identity, ethnicity, length of time with your current employer, your role, and your work location. These details are collected only for research purposes. They will stay confidential and will not be included in the final report in a way that identifies you. The interview will be arranged at a time and location that suits you. This could be at a café of your choice, an AUT meeting room, or online. With your consent, the interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed. A summary of the findings will be shared with at the end, if you wish. You are free to skip any question you do not wish to answer, and if at any point you feel uncomfortable, the interview can be paused or stopped. While it is not my intention to cause distress, I understand that recalling such experiences may be emotionally difficult. Please note that I am not a trained counsellor, and this study is not suitable for individuals currently experiencing emotional distress related to workplace harassment.

What are the benefits?

Benefits to the Researcher: The completion of this research will also support the requirements of my Master of International Hospitality Management degree.

Benefit to Participants & Wider Community: By sharing your experiences, you may help contribute to a safer and more respectful work environment for current and future hospitality professionals. Your insights will help highlight the issue of verbal harassment within the industry. The findings of this study may help inform more effective HR policies, enhance guest interaction training, promote gender-sensitive approaches to managing workplace harassment, and lead to clearer procedures for reporting inappropriate behaviour.

What are the costs?

There are no costs involved in participating in this interview, other than the time you may spend travelling to the interview location and the approximately 45 to 60 minutes required for the interview itself.

What are the discomforts and risks?

Reflecting on your experiences during the interview may cause some psychological discomfort. However, the research will be carried out ethically and respectfully. I will be attentive to any signs of discomfort and will offer to pause or stop the interview at any time if you feel uneasy. You are also free to skip any questions you do not wish to answer. You can withdraw at any time during and after the interview without any negative consequences.

Your participation is completely confidential. Any identifying information about you or your workplace will be removed. All data and documents will be securely stored to ensure your privacy and reduce any risk.

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

During this interview, if you show discomfort at any stage, I will be sensitive to how you are feeling and will stop the interview if it is necessary. You can withdraw at any time from the study. Should you require assistance, confidential counselling can be arranged through the Health and Counselling service in AUT.

AUT Student Counselling and Mental Health may be able to offer three free sessions of confidential counselling support for adult participants in an AUT research project. These sessions are only available for issues that have arisen directly as a result of participation in the research and are not for other general counselling needs. To access these services, you will need to:

drop into our centre at WB203 City Campus, email counselling@aut.ac.nz or call (09) 921 9292.

Let the receptionist know that you are a research participant and provide the title of my research and my name and contact details as given in this Information Sheet.

You can find out more information about AUT counsellors and counselling on <https://www.aut.ac.nz/student-life/student-support/counselling-and-mental-health>

Other options for helpline services are,

HELP Auckland (helpauckland.org.nz): Offers 24/7, free, professional, compassionate and confidential support by phone, text message (SMS) and email.

Call: 0800 623 1700

Text: 8236

Email: gethelp@helpauckland.org.nz

Manaaki Tangata | Victim Support (victimsupport.org.nz): 24/7 free, confidential emotional and practical support and information to anyone affected by crime, suicide and traumatic events, including their whānau and witnesses.

Call: 0800 842 846

Citizen's Advice Bureau: Free, confidential, independent information and advice to anyone. CAB helps people know what their rights are and how to access services they need.

Call: 0800 367 222

Unite Union | Aotearoa's Hospitality Union

Call: 0800 286 483

Email: support@unite.org.nz

What will happen to information about me?

The data collected during the interview will be individually identifiable at the time of collection due to the audio recording of your voice. This is considered identifiable information.

Other identifiable information that may be collected includes your first name and place of work (if mentioned), but this will not be included in the final research report.

Once the interview is transcribed, your name and any other identifying details will be removed. You will be assigned a pseudonym (false name) or participant number to protect your identity. This process makes the data re-identifiable (coded).

The document that links your real name to the assigned code will be stored separately in a password-protected file on a secure AUT OneDrive account. Only the researcher and academic supervisor will have access to this list.

Audio recordings and transcripts will be stored digitally on AUT's secure systems for six years, under AUT's Research Data Management policy. After that, they will be permanently deleted.

Your identifiable information will not be shared outside the study unless you provide explicit permission or if required by law.

You have the right to access and request correction of your information at any time before the data is anonymised or the findings are finalised.

By signing the consent form, you are agreeing to the use of your information as outlined in this Information Sheet.

Your data will only be used for this specific research project. If any future use of your data is considered (e.g., related research or publication), you will be contacted for additional consent. Participation in future research is entirely optional.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, *Dr Shelagh Mooney*, Shelagh.mooney@aut.ac.nz

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEK, ethics@aut.ac.nz, (+649) 921 9999 ext 6038.

Who do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details:

Researcher: Akshata Gaikwad

Email: vmp7474@autuni.ac.nz

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Project Supervisor: Dr Shelagh Mooney

Email: Shelagh.mooney@aut.ac.nz

**Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 27 August 2025,
25/24**

B.2 Consent form



Consent Form

For use when interviews are involved.

Project title: *Behind the smile: Examining verbal harassment experienced by front office employees*

by guests in hotels

Project Supervisor: *Dr Shelagh Mooney*

Researcher: *Akshata Gaikwad*

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated _____.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- I understand that if I withdraw from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.
- I agree to take part in this research.
- I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes No

Participant's signature:

Participant's name:

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....

.....

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 27 August 2025, 25/246.

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.

B.3 Demographic questionnaire



Participant Personal Details Form

Project title: Behind the smile: Examining verbal harassment experienced by front office employees by guests in hotels

Researcher: Akshata Gaikwad

The following information is for our own records only and will in no way be used to affect your confidentiality in this project.

Please enter or circle the appropriate details.

Name:

Age:

I identify my gender as:

Ethnicity:

Length of time with current employer:

Role: Senior

Location: e.g. Auckland Christchurch Wellington Other:

Thank you for providing these details.

B.4 Interview guide

Interview Questionnaire

Part 1: Types of Verbal Harassment

1. Have there been moments when a guest spoke to you in a way that felt uncomfortable or seemed inappropriate?
2. Can you recall any situation where a guest said something that felt disrespectful or aggressive?
3. How would you define “verbal harassment” based on your own experiences?
4. Are these experiences usually isolated, or do they happen frequently?
5. Do you feel that your gender or ethnicity may influence how guests speak to you?
6. Do you think the gender of the guest influences how they interact with you, and if so, how?

Part 2: Perceptions and Interpretations

1. How do you personally feel during and after such incidents?
2. How do you usually respond when a guest speaks to you in a disrespectful or aggressive way?
3. What goes through your mind when these situations happen?
4. Did you ever feel blamed or unsupported after these experiences?
5. Have you ever felt that the way guests treat you affects how you see your role or value in the workplace?

Part 3: Impacts on Motivation

1. How do these experiences affect your motivation to come to work or do your job well?
2. Have you ever considered leaving your job or switching departments because of how guests treated you?
3. What support, if any, do you receive from your manager or colleagues after such experiences?
4. Do you feel recognised or supported by the organisation when these issues occur?
5. What changes do you think could make you feel more motivated or protected in your workplace.