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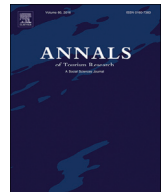
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## Research article

## Customer incivility as an identity threat for frontline employees: The mitigating role of organizational rewards☆

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## ABSTRACT

This work proposes identity theory as a novel theoretical lens for understanding frontline employees' responses to customer incivility in tourism and hospitality. We advance pertinent research by demonstrating that customer incivility constitutes a dual identity threat (individual/collective threat) for frontline employees. Two experimental studies reveal that: customer incivility towards frontline employees' individual identity affects their psychological responses more adversely than their citizenship behavior; non-monetary rewards are more effective at reducing the adverse effects of customer incivility on frontline employees' psychological responses (than monetary rewards); finally, allowing frontline employees to choose the reward they deem most appropriate enhances both their psychological responses and citizenship behavior. Based on these results a four-step process is proposed to help managers dealing with customer incivility.

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## Introduction

Frontline employees in the tourism and hospitality industries are confronted with an increasing amount of demands from customers whilst remaining under greater scrutiny from their organizations (Chen, 2021). Evidence in the hotel industry shows that frontline employees top the list of the unhappiest customer-facing jobs (Forbes, 2017). In this increasingly challenging environment, frontline employees receive heterogeneous, and often conflicting, performance/social feedback from their proximal environment, and especially customers (Liu & Gursoy, 2022). That has an impact on their individual (i.e., perceived uniqueness as individuals) and collective identity (i.e., valued membership in the organization) (Petriglieri & Devine, 2016; Sedikides & Brewer, 2001). Such customer feedback could question frontline employees' self-perceptions and their relationship with their organization. It can become an identity threat for them, damaging the enactment of their various identities, which shape their commitment to service excellence (Sedari Mudiyansele & Vough, 2019).

Tourism and hospitality scholars have long recognized the disruptive consequences of negative customer feedback, especially in the form of customer incivility (i.e., low-intensity, rude or disrespectful customer behaviors) towards employees (Huang & Miao, 2016; Kim & Baker, 2020). Customer incivility incidents can exert a toll on frontline employees' psychological wellbeing and impair their service de-

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livery efforts (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Cheng, Dong, Zhou, Guo, & Peng, 2020; González-Mansilla, Berenguer-Contrí, & Serracantallos, 2019). Recent studies investigate the effectiveness of managerial interventions in such incidents, such as supervisor support (Kim & Baker, 2020) and leadership style (Boukis, Koritos, Daunt, & Papastathopoulos, 2020). Despite this evidence, tourism scholars have neither assessed whether customer incivility incidents represent a threat to various frontline employees' identities; nor have explored identity threat as a theoretical lens for understanding frontline employees' responses to customer incivility (e.g., Balaji, Jiang, Singh, & Jha, 2020; Cheng et al., 2020). With the exception of Pu, Ji, and Sang (2022), who have examined the effect of customer incivility on frontline employees' professional identity, the tourism and hospitality literature implicitly assume that customer incivility incidents target frontline employees' self-perceptions (i.e., individual identity). This fails to recognize that such incidents might further damage employees' relationship and group membership with the organization as a whole (i.e., collective identity). Managerial attitudes are critical for frontline employees (Ye, Lyu, Wu, & Kwan, 2022). No empirical insights inform hotel managers of the steps they should consider in such incidents and whether organizational resources, such as rewards, can help employees deal with customer-induced identity threats. These are important omissions, as identity threats can prevent frontline employees' from fulfilling their role demands and from internalizing organizational goals, negatively shaping their attitude towards customers (Johnson & Jackson, 2009; Mischenko & Day, 2016).

The emerging identity threat stream in the management literature is largely conceptual on how frontline employees experience identity threats (Piening, Salge, Antons, & Kreiner, 2020). This stream mostly acknowledges intra-organizational sources of identity threats for frontline employees (e.g., supervisors, co-workers), ignoring that most hospitality staff spend a great deal of their time in customer-facing tasks (Sliter, Sliter, & Jex, 2012). Research in organizational identity has primarily theorized the various levels of frontline employee identity in isolation (e.g., Sluss & Ashforth, 2007), based on their distinctiveness and distance from employees' individual self (Sedikides & Brewer, 2001). Depending on the level of identity that is under threat, varied frontline employee responses are engendered, which have yet to be explored (Gardner, Dyne, & Pierce, 2004; Sedikides & Brewer, 2001). Understanding these varied frontline employees' psychological and behavioral responses to identity threats requires a comparative evaluation of different triggers (e.g., customer incivility), which is currently missing, due to the survey-based approaches, mostly adopted in management studies (e.g., Walker, 2022).

To tackle these issues, this research, sheds light into the role of customer incivility as a source of identity threat for frontline employees. It uses two scenario-based experimental studies to investigate the moderating effect of organizational rewards and reward choice on their psychological and behavioral outcomes. Drawing on the identity threat literature (Petriglieri, 2011), study 1 investigates the effect of identity threats (individual and collective) on employees' psychological responses (i.e., self-esteem, role stress) and their citizenship behavior (i.e., willingness to report customer complaints). It also assesses whether organizational rewards (i.e., monetary vs. non-monetary) can mitigate the effects of identity threats on these frontline employee outcomes. Study 2 investigates whether offering frontline employees a reward choice (vs. no-choice) affects the impact of identity threats on their psychological responses and citizenship behavior.

This research therefore contributes to tourism and hospitality in several ways. First, it proposes a novel theoretical lens (i.e., identity threat) for interpreting employees varied behavioral responses to customer incivility. Second, findings expand prior work in tourism and hospitality by confirming customer incivility as an extra-organizational source of threat to (individual and collective) frontline employees' identity that generates differential psychological and behavioral responses (Lugosi, 2019). Third, it provides tactical directions regarding the effectiveness of different forms of organizational rewards (i.e., monetary vs non-monetary) during customer incivility incidents, expanding work on managerial interventions that support frontline employees in coping with uncivil customers (e.g., Balaji et al., 2020). Fourth, findings elaborate the benefits of offering (reward) choice in the management of customer incivility incidents (Bani-Melhem, Quratulain, & Al-Hawari, 2020). Finally, the research proposes a four-step appraisal process that can help managers alleviate the disruptive consequences of customer incivility incidents on employees.

## Theoretical background and conceptual framework

Tourism and hospitality literature streams have stressed the role of customers in the cocreation of experiences with employees (Prebensen, Vittersø, & Dahl, 2013). A parallel stream of research has investigated the disruptive consequences of various forms of customer incivility towards frontline employees (e.g., Huang & Miao, 2016). Customer incivility represents one of the most common types of disruptive behavior towards frontline employees. It captures customer comments or remarks articulated in a rude, disrespectful, or insulting manner that violate service norms and/or abuse service standards and policies (Kim & Baker, 2020). Customer incivility often results in severe consequences for frontline employees, including reduced performance, increased rumination, disengagement from their role, and higher withdrawal intentions (e.g., Kim & Baker, 2020; Yagil, 2017). An under-researched aspect of customer incivility is that it can lead frontline employees to question beliefs about distinctive attributes of themselves, as well as of the organization they work for, which can damage their perceptions of self-worth and group membership (Jerger & Wirtz, 2017; Petriglieri, 2011). Research has paid scant attention to whether customer incivility poses a threat to different frontline employees' identities and how frontline employees can cope with customer-induced identity threats (Piening et al., 2020; Kim & So, 2022).

### *Frontline employees' self-concept and identities*

Frontline employees enact their various identities to understand themselves and others and regulate their behavior during their interactions with customers (Sedikides & Brewer, 2001). Often this determines their income and reward through tipping (Hsiao, Chien, Yeh & Huan, 2022; Jacob & Guéguen, 2012). The enactment of various identities is a personal resource for frontline employees that allows them to build social capital when facing high customer demands and offset these demands that are often created by interpersonal unfairness (Johnson, Chang, & Yang, 2010; Yang, Johnson, Zhang, Spector, & Xu, 2013). This way, frontline employees become more resilient to demanding customers and less likely to engage in deviant behavior towards coworkers or customers (Aquino & Douglas, 2003; Lugosi, 2019).

Although employees' orientation towards a particular identity is relatively stable, situational conditions and role-specific factors, such as their interactions with customers, may lead them to adopt more situational identity orientations (Johnson, Morgeson, Ilgen, Meyer, & Lloyd, 2006). Such contextual primes could increase the salience of a particular identity (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010) that frontline employees tend to protect, as this is the vehicle for maintaining or restoring their sense of self-worth in their role capacity (Petriglieri, 2011). Individual and collective identities are the two predominant forms of identity for employees, as they determine how they interpret two key aspects of their work, their self-perceptions and their relationship with their organization, in relation to their role expectations (Gardner et al., 2004; Sedikides & Brewer, 2001).

*Individual identity* involves frontline employees' sense of uniqueness and self-worth that derives from interpersonal comparisons (Johnson et al., 2010). *Collective identity* reflects self-definition based on a social group to which individuals belong (i.e., organization) and is reflected by the success and social standing of this group, as well as the successful performance of their assigned group roles (Johnson et al., 2010; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Individual identity is important as it affects how frontline employees fulfill their role requirements through their understanding of their own self and how the latter helps them offset the demands of their role (Yang et al., 2013). Collective identity shapes the way frontline employees interpret organizational values as well as how they internalize organizational goals and display their commitment to their team (Johnson et al., 2010). As these identities coexist in frontline employees, they have varying salience and importance and shape employees' psychological and behavioral responses in different ways (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007).

### Customer incivility as an identity threat

Customer incivility incidents constitute a violation of interaction norms and are incongruent with frontline employees' own norms and personal values as well as with their expectations of how their organization should act on such occasions (Boukis et al., 2020; Yagil, 2017). Such incidents include low intensity, disrespectful acts from customers that violate service norms and signal a lack of regard for frontline employees (Elbaz, Haddoud, Onjewu, & Abdelhamied, 2019). They are widely thought to negatively affect frontline employees' psychological and behavioral responses (Cheng et al., 2020). Identity control theory suggests that individuals compare their identity standards with perceptions of themselves obtained through social interactions and feedback (Burke, 2016). In the case of customer incivility incidents, there is a strong discrepancy between frontline employees' self-identity perceptions and the customer feedback they receive about themselves. Customer incivility can turn into an identity threat towards frontline employees' working role status/image and activate their self-system to protect their perceived integrity and reduce the dissonance they experience (Korfiatis, Chalvatzis, & Buhalis, 2019; Sherman & Cohen, 2006).

Identity threats constitute individual-level events that damage the value, meaning, or enactment of various frontline employees' identities; they could impair individual performance and trigger deviance from organizational norms (Walker, 2022), jeopardizing employees' perceptions of central attributes of an organization (Piening et al., 2020). Individual identity threats refer to evaluations of frontline employees' personal characteristics and self-concept triggered by customer incivility (Jerger & Wirtz, 2017; Petriglieri, 2011). In this case, frontline employees receive signals of low self-worth or reduced competence and likeability due to customer incivility, which are likely to impair their ability to deliver their role (Kyratsis, Atun, Phillips, Tracey, & George, 2017). By contrast, collective identity threats challenge frontline employees' organizational (collective) membership along with "the value and social significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). Frontline employees experience collective identity threats when their group's distinctiveness or values are undermined from customer incivility (Fisk & Neville, 2011).

### Conceptual framework

Fig. 1 presents the conceptual framework of the current research. Study 1 manipulates customer incivility as a threat towards frontline employees' individual (vs. collective) identity and explores its differential effect on two frontline employee psychological responses (i.e., self-esteem, role stress) as well as on their citizenship behavior (i.e., willingness to report customer complaints). It

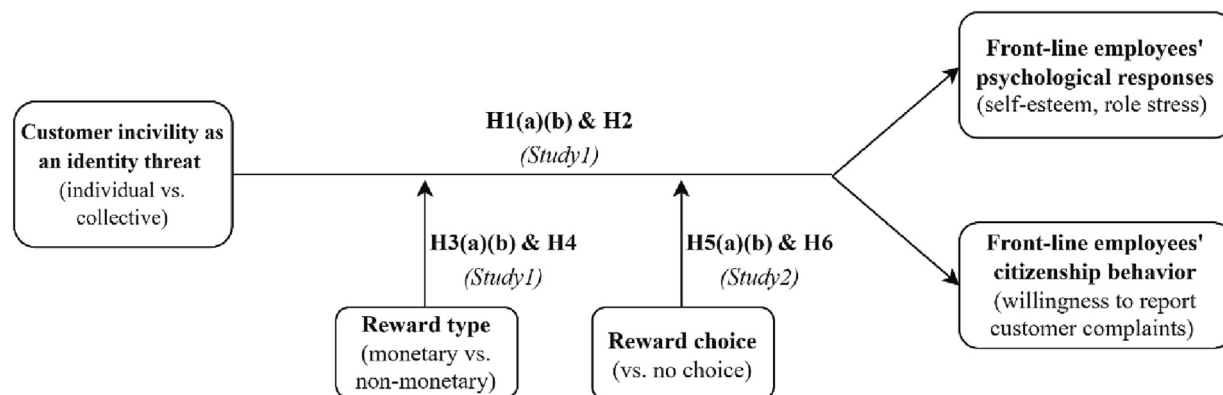


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework.

also investigates whether and how the provision of two types of organizational rewards (monetary vs. non-monetary) to frontline employees who have experienced an identity threat, can mitigate the adverse effects of such threats on the aforementioned outcomes. Study 2 investigates the moderating impact of reward choice (i.e., providing frontline employees with a choice between two rewards vs no reward choice) on the relationship between customer incivility and the aforementioned outcomes. The theoretical arguments for the hypotheses depicted in the conceptual framework are presented in more detail in the ensuing sections.

## Study 1 - the impact of identity threats on frontline employees and the moderating role of organizational rewards

### *Hypotheses development*

According to identity control theory (Burke, 2016), customer incivility towards frontline employees represents a source of identity (in)validation (Lind & Tyler, 1988). Threats to individual identity affect frontline employees' self-definition and self-perception as individuals who deserve fairness, consideration and respect (Dong, Liao, Chuang, Zhou, & Campbell, 2015), whereas threats to collective identity mostly challenge frontline employees' valued membership in the organization (Lind & Tyler, 1988). The employee identity literature suggests that frontline employees' identities differ in terms of their motivational primacy; threats to individual identity are likely to exert a more direct effect on frontline employees' psychological state compared to threats directed at their collective identity, which are more distant from their self-concept (Haslam, Powell, & Turner, 2000).

Self-esteem and role stress were identified as two of the most immediate and impactful psychological responses of threats directed at frontline employees' individual identity (Boukis et al., 2020; Kim & Baker, 2020). Self-esteem, or one's self-perceived value, reflects an individual's positive or negative evaluation of self-worth (Kim & Baker, 2020; Rosenberg, 1989). It is a key outcome triggered by threats to employees' self-concept (Haslam et al., 2000), as its two underlying dimensions (i.e., self-competence and self-liking) can be severely disrupted by uncivil customer remarks and feedback. Customer incivility towards frontline employees' self-identity can also trigger increased role stress making frontline employees perceive their role tasks as more incompatible and harder to achieve (Morales & Lambert, 2013). This is due to the discrepancy between frontline employees' perceived role demands and the low-worth, negative signals they receive from customers when carrying out their assigned tasks (Kyratsis et al., 2017).

Customer incivility targeting frontline employees' individual identity could impair their self-esteem by signaling their low worth to the customer (Lind & Tyler, 1988) and by reducing individual self-competence and likeability (En Yap, Bove, & Beverland, 2009; Kyratsis et al., 2017). Customer incivility can damage frontline employees' personal status, leading to increased levels of role stress (Jerger & Wirtz, 2017). During customer incivility incidents, frontline employees are expected to follow specific communication norms (e.g., politeness) that become ongoing stressors and sources of emotional labor for them, eroding their sense of status and self-perception (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010). Collective identity threats are perceived as a more distant identity level by frontline employees that are mostly associated with broader organizational aspects of the firm such as organizational reputation and top management (Kirk & Rifkin, 2022). However, frontline employees have no delegated responsibility or control over these organizational aspects. Therefore, they are more likely to experience them as more abstract and distant from their daily tasks, and as having a less direct impact on their individual identity (i.e., due to increased psychological distance) (Van Lange & Huckelba, 2021). Thus, we hypothesize:

**H1.** Customer incivility targeting frontline employees' individual identity will result in (H1a) lower self-esteem and (H1b) higher role stress than customer incivility targeting frontline employees' collective identity.

Collective identity threats can result in frontline employees' distancing themselves from their organization. They can make frontline employees question the extent to which their organization matches their own sense of who they are and their relationship with it make them appear less favorable to customers (Petriglieri & Devine, 2016). When customer incivility targets frontline employees' collective identity, they feel less motivated to undertake the requisite actions for dealing with any issues that might arise during service provision. One of the most important aspects of hospitality frontline employees' commitment to service excellence is their willingness to report customer complaints (Luria, Gal, & Yagil, 2009). Willingness to report customer complaints indicates frontline employees' proneness to share customer complaints with their supervisors (Luria et al., 2009). As customer feedback is often given to frontline employees verbally rather than submitted through formal channels, reporting customer complaints is crucial for understanding service failures and initiating recovery efforts (Sakurai & Jex, 2012).

Collective identity threats, such as customer incivility, endanger frontline employees' sense of group belonging and reduce their inclination to fulfill their role responsibilities as organizational members, often generating dissatisfaction and negative emotions among frontline employees (Petriglieri & Devine, 2016). This can lead frontline employees to question whether their organization cares about their individual welfare and to compare unfavorably with other peers (Petriglieri & Devine, 2016; Maggi & Vroegop, 2023). As collective identity threats become "a destabilizing force" of frontline employees' organizational identity (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000, p. 67), their engagement in pro-organizational activities, such as willingness to report customer complaints, might be suspended until they minimize the negative identity effects of perceived taint. Individual identity threats would be less likely to affect frontline employees' firm-directed citizenship activity. Pro-organization citizenship activity, like willingness to report customer complaints and advocacy, are mostly triggered from the quality and support employees perceive from their working environment (i.e., service climate, empowerment, perceived recognition) and less from their individual service orientation or commitment levels (Luria et al., 2009; Girish, Lee, Lee, & Olya, 2023). Thus, we hypothesize:

**H2.** Customer incivility targeting frontline employees' collective identity will result in a lower willingness to report customer complaints than customer incivility targeting frontline employees' individual identity.



Recent work in tourism and hospitality has begun to explore various organizational resources that can help frontline employees recover from disruptive customer incidents (Balaji et al., 2020; Yue, Nguyen, Groth, Johnson, & Frenkel, 2021). Scholars have yet to examine whether the provision of organizational rewards can shield frontline employees against customer-induced identity threats. Organizational rewards refer to all forms of extrinsic (i.e., tangible, monetary benefits, such as lump sum bonus) and intrinsic (i.e., intangible, non-monetary benefits, such as employee of the week awards) rewards employees receive as part of their job. Organizational rewards have been proposed as incentives for accomplishing specific goals, enhancing performance, and as compensation mechanisms with symbolic meaning to frontline employees (e.g., Aguinis, Joo, & Gottfredson, 2013). This study focuses on this latter function of rewards—that is, as a means of demonstrating management's appreciation for frontline employees' coping with uncivil customers (En Yap et al., 2009), and investigates how the provision of monetary (i.e., lump-sum bonuses) versus non-monetary rewards (i.e., employee of the week) shapes frontline employees' psychological responses and citizenship behavior after customer incivility incidents.

Rewards hold symbolic and psychological value for frontline employees, as they are external 'self-affirmations' (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). They remind frontline employees of 'who they are' and provide them with a broader view of themselves, focusing on salient demands in the situation other than ego protection (Steinhart & Jiang, 2019); they also signal frontline employees' worth and validate their identity, status, and relationship with the organization. According to reflection theory on compensation (Sherman & Cohen, 2006), rewarding frontline employees can reinforce their self-concept, leading to more favorable work attitudes and behaviors. After a customer incivility incident, the provision of rewards signals information and organizational support when frontline employees evaluate the discrepancy between customer-induced social feedback and their self-concept (Sliter et al., 2012).

The provision of a conspicuous, non-monetary reward (i.e., employee of the week) increases social utility for its recipients due to social reinforcement (Luthans & Stajkovic, 2015). Also, it serves as a symbol of organizational appreciation for frontline employees' efforts by recognizing them as role models, thereby enhancing their self-appreciation and reducing their psychological strain (Deci & Ryan, 2012; En Yap et al., 2009). Individual identity threats primarily attack frontline employees' personal status and self-worth on the spot, by challenging their perceived competence and likeability (Kyratsis et al., 2017). In this case, non-monetary rewards are likely to have a stronger functional and symbolic benefit for frontline employees than monetary rewards. This is because non-monetary rewards enhance perceptions of self-control, which enables frontline employees to reduce the amount of post-episode stress they experience and renew interest in their role (Long & Shields, 2010). Thus, we hypothesize:

**H3.** When customer incivility targets frontline employees' individual identity, non-monetary rewards result in (a) higher self-esteem and (b) lower role stress than monetary rewards.

In the case of collective identity threats, frontline employees' inclination to fulfill their extra-role responsibilities and their positive distinctiveness as functions of collective identity are impaired (Gioia et al., 2000). As uncivil customer comments tend to breach service norms, frontline employees' emotional and cognitive resources are easier depleted in their interactions with customers and any efforts to go the extra mile to support the firm can be undermined (Sliter et al., 2012). Frontline employees' willingness to report customer complaints is a behavior oriented towards the firm's wellbeing, often driven by their proximal working environment (Luria et al., 2009). Collective identity threats harm frontline employees' perceptions as unique members of the organization (positive distinctiveness) and damage their collective identity motives (e.g., self-enhancement, sense of group belonging) (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010). Frontline employees' inability to fulfill such motives leads to reduced altruism as well as increased psychological distance, apathy and impatience during customer interactions (Halbesleben & Bowler, 2007) and reduces their inclination to engage in pro-organizational acts, such as divulging customer insights to management (Choi, Kim, Lee, & Lee, 2014).

Research in organizational behavior predominantly focuses on monetary rewards as drivers of frontline employees' individual competence and prosocial behavior; for example, Mok and De Cremer (2016, p. 5) indicate that monetary rewards activate a norm of social conscientiousness and thereby can "elicit prosocial, warmth-signaling behaviors rather than self-serving acts" among employees. The provision of monetary rewards also signals the organization's acknowledgement of frontline employees' competence (Gardner et al., 2004; Kuvaas, 2006) in dealing with uncivil customer remarks. Such signals recognize frontline employees' ability to take initiatives to handle difficult situations and encourage them to take on other aspects of their relationship with customers that require initiative, such as reporting customer complaints. By contrast, non-monetary rewards are more likely to signal warmth rather than competence (Kuvaas, 2006), possibly attenuating frontline employees' confidence that they can successfully cope with customer complaints. Thus, we hypothesize:

**H4.** When customer incivility targets frontline employees' collective identity, monetary rewards result in higher willingness to report customer complaints than non-monetary rewards.

## Methods

### Participants and scenario design

Study 1 draws on the United Arab Emirates, an international destination that offers high-end tourism and hospitality services. The research team established contact with 29 five-star international hotels and resorts in Abu Dhabi (out of 39 such facilities in this category in total), which were identified via online travel agents and review websites (i.e., Booking, Expedia, Agoda, Trivago, TripAdvisor). These 29 hotels and resorts were owned or managed by multinational hotel chains, as the focus (i.e., management of uncivil customers) required that sampling units had established service standards, protocols and processes in place for their daily operation and the management of customers. Approval for data collection was gained for 13 of them and participation was requested on a voluntary basis from hotel frontline employees working in customer-facing roles. In total, 115 responses were

collected from their frontline employees, before the beginning of their shift. Participants were 53 % female; the mean age was 29.6 years; and 45.2 % had more than three years of work experience, 37.3 % one–three years, and the remaining 17.2 % less than one year.

Study 1 adopted a  $2 \times 2$ , fully randomized, between-subjects factorial design, with one condition representing two levels of identity threats (individual vs collective) and the other the two types of organizational rewards (non-monetary vs monetary rewards). Hotel frontline employees were randomly exposed in one of the four scenarios (see Appendix - Study 1 scenario) and were asked to imagine that the episode was taking place at their work. Participants report on self-esteem, role stress and willingness to report customer complaints. The first part of the scenarios presented a customer making a derogatory/abusive comment (i.e., uncivil remark) directed at the frontline employee or their organization respectively, following a minor delay in service. The second part of the scenarios primed the provision of rewards following the customer incident. We manipulated monetary rewards using *lump-sum bonuses*, which are cash payments in recognition of a work-related achievement (e.g., handling of a difficult task) (Milkovich & Newman, 1999). For non-monetary rewards, employee of the week was selected as it remains one of the most popular types of formal recognition in organizations giving credit to high performers (Johnson & Dickinson, 2010) (see Appendix - Study 1 scenario).

All scenarios were pretested for (a) the realism of the incident, (b) the extent to which they represent a threat to the employee (vs their organization), and (c) the realism of the reward (see Appendix - Study 1 Pretesting).

### Measures

To capture frontline employees' responses to customer incivility, we used four items from Motowidlo, Packard, and Manning (1986) to measure role stress and three items from Namasivayam and Guchait (2013), who adapted Rosenberg's (1989) state self-esteem scale within hospitality. Willingness to report customer complaints was captured with four items from Luria et al. (2009). All variables are measured with 7-point Likert scales – Table A3 and possess acceptable psychometric properties (see Appendix - Table A1).

### Analyses and results

In study 1, identity threat and organizational rewards act as the independent variables and self-esteem, role stress and willingness to report customer complaints as the dependent ones. Results are based on three analyses of variance (ANOVA). The manipulation check was successful (see Appendix Study 1) suggesting that our scenarios were successful at creating the intended conditions.

For hypotheses H1(a)(b) and H2, we focus on the main effects of the identity threat condition on each of the three outcomes. More specifically, a significant main effect of identity threat on self-esteem is found ( $M_{ind}(SD) = 3.74(1.70)$  vs.  $M_{col}(SD) = 4.33(1.44)$ ;  $F = 11.13$ ,  $p < .001$ ); individual identity threats result in significantly lower self-esteem among frontline employees than collective ones, confirming H1(a). Likewise, a significant main effect of identity threat on role stress is also confirmed ( $M_{ind}(SD) = 4.29(1.51)$  vs.  $M_{col}(SD) = 3.92(1.18)$ ;  $F = 6.99$ ,  $p < .01$ ), with individual identity threats leading to significantly higher role stress than collective ones, fully confirming H1(b). Finally, a significant effect of identity threat on willingness to report

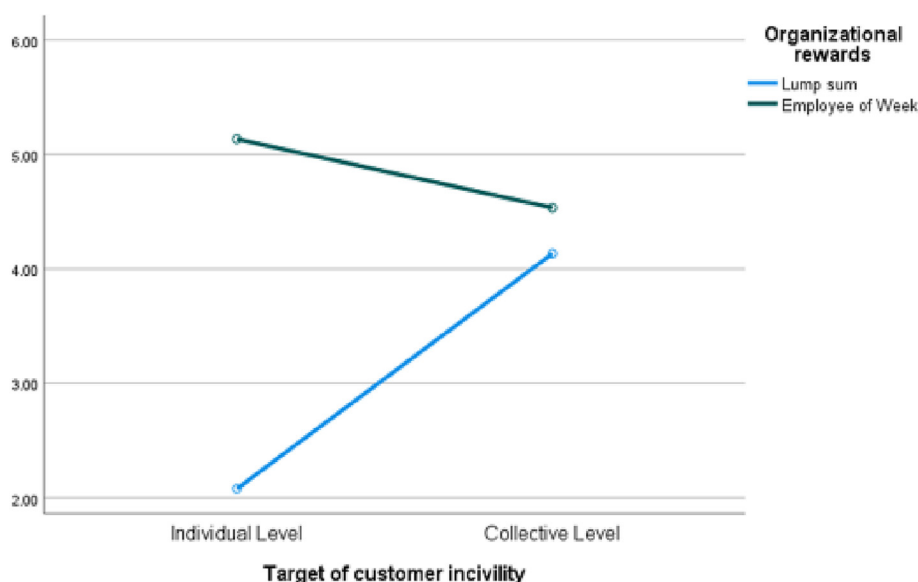


Fig. 2. Estimated marginal means of self-esteem.

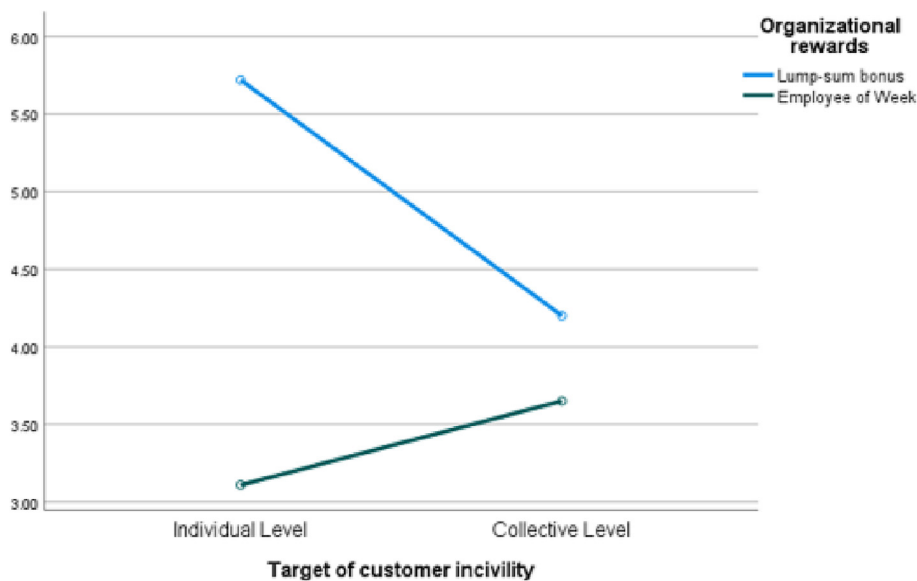


Fig. 3. Estimated marginal means of role stress.

customer complaints is evident ( $M_{ind}(SD) = 2.92(1.40)$  vs.  $M_{col}(SD) = 3.91(1.51)$ ;  $F = 19.11$ ,  $p < .001$ ), with individual identity threats resulting in a lower willingness to report customer complaints than collective ones, in support of H2.

For hypotheses H3(a)(b) and H4, we examine the interaction effects between two independent variables (i.e., identity threat and type of organizational reward). With regards to the moderation effect of organizational rewards, the provision of non-monetary rewards after individual identity threats (i.e., employee of the week) results in frontline employees reporting significantly higher self-esteem than the provision of monetary rewards (i.e., lump-sum bonus) ( $M_{monetary}(SD) = 2.08(0.49)$  vs.  $M_{non-monetary}(SD) = 5.13(0.90)$ ;  $F = 37.09$ ,  $p < .000$ ; see Fig. 2). These results confirm H3(a).

Regarding H3b, the provision of non-monetary rewards after individual identity threats results in significantly lower role stress for frontline employees than the provision of monetary rewards ( $M_{monetary}(SD) = 5.72(0.71)$  vs.  $M_{non-monetary}(SD) = 3.10(0.78)$ ;  $F = 31.06$ ,  $p < .001$ ; see Fig. 3). Thus, the results confirm H3(b).

After collective identity threats, the provision of monetary rewards leads frontline employees to report significantly higher willingness to report customer complaints than the provision of non-monetary rewards ( $M_{monetary}(SD) = 5.07(0.94)$  vs.  $M_{non-monetary}(SD) = 2.75(0.98)$ ;  $F = 9.07$ ,  $p < .01$ ; see Fig. 4). These results provide support for H4.

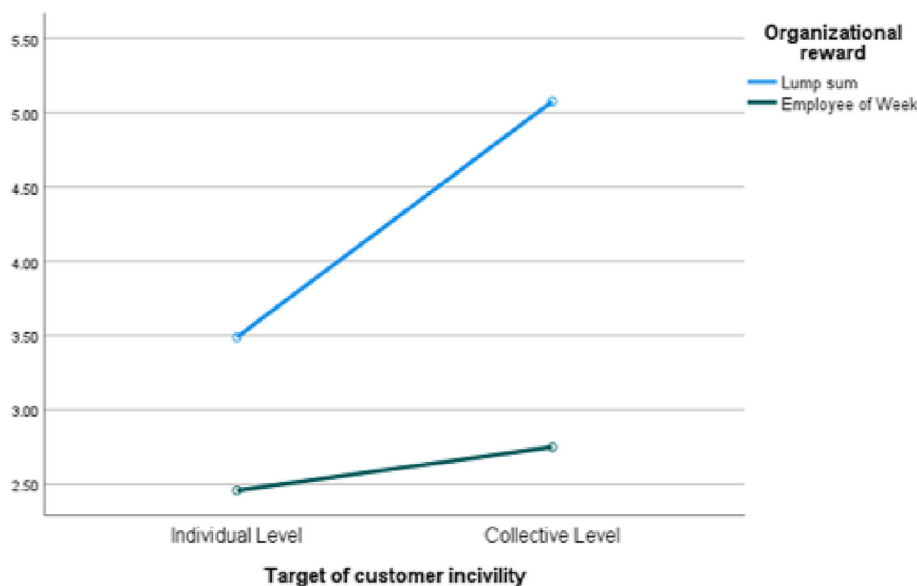


Fig. 4. Estimated marginal means of willingness to report customer complaints.



Research has demonstrated that factors such as frequency of customer incivility incidents, perspective taking, and length of organizational tenure can attenuate the effects of customer incivility on important frontline employees' outcomes (Boukis et al., 2020; González-Mansilla et al., 2019). To assess whether these three variables alter the effects reported by ANOVAs, we run three analyses of covariance (ANCOVA) with these three variables as covariates. Results suggest that both the main and interaction effects are similar to those presented in the three ANOVAs above.

Study 1 results indicate support for the hypothesized disruptive effects of customer incivility on frontline employees' individual and collective identity. Uncivil customer complaints directed at frontline employees' individual identity impair their self-esteem and increase their role stress. Uncivil customer complaints directed at frontline employees' collective identity tend to reduce frontline employees' inclination to share customer feedback with their supervisor. These results uncover the important but neglected role of identities in the customer incivility literature (Yue et al., 2021). They show that the target of customer incivility indeed produces diverse behavioral responses from frontline employees. The results also provide support for the mitigating impact of organizational rewards on the adverse effects of customer incivility on frontline employees' identities. The buffering role of organizational rewards can now be added to research seeking to uncover remedies to on customer incivility towards frontline employees (Kim & Baker, 2020).

## Study 2 - the moderating effect of organizational reward choice

Scholars have long investigated the effects of employees' participation in the design of role-related activities (e.g., firm policies) (e.g., González-Mansilla et al., 2019). Scant, if any, work investigates the role of choice in reward provision and, especially, whether offering choice among different organizational rewards can help frontline employees cope with customer incivility. This is important as reward provision tends to be relatively standardized (or left to supervisors' discretion) and offering choice to individuals is thought to have significant effects on their self-perceptions (e.g., empowerment) (e.g., Aguinis et al., 2013). Therefore, study 2 investigates whether offering frontline employees a reward choice (vs. no-choice) affects the impact of identity threat on their psychological responses and citizenship behavior.

### Hypotheses development

The organizational psychology literature suggests that allowing employees to choose from available reward options positively affects their satisfaction with decision-making and willingness to take additional risks related to their work (Dewitte & Cremer, 2001). The explanation for this rests on the concept of decisional control (Girish Averill, 1973), with research on individual motivation suggesting that individuals' perception that an outcome is generated by their own decisions is linked to more positive psychological and behavioral responses (e.g., Wortman, 1975). Studies in psychology also show that providing individuals with choice enhances their feelings of personal responsibility and the likelihood of accepting responsibility for both positive and negative outcomes (Langer & Rodin, 1976). Providing frontline employees with the opportunity to choose the type of reward to receive after a customer-induced identity threat will enhance their sense of being in control (Girish Averill, 1973; Wortman, 1975). In turn, this is likely to reduce the adverse effects of uncivil customer acts directed at their self on their levels of self-esteem and role stress. Thus, we hypothesize:

**H5.** When customer incivility targets frontline employees' individual identity, reward choice will result in (a) higher self-esteem and (b) lower role stress than when no reward choice is provided.

The provision of choice in the selection of organizational rewards should enhance frontline employees' perception of self-efficacy, as self-efficacy remains maximal when the decision maker has the choice of whether to take an alternative or not (Dewitte & Cremer, 2001). Rewards can help frontline employees restore some of their self-control loss, which often results in more self-interested and egoistic behaviors among employees (Dewitte & Cremer, 2001). In line with the premises of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012), enhancing frontline employees' perceptions of self-control might overcome self-interested tendencies that may develop in such circumstances, making them act in a more pro-organizational way (Baranik, Wang, Gong, & Shi, 2017). The fulfilment of universal psychological needs (e.g., empowerment, self-control) is also likely to lead to more effective individual functioning, including greater motivation, effort, persistence, and extra role engagement (Greguras & Diefendorff, 2009). Thus, we hypothesize:

**H6.** When customer incivility targets frontline employees' collective identity, reward choice will result in higher willingness to report customer complaints than when no reward choice is provided.

## Methods

### Participants and scenario design

Similar to Study 1, the research team approached the management of a different set of 19 five-star international hotels and resorts in the United Arab Emirates (except those located in Abu Dhabi), out of a sample of 183 such facilities identified from online travel agents and tourism and hospitality review websites (i.e., Booking, Expedia, Agoda, Trivago, TripAdvisor), requesting frontline employees' participation in the study. Overall, 122 responses were collected from 11 hotels and resorts, and participants

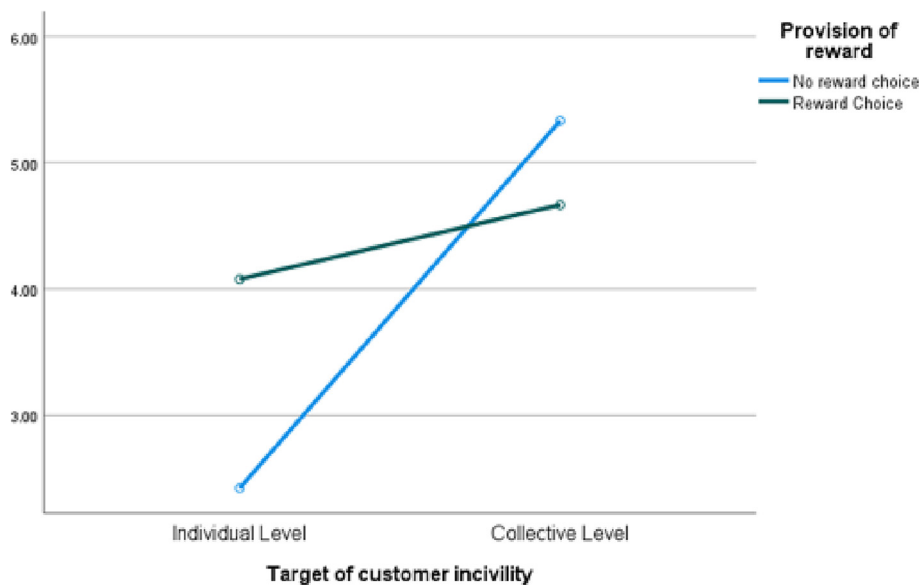


Fig. 5. Estimated marginal means of self-esteem.

completed the survey before the beginning of their shift. Participants were 51 % male; the mean age was 28.9 years; and 47.2 % had more than 3 years of work experience, 29.1 % one–three years, and the remaining 23.7 % less than one year.

Study 2 adopted a  $2 \times 2$ , fully randomized, between-subjects factorial design, with one condition representing two levels of identity threats (individual and collective) and the other the two approaches to reward provision (i.e., provide frontline employees with reward choice vs. no-choice). Hotel frontline employees report on self-esteem, role stress and willingness to report customer complaints and they were randomly exposed in one of the four scenarios (for the choice condition see Appendix - Study 2 scenarios). In the no choice scenario, participants were randomly assigned to one of the two types of organizational rewards (monetary or non-monetary) presented in Study 1.

### Analyses and results

In study 2, one condition represents frontline employees' identity (individual vs. collective) and the other one the provision of reward choice (vs. no reward choice). The same measures (as in Study 1) were used as the dependent variables (i.e., self-esteem, role stress and willingness to report customer complaints) that capture frontline employees' responses to identity threats. All measures possess acceptable psychometric properties (see Appendix – Table A2). Results are based on three ANOVAs. The same manipulation check, as in study 1, was used (see Appendix – Study 2), suggesting that our scenarios were successful at manipulating the intended conditions.

With regards to the moderation of reward choice on the relationship between customer incivility towards frontline employees' individual identity and self-esteem, results confirm our expectations. After individual identity threats, the provision of reward choice to frontline employees leads them to report a significantly higher level of self-esteem than in the no-choice condition ( $M_{\text{choice}}(SD) = 4.07(1.66)$  vs.  $M_{\text{no-choice}}(SD) = 2.42(0.94)$ ;  $F = 23.93$ ,  $p < .001$ ; see Fig. 5), in support of H5(a).

Furthermore, after individual identity threats, offering a reward choice to frontline employees leads them to report a significantly lower level of role stress than in the no-choice condition ( $M_{\text{choice}}(SD) = 2.97(1.60)$  vs.  $M_{\text{no-choice}}(SD) = 5.20(1.37)$ ;  $F = 24.56$ ,  $p < .001$ ; see Fig. 6), in support of H5(b).

Finally, after individual identity threats occur, the provision of reward choice to frontline employees leads them to report significantly higher willingness to report customer complaints than in the no-choice condition ( $M_{\text{choice}}(SD) = 3.74(1.82)$  vs.  $M_{\text{no-choice}}(SD) = 2.09(1.51)$ ;  $F = 7.84$ ,  $p < .01$ ; see Fig. 7). These results fully confirm H6.

Similar to Study 1, we controlled for frequency of customer incivility incidents, perspective taking, and length of organizational tenure. Results of the three ANCOVAs suggest that both the main and interaction effects are similar to those presented in the three ANOVAs above.

## Discussion

### Theoretical contributions

Customer incivility towards frontline employees is becoming a frequent phenomenon with far-reaching ramifications for frontline employees and managers in the tourism and hospitality industries. As such, it has attracted the interest of a nascent research

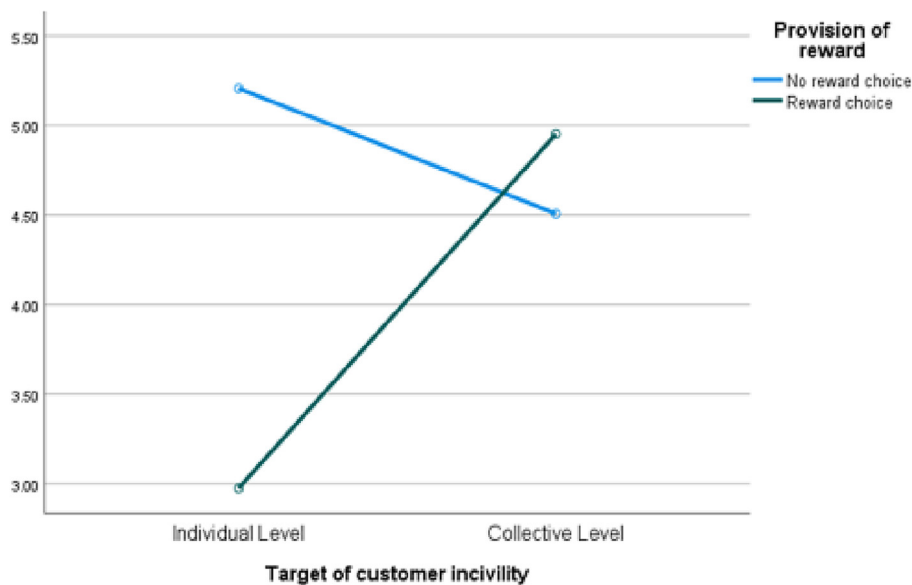


Fig. 6. Estimated marginal means of role stress.

community in tourism and hospitality in particular (Balaji et al., 2020; Kim & Baker, 2020) and management more broadly (Yue et al., 2021). Despite the insights that these research streams offer in understanding the psychological processes that frontline employees undergo when experiencing customer incivility, scarce, if any, work has attempted to shed light on identity threats as a theoretical mechanism through which customer incivility influences frontline employees' identity enactment and map the diverse ways frontline employees respond to such (external to the organization) threats (Baum, Kralj, Robinson, & Solnet, 2016). Addressing this void of knowledge will enable managers in tourism and hospitality understand how to best address the various demeaning behaviors that frontline employees face.

The findings reveal that customer incivility can indeed turn into a dual threat for frontline employees' identity and may distinctively result in diverse psychological and behavioral responses (Sedikides & Brewer, 2001). Both study 1 and 2 findings concur that the effects of customer incivility incidents can asymmetrically damage frontline employees' psychological and behavioral responses. These effects depend on the identity level of frontline employees that is under attack from customer incivility. Customer incivility directed at frontline employees' individual identity has a more disruptive effect on their self-esteem and role stress than on their willingness to report customer complaints. Customer incivility directed at frontline employees' collective identity has a stronger adverse effect on their willingness to report customer complaints than on their levels of self-esteem and role stress.

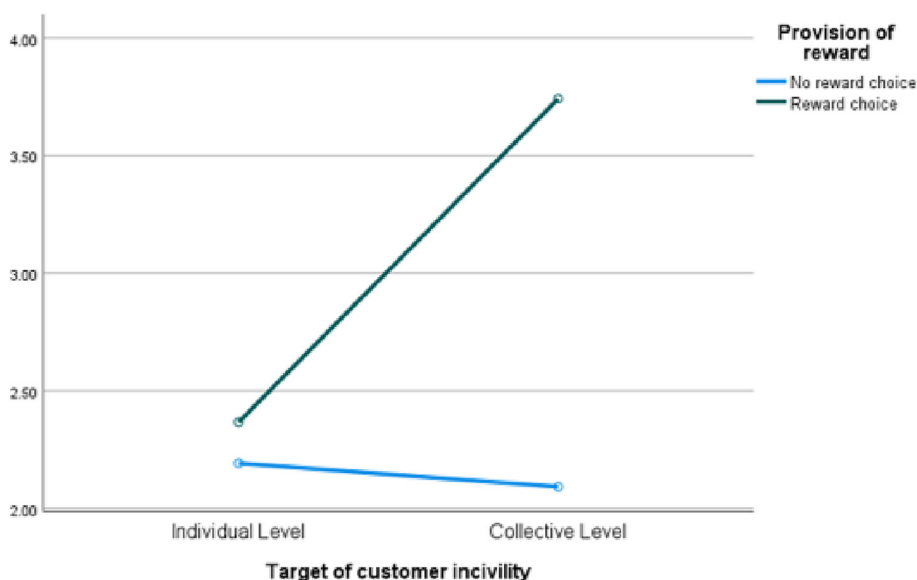


Fig. 7. Estimated marginal means of willingness to report customer complaints.

These findings bring to the forefront of incivility research in tourism and hospitality a new theoretical lens that might uncover why different types of customer incivility have differential effects on employees that prior research has shown (Kim & Baker, 2020). This lens suggests that the impact of customer incivility on frontline employees does not depend only on situational conditions of such incidents (e.g., intensity, frequency, visibility to others) that previous studies confirm (Hershcovis & Bhatnagar, 2017), but also on frontline employees' own understanding and interpretation of such incidents as identity threats. These insights depart from previous work that favors the provision of generic organizational support to employees (e.g., Boukis et al., 2020). They suggest that the remedies for customer incivility should become more tailored and directed at either restoring frontline employees' self-perceptions or re-stabilizing their relationship with the organization.

This research is a first step towards opening the debate about employee identity threats in tourism and hospitality literature. Recent developments in the management literature explore how various intra-organizational identity threats shape employee performance and wellbeing. This research extends this stream of research by showcasing the consequences of an unexplored (and external to the organization) phenomenon that the identity literature has yet to examine (Piening et al., 2020) - namely, customer incivility. The findings also extend studies in tourism and hospitality by uncovering the consequences of individual identity threats on frontline employees, beyond those associated with their collective identity (e.g., Lu, Capezio, Restubog, Garcia, & Wang, 2016).

Study 1 provides tactical directions on how managers should use organizational rewards in light of customer incivility incidents. This work investigates the effectiveness of organizational rewards in tourism and hospitality, adding to work on managerial interventions that support frontline employees in coping with uncivil customers (e.g., Balaji et al., 2020). When frontline employees' individual identity is under threat by customer incivility, non-monetary rewards remain more effective than monetary rewards in helping frontline employees restore their wellbeing (i.e., self-esteem and role stress). Publicly recognizing frontline employees' effort to handle uncivil customers enhances their self-appreciation and enables them to reduce the amount of post-incident stress they experience. This is one of their primary goals so that they can carry on with their role requirements (Long & Shields, 2010).

In turn, when customer incivility targets frontline employees' collective identity, monetary rewards become more effective at restoring frontline employees' willingness to report customer complaints (than non-monetary ones). Monetary rewards act as signals of formal recognition of frontline employees' competence and ability to handle difficult customers (Gardner et al., 2004; Kuvaas, 2006) and as a reparation for the psychological strain they have suffered from customers, due to their organizational membership. These findings also add to the organizational rewards literature by showing that intrinsic rewards (i.e., employee of the week) are more beneficial for enhancing frontline employees' self-concept than monetary rewards (Steinhart & Jiang, 2019).

Study 2 findings of this research further contextualize the effectiveness of organizational rewards in tourism research (e.g., Bani-Melhem et al., 2020) by exploring the role of reward choice after customer incivility incidents. They expand prior knowledge around situational conditions that affect the disruptive impact of incivility incidents on employees by adding reward choice as one of them (Hershcovis & Bhatnagar, 2017). Study 2 findings suggest that giving frontline employees the option to choose the organizational reward they prefer after customer-induced threats, reduces the impact of such incidents significantly more than when rewards are selected by their manager. This finding also stands when customer incivility targets both frontline employees' individual and collective identities and offers a new perspective to the organizational reward literature, which has traditionally treated employees as passive recipients of rewards (Aguinis et al., 2013).

### *Managerial implications*

This research highlights that frontline employees experiencing identity threats from customers tend to react through negative self-evaluations, decreased self-esteem and reduced engagement in citizenship activity. Tourism and hospitality managers should attempt to remedy the consequences of customer incivility incidents through four tactical steps stemming from our findings. Overall, it is advised that tourism and hospitality providers establish a multi-step appraisal process for line managers to follow in such incidents and steer their mindset towards implementing some tactical actions to reduce the disruptive effects of customer-induced identity threats on staff.

First, managers should actively seek for more details from staff involved in various customer incivility incidents so that they can early realize whether employees' identities are being affected, before undertaking any corrective action. The second step forward is to understand employees' level of identity being mostly affected. Whereas customer incivility directed at frontline employees' individual identity, such as customer demeaning comments about frontline employees' performance or/and personality, can damage frontline employees' self-perceptions, customer incivility directed at the organization (e.g., firm reputation) tends to discourage frontline employees from reporting customer complaints back to their line manager.

Based on the above-described audit, the third step for managers is to choose the reward that best fits the identity affected by a customer incivility incident. When customer incivility is directed towards frontline employees' individual identity, managers should bestow non-monetary rewards, such as "employee of the week" (rather than monetary compensation), as the frontline employee is more likely to have suffered a psychological resource loss (i.e., self-esteem, stress) in this case. On the contrary, managers should prioritize monetary rewards (e.g., lump sum) when customer incivility is directed to frontline employees' collective identity. In this case, monetary rewards would make frontline employees more prone to report customer feedback and complaints, as they signal more tangibly that the organization acknowledges employees' competence in handling of difficult customers.

The last step of the line manager's appraisal process is to communicate their action for the incident to the respective employee. Our findings highlight the importance of framing the reward offered to employees in a way that maximizes its perceived value to them. One way to do so is offering a choice among available organizational rewards to frontline employees who have experienced customer incivility. This enhances their perceptions of self-control and makes them feel more valued by making them active

participants in the management of such incidents. Providing options among available rewards signals a more collaborative approach to the handling of uncivil customers, as employees feel more empowered to choose the remedy they prefer and satisfy different psychological needs they might have (work status vs financial compensation). As a side effect of this four-step appraisal process, there might be some unintended benefits as well. This closer monitoring of employee-customer interactions might enhance managers' overall attentiveness to staff challenges as well as their understanding on what may rest behind their increased daily stress or their reduced sense of appreciation from their employer.

Findings also provide some strategic directions for tourism and hospitality managers to tailor the provision of rewards to staff. When there is staff shortage or staff retention is prioritized, managers should work to restore employees' self-esteem and reduce their stress levels using non-monetary rewards, as the management literature considers them both as strong predictors of employees' turnover (Aguinis et al., 2013). If service excellence or impeccable customer experience is the focus of the management (e.g., luxury resorts, high-end restaurants), managers might lean towards the use of monetary rewards so that they can positively reinforce employees to go the extra mile when serving customers.

### Limitations and suggestions for future research

This research carries several limitations as well as untapped themes that future research could address. First, it does not investigate customer incivility towards frontline employees' relational self, which resides between the individual and collective identities (Sedikides & Brewer, 2001). As customer incivility can also be directed at co-workers, supervisors, and even other customers with whom frontline employees develop interpersonal relationships, future studies should attempt to explore how third parties might experience customer incivility towards frontline employees' (relational) identity. Moreover, the current research does not account for the level of organizational identification among frontline employees. With regards to customer incivility targeting frontline employees' collective identity, the extent to which frontline employees identify with their organization might amplify their behavioral responses (Haslam et al., 2000). As such, researchers can investigate whether stronger bonds with an organization helps frontline employees cope better with uncivil customers.

Being the first effort to explore the relationship of the target of customer incivility (i.e., individual vs. collective identity) with both psychological and behavioral frontline employees' responses, the current research has attempted to establish some direct effects. However, it is likely that more complex relationships among the target of identity threat, psychological and behavioral responses may be at play, due to the interdependence of various identity levels. Hence, future studies could explore these possibilities by testing the use of various theoretical models (e.g. SOR) as well as potential mediation effects between the multiple levels of employee identities.

The focus of this research is on a single incivility incident. Although we control for participants' previous experience with such incidents, it is plausible that frontline employees might deal with several episodes in their role capacity. Hence, an interesting avenue would be to examine how managers could optimize the use of organizational resources (e.g., financial, non-financial) to cope with the effects of serial incivility incidents on frontline employees' job engagement and identify the more effective adaptive strategies for employees. Scholars should further explore whether rewards' provision has a more long-lasting effect on employees who regularly experience customer incivility.

Whilst the focus is on incivility stemming from customers, incivility might also derive from other sources (e.g., supervisors, co-workers) providing a diverse mix of identity threats for frontline employees, which future research could disentangle. This research addresses specific frontline employees' attitudinal and behavioral outcomes, without capturing other important responses, including job attitudes, emotional exhaustion, physical and mental health consequences, counterproductive work behaviors, group cohesion, turnover, aggression spillovers to coworkers, supervisors, and family members. These are some additional outcomes that future research could assess in this context.

Tourism and hospitality researchers should also explore further how increased frontline employees' participation in the handling of such incidents can be effective at mitigating the deleterious effects of customer incivility on their wellbeing and work performance. Both studies took place within one tourism and hospitality activity (i.e., lodging) in a single country (i.e., United Arab Emirates). Both limit the generalizability of the findings across other tourism and hospitality activities and countries with different cultural dynamics. Future research can replicate the current research approach to determine whether these findings across other tourism and hospitality activities and geographies with different cultural dynamics hold.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Achilleas Boukis:** Introduction writing, Theory integration, Hypotheses building

**Christos Koritos:** Data analysis, Findings, Managerial implications

**Avraam Papastathopoulos:** Data collection, methodological design

**Dimitrios Buhalis:** Discussion writing, positioning, Managerial implications, editing

### Declaration of competing interest

None.



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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2023.103555>.

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