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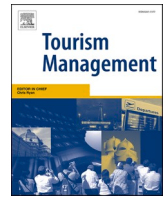
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# “Give me an upgrade or I will give you a bad review!” Investigating customer threats in the hospitality industry

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## ABSTRACT

This work is a first attempt to explain the phenomenon of customer threats and identify the individual and situational factors that drive this phenomenon in tourism and hospitality. Towards this goal, one qualitative and two quantitative studies are employed. Study 1 conceptualizes customer threats by uncovering two of the most common forms of verbal threats (i.e., threat to switch and threat to negative word of mouth) and their distinctive features as well as customers' motivations behind them, and some situational conditions that favor the enactment of customer threats. Using a survey-based approach, study 2 sheds light on three incident-specific drivers (i.e., psychological reactance, rumination, and justice perceptions) of the two main forms of customer threats. Finally, using an experimental approach, study 3 assesses the effectiveness of two service recovery strategies (self-service recovery vs. human-based recovery) at mitigating customer threats following service failure incidents.

## 1. Introduction

“A guest pulled me aside and said he didn't get the level of concierge service he expected and was going to write a negative review if he didn't get his money back,” Mr. Willis [owner of the Gables Wine Country Inn in Santa Rosa, California] said. “It was pretty bold.”

(The New York Times, 2016)

The rise of on-demand economy and price-comparison apps have rendered customers more demanding and entitled in their communications with tourism and hospitality providers (Ruvio, Bagozzi, Hult, & Spreng, 2020; Wang, Wang, & Gui, 2022). Anecdotal evidence in tourism and hospitality reports an exponential increase in demanding customers (e.g., Times Magazine, 2021) who routinely engage in intimidating verbal communication in their interactions with employees. For instance, a marked increase is evident in incidents where the threat of a bad online review on TripAdvisor has become an increasingly common form of hotel guest leverage, with guests even writing negative reviews while still in residence, knowing that the travel websites are monitored by the hotel staff (The New York Times, 2016). This is especially evident in post-service failure contexts where increased levels of entitlement provide customers with moral licensing

to demand restoration of the value that they deem lost (e.g., Cho, Bonn, Han, & Lee, 2016; Huang & Miao, 2016). Given that customer threats can affect future customers' intentions and generate additional costs to tourism and hospitality providers (Sparks, So, & Bradley, 2016), it becomes important to develop a deeper understanding around the nature, forms, and drivers of customers threats in this context.

While the concept of threat is long-investigated in the social psychology literature and fear appraisal frameworks (e.g., Witte, 1996), to date, we know very little about customer-induced threats. Customer threats refer to customers' verbal communication towards front-line employees (FLEs) with the manifested intention to cause harm to the employee and/or the company well-being, unless their demand(s) are met (Harris, Boukis, & Harfield, 2022). Such customer acts are distinct from customer misbehavior (e.g., incivility, physical threat, etc.), as (i) they center on expressed intentions to cause harm, (ii) they do not violate existing service norms, whilst (iii) nonetheless offers the threatened entity with the opportunity for immediate response, which may (or may not) prevent any customer misbehavior (Wang et al., 2022). Verbal threats could be deployed, as a response to service failures or unsuccessful service recovery efforts to vent off customers' anger, rage, or revenge intentions (Grégoire, Ghadami, Laporte, Sénécal, & Larocque, 2018; Harris, 2013), or from opportunistic customers who

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attempt to take advantage of ill-designed hotel policies (e.g., demands for room upgrades) (Fisk & Neville, 2011; Wirtz & McColl-Kennedy, 2010).

Although researchers have begun to explore how tourism and hospitality providers should respond to different levels of customer demandingness (Jung, Brown, & Zablah, 2022), ranging from excessive service levels to special treatment (Beatty et al., 2016), the nature and implications of assertive, customer-initiated threats have yet to be investigated. Moreover, scarce insights exist as to what makes customers engage in such behaviors following service failure incidents. Unlike excessive customer requests (Jung et al., 2022), customer threats often require immediate action, as they place FLEs in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, dismissing customer threats could result in switching or escalation into customer aggression (Wirtz & McColl-Kennedy, 2010); on the other, attempting to placate the threat without clear guidance could generate increased psychological strain for FLEs and approbation from their manager (Troebbs, Wagner, & Herzog, 2021). In this regard, providing guidance on threat incidents is of utmost importance for tourism and hospitality providers to avoid additional costs for service recovery and reduce the chances for customer complaining online (Van Vaerenbergh, Varga, De Keyser, & Orsingher, 2019).

With these gaps in mind, the current research advances scholarly knowledge around the nature, forms, and drivers of customer threats in tourism and hospitality. More specifically, through an exploratory approach, study 1 uncovers two main forms of verbal threats (i.e., threat to switch to another provider and threat to negative word of mouth – NWOM), and identifies three factors (i.e., psychological reactance, rumination, and justice perceptions) that seem to give rise to these two forms of customers' verbal threats following service failures. Through a survey-based approach, study 2 offers empirical evidence on the significant role that psychological reactance and justice perceptions have in driving the two main forms of customer verbal threats. Finally, via an experimental approach, study 3 investigates how the type of service failure that customers experience (i.e., outcome vs. process failure) and two recovery strategies (i.e., human-based vs. self-service technology (SST)) affect customers' intentions to engage in the two main forms of threat. Findings confirm that both threat to NWOM and threat to switch remain higher when outcome failures occur and that customers are more likely to engage in threat to NWOM intentions after SST-based recovery.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. The notion of threat

The notion of threat is long embedded in the social psychology and interpersonal relationship literatures and is widely associated with the initiation of a fear appeal process communicating the intention to inflict damage or harm on someone if a particular demand is not met (Witte, 1996). Threat enactment tends to generate negative responses from the recipient's side, through fear appeals, which motivate individuals to comply with a recommended action through the arousal of fear, a common outcome of threat (Witte, 1996). Studies in social psychology explore how individuals experience threat and the consequent fear arousal from various environmental factors (e.g., political ideologies), when aspects of their social or personal identity are under attack (e.g., race) and map cognitive (e.g., intolerance), emotional (e.g., hatred), and behavioral reactions to perceived threats (e.g., Frandsen & Morsing, 2022).

Management scholars investigate perceived threats that employees experience with respect to some of their self-identities, such as their occupation, their organizational status, or their belonging to a group (cf. Petriglieri, 2011). The focus of this stream is on perceived threats from organizational sources (e.g., abusive supervisors) and firm policies (e.g., organizational crises, change, etc.), as well as their impact on employee well-being, behavioral responses (e.g., withdrawal, retaliation, etc.), and group membership (Piening, Salge, Antons, & Kreiner, 2020).

Recent work has begun to investigate how FLEs experience identity threats from customers (e.g., Boukis, Koritos, Papastathopoulos, & Buhalis, 2023). Despite this evidence scarce, if any, insights exist on how and why customers communicate and enact threats towards tourism and hospitality providers and their employees.

### 2.2. Customer threats

Work in the broader customer sovereignty stream investigates how increasingly demanding and entitled customers respond to marketing strategies and how customers step up their expectations and voice their complaints and requests towards firms (e.g., Beatty et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2022). As part of this, the customer misbehavior/deviance literature (e.g., Lugosi, 2019) has examined the effects of physical aggression on hospitality employees, stressing the disruptive outcomes on FLEs, such as strain and withdrawal intentions (Cho et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2022). In parallel, tourism and hospitality researchers highlight forms of lower-intensity deviant behaviors, including customer incivility acts such as demeaning remarks (e.g., Boukis, Koritos, Daunt, & Papastathopoulos, 2020; Pressey & Harris, 2023). Concurrently, scholars also uncover customer manipulative/opportunistic behaviors (e.g., lying, excessive upgrade demands) towards companies (e.g., cheating) and map how customers retaliate when they experience helplessness or remain locked into service relationships (e.g., Jung et al., 2022; Wirtz & McColl-Kennedy, 2010). However, scarce, if any, studies explicate the situational antecedents of customers' undertaking verbal threats towards FLEs (Zhao, Jolly, & Zhao, 2023).

On the company side, research into service failures provides extensive insights into how tourism and hospitality providers should organize their service recovery efforts (e.g., Grégoire et al., 2018) to reduce customer switching and how they should deal with negative customer responses to service failures or moral violations (Jerger & Wirtz, 2017). The employee compliance literature also explores how FLEs respond to customer requests and highlights factors that affect employees' willingness to comply with such requests (Beatty et al., 2016; Jung et al., 2022).

Despite these insights around how service providers should cope with opportunistic or demanding customers, often following service failures, customer verbal threats have some stark differences compared to customer misbehavior. First, customers only communicate their *intention* to act; unless customers actualize the demand attached to a threat, service standards and processes for coping with "problem" customers cannot be easily enacted (Fisk & Neville, 2011). Interestingly, evidence shows that perceived threats trigger strong negative psychological effect (e.g., psychological strain) on its recipients, even without its enactment, impairing their effort to engage in extra-role behaviors (Zhao et al., 2023). Second, the demanding and burdensome nature of customer verbal threats place FLEs into a hostage situation whereby customers force them to act towards satisfying a particular demand (Witte, 1996). This makes FLEs more likely to satisfy customer demands, giving away valuable organizational resources (e.g., offering discounts) that might generate an increased sense of unfairness among observers (Troebbs et al., 2021).

To this point, no studies have explored the idiosyncratic nature of customer verbal threats as well as the efficacy of recovery strategies that tourism and hospitality providers should employ in such incidents. Given the limited research into the nature and dynamics of customer threats in tourism and hospitality, our literature review raises two questions that the extant literature has yet to address. First, when do customers resort to threatening communications and what circumstances trigger such verbal threats? How do different types of service failures and service recovery strategies affect customers' threats? The following studies seek to provide preliminary answers to these questions.

### 3. Study 1 –Understanding customer threats post service failures

To answer the above questions, we deemed an exploratory design, using interpretative methods as the most appropriate approach. We employed grounded theory to elicit insights into the actions and perceived actions of those making threats and those recipients or interpreters of threats, we undertook 54 in-depth interviews encompassing both threat perpetrators and threat recipients (22 with recipient FLEs of whom 6 were also perpetrating customers and 32 with participants who were simple customers) within a hotel context. Participants were selected in response to an online advertisement and were screened for suitability (including for example frequency of recent hotel stays, online posting of comments for customers and experience of frontline customer-facing roles for employees). We selected a hospitality context as it involves extended FLE-customer interactions, elevated expectations, and emotional investment to maximize available leisure opportunities; moreover, interactions are varied and commonly have latitude built into employee roles, while the hotel sector forms a significant part to most contemporary tourism contexts.

#### 3.1. Method

We audio recorded and fully transcribed each interview which followed a set interview protocol grounded in our review of relevant literature. Illustrative questions include ‘during your conversation, did the customers say or do anything you thought was pressuring you (how, when, why etc.)?’ and (for customers) ‘can you tell me how you acted and what you said when you threatened to take action? Do you always use the same approach, or do you vary things slightly?’ (how, when, why etc.). The mean length of interviews was 70 min for customers and 73 min for FLEs. Data collection ended shortly after theoretical saturation was achieved (Demographic background is available in the Appendix - Part A).

Our data analysis focused on the verbatim transcriptions of in-depth interviews but also reflected non-verbal data observations and notes (which were integrated into transcripts). We followed the analysis guidelines specified for both the methods of naturalistic inquiry (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and the techniques of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Overall, our approach followed the iterative procedures championed by Corley and Gioia (2004). Within these structures, we broadly followed the suggestions of Strauss and Corbin (1998) and adopted open, axial, and selective coding. Finally, we evaluated our analysis in terms of trustworthiness (including the sub-dimensions of transferability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability).

#### 3.2. Results

Analysis of interviews revealed that, post-service failure, hotel patrons typically communicated their views in ways that FLEs interpreted as threatening, in the sense that; communications centered on requests for certain actions by hotels which, *if not fulfilled*, would result in reprisal customer actions. Such behaviors constitute ‘threats’ but significantly differ from the colloquial use of the term ‘threats’ which are often associated with aggression or even violence. In the context of this study, combined with insights from existing definitions of threats (cf. Witte, 1996), lead us to develop a definition of customer threats as ‘*verbal demands by customers, in reprisal for poor consumption experiences, which state an intention to inflict harm on service providers (or their employees) unless a particular course of action is followed to meet these demands*’. This is concordant with the *parallel response model* (see Leventhal, 1970) comprising a view of customer threats as communicated intentions to inflict harm, commonly driven by two main motivations (see below) of retribution and/or reparation.

Data indicates that such reprisal-demands by customers after a service failure (or multiple service failures), were common to the point of

mundanity. Indeed, such demanding requests by customers were viewed as inherent to post-service failure communications with the firm. A hotel FLE illustratively comments:

“I don’t think they’re trying to hold a gun to my head! It’s just part of their complaint (quizzically). All they’re saying is ‘you do X or if you don’t I’m going to do Y’. That’s how most people react to a screw up – we mess up, try and fix it (if we see it) and if that doesn’t work people say ‘sort me out or else I’ll kick off’. Doesn’t mean they’re threatening to beat you up – they’re just pushing back!” [Participant 2–566]

As such, communications that threatened reprisal actions unless demands were met were commonplace. However, importantly, such threats were expressed *intentions* to act and, as such, were not necessarily enacted but were expressed intentions to act in a way that typically led to outcomes that would be harmful to the firm in some way. Thus, consistent with our definition of post-service failure customer threats, such threats involve a clear indication that negative outcomes *may* occur for the receiver unless demands are met. As such, threats were often deliberately and ostentatiously polite (uncivil or rude behavior often being viewed as counterproductive) and thus, for customers, such threats were commonly a legitimate way of structuring their demands to maximize the likelihood of a desire outcome for them:

You get nothing for nothing. All I said was – ‘you sort this out or I’m going to tell the world how you screwed up and ruined my trip. Your screw up – your choice!’ [Participant 4–42]

In this regard, a focus for customers was employing communications that highlighted their ability to take reprisal actions which *could* harm the hotel unless the hotel met their demands. In contrast, FLEs recognized the nature of customer threats but also recognized that such threats were expressed intention to act which may or may not be enacted:

Sometimes you think ‘you’re never going to do that buddy’. They’re just venting – mouthing off. Other times you think – ‘Yep, you’re mad enough with us to damn well follow that through’. Not all of them are. [Participant 1–213]

#### 3.2.1. Forms of threat

Data analysis revealed two main forms of customer threats that merit further delineation; communications involving threats to *enact negative word of mouth (NWOM)* and communicated threats to *switch service providers (SWITCH)*. First, post-service failure, customers communicated threats that were found to focus on their intention to disseminate negative or disparaging reports or comments about either the hotel, or an individual; we label this form of communication NWOM threats. In this regard, NWOM threats could be both personal and impersonal in nature but were typically current/immanent *and* indirect (that is, via third parties).

“I find that if you say what the problem was and they’re, like, ‘well, we’re sorry that you were inconvenienced’ and just digging their heels in, you’ve got to up the ante. You got to push them into doing something. One mention of ‘sorry but that isn’t good enough and going to post this on Trip Advisor’, or whatever and they respond – and pass it up to their boss. It shows that you’re serious and gives them the excuse to sort you out.” [Participant 7–12]

Typically, NWOM threats were evoked to highlight potential hotel or individual reputational harm/damage. In that regard, NWOM threats were often perceived by FLEs as driven more commonly (but not exclusively) by the revenge-aims or the character/ego of the protagonist than by a genuine sense of inequity, injustice, or unfairness. Thus, while some customers considered such communication approaches entirely legitimate and argued that their motives were equity rather than merely instrumental, FLEs were highly skeptical about such claims:

I'm not saying their all lying. Of course, mistakes happen but the second it's 'I'm gonna post this on Trip Advisor or whatever', you just know this is a power-trip for them – just trying to show they're the big 'I am'. [Participant 1–02]

In this sense, NWOM threats were often viewed by FLEs as more likely to be illegitimate or unethical in some way. Finally, while FLEs were often skeptical of NWOM threats, customers typically believed that such communications were effective and efficient means of reprisal for persistent or repeated service failure. One comments:

To some companies, we're just one of hundreds – nothing to them. Well, this way, you remind them that you're not – you can bite them back and even the score. Using the threat of a bad review or lashing on Trip Advisor, keeps them honest. [Participant 2–07]

In this regard, NWOM threats were deemed by customers to be a tough but effective means of triggering desired outcomes from hotels or individuals more concerned with protecting the hotel's interests than those of hotel patrons.

The second form of post-service failure threat communication centered on threats to switch to other hotels. After service failure episodes and often failures by the hotel to recover, customers communicated their intentions to be disloyal or to switch to rival hotels in the area, often broadened to include other parties (such as the custom of family and friends), unless recompense, reparation, or restitution was made. As such, threats to switch were predominately made directly to the hotel (or its representatives). One hotel patron explains:

It is ingrained into hotel staff – 'the customer is always right'. So, when you start saying you'll move, they get really jittery. 'Always right' you, see? Just 'cos you say it, doesn't mean you have to do it. You can simply push their button to get what you want. [Participant 2–11]

Interestingly, typically customers' threats to switch were centered on future consumption (rather than current events) but very much based on equity, fairness, and restitution justice. As such, while the bases of the threats were claims regarding past firm performance, expectations were typically on future events and providing organizations with an opportunity to make amends for past failures. This potentially explains why FLEs more commonly viewed customers' threats to switch as more legitimate, justifiable, and reasonable:

"It does depend, but largely if they're saying – 'look, shit happened, you ballsed up, sort me out next time or I'll switch to X or Y', they're being reasonable – well, -reasonable-ish! They could be yanking your chain but they're being sensible – most of the time, that's a sign that their trying to be fair." [Participant 2–13]

Nonetheless, FLEs noted that the cost to hotels of such threats were typically larger than with NWOM threats (in part, because such threats were typically measurable in monetary value compared to reputational harm). This prevailing view was shared with customers who argued that the threats to switch was a powerful form of leverage which gave customers considerable power in competitive conditions:

People don't want to lose business – they don't want to lose you. So that gives you leverage, right? You've got power to push them into giving you what you want or you'll walk away. [Participant 4–22]

As such, customers issuing threats to switch were aware of their worth to hotels and well aware of their customer rights and their power to force restitution for perceived unfairness.

While the triggers for episodes of customer's threats to switch post-service failure were often idiosyncratic or context-specific, in contrast to threats to NWOM which were more typically ego-oriented, threats to switch were commonly more focused on perceived injustice triggering negative reflections on experiences and negative consumption emotions. Such reflections were deepened by unsatisfying attempts by firms to

recovery service failures but, probably reflecting the equity-basis of the corer issues, triggered communications that threatened a lack in future loyalty unless the hotel made tangible effort to make meaningful reparations.

Notwithstanding differences in the two forms of customer's post-service failure threat communications, participants were in broad agreement that such tactics could be effective in achieving the desired outcomes of customers.

This is not to suggest that FLEs viewed all such threats as legitimate or fair but, in contrast, reflects their interpretations of success rate from the perspective of guest visitors. Table 1 summarizes the key differences between the two main forms of customer threats distilled by the qualitative findings.

Although participants suggested that the use of varying threats after service failure could be effective for customers and in that regard should be viewed as rational rather than merely dysfunctional, less clear evidence was found regarding the drivers of such behaviors. As mentioned previously, varying forms of threats communicated by customers, often reflected very different circumstances, and were driven by differing motives. Thus, differing types of threats by customers appeared to be more strongly linked with differing contingencies or considerations. Threats to NWOM tended to be more immediate compared to typically threats to switch future custom; the distinction seemingly linked to the ego-related, retribution, or justice-oriented nature of NWOM versus the negative emotional drivers of justice-related threats to switch future service.

In summation, Study 1 contributes insights into the nature of consumer threats as reprisal-based intentions that are communicated. Moreover, two main types of threat (Threat to NWOM and Threat to Switch) are identified and key differences elucidated (see Table 1 for a summary). These insights include a recognition that the two different types of threat are driven by differing aims and motives, trigger differing responses, and are likely to incur different outcomes for both recipients and perpetrators.

#### 4. Study 2 – Antecedents of customer threats

Study 1 investigates the phenomenology of customer threats and uncovers two different forms of threat, their distinctive nature and various situational conditions that favor its enactment after service failures. Based on these insights, study 2 adopts a survey-based approach to assess the effect of three antecedents (i.e., psychological reactance, rumination, and justice) on the two forms of threat intentions.

##### 4.1. Theoretical background and hypotheses

Psychological reactance "is an unpleasant motivational arousal that emerges when people experience a threat to or loss of their free behaviors" (Steindl, Jonas, Sittenthaler, Traut-Mattausch, & Greenberg, 2015, p. 205). Unexpected changes in aspects of the agreed offerings (e.g.,

**Table 1**  
– Differences between threat types.

	Threat to NWOM	Threat to switch
<b>Direction</b>	Indirect form via 3rd parties	Direct via the firm's employees
<b>Timing</b>	Current	Future
<b>Aim</b>	To punish/revenge	To restore justice/resources
<b>Perceived Impact</b>	Cause reputational damage	Cause financial damage
<b>Perceived Legitimacy</b>	Less ethical request	More legitimate request
<b>Motives</b>	Driven by ego-related motives (e.g. entitlement)	Driven by situational/incident-specific factors (e.g. rumination, emotions)
<b>Response immediacy</b>	Lower	Higher

deviance from service expectations), represent a change in the contract between customers and the company, which equates to a reduction of perceived customer freedom (Li, Xue, Cheng, Lim, & Tan, 2023). While there is still debate on whether reactance itself can be empirically captured, researchers agree that negative emotions motivate individuals to seek ways for restoring their lost freedoms (Steindl et al., 2015). At the same time, anger-related emotions can motivate individuals to become aggressive and hostile towards the perpetrators of their lost freedoms (Li et al., 2023).

Psychological reactance is previously examined in the context of online advertising and product recommendations as well as in loyalty programs and rewards (e.g. Fitzsimons & Lehmann, 2004). Following a restriction of their available choices, customers can experience anger (Steindl et al., 2015) and negative emotions for sellers; negative advocacy and switching intentions appear as the most common responses to restriction/changes on customers available options (Thorbjørnsen & Dahlén, 2011). Hence, when the available options for customers are changing to the worse (e.g., reduced levels of customer service), psychological reactance is likely to activate anger and negative emotions (Steindl et al., 2015), which, in turn, is associated with more hostile customer responses, such as negative word-of-mouth and switching intentions. Hence, we hypothesize that.

**H1.** Customer reactance positively affects their intentions to engage in threats to NWOM (H1a) and threats to switch provider (H1b).

Rumination represents “a mode of responding to distress that involves repetitively and passively focusing on symptoms of distress and on the possible causes and consequences of these symptoms” (Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, & Lyubomirsky, 2008, p. 400). As individuals dealing with a stressful situation may not take action to alleviate the causes of their ruminative thinking, researchers have demonstrated that rumination can lead to acts of revenge (McCullough, Bono, & Root, 2007) and aggression against the perpetrator of the stressful situation. There is also evidence that rumination consists of several subcomponents, with one of them, anger rumination, significantly predicting physical and verbal aggression and hostility (Anestis, Anestis, Selby, & Joiner, 2009).

Scholarly work in service failure suggests that customer rumination generates negative advocacy and negatively affects repeat patronage following service failure with an internal blame (e.g., Akarsu, Marvi, & Foroudi, 2023). Relatedly, double deviations incidents make customers less forgiving of service providers (Hur & Jang, 2019). Finally, rumination is also examined as a response to customer regrets in post consumption situations, where customers’ immediate reaction to rumination is regret for the choice of the providers they made and a strong drive to switch provider (Akarsu et al., 2023). Taken together, it appears that increased rumination levels are likely to result in both aggressive and hostile reactions towards the perpetrators of ruminative thinking (Anestis et al., 2009), as well as in increased intentions to switch service providers. Hence, we hypothesize that.

**H2.** Customer rumination positively affects their intentions to engage in threats to NWOM (H2a) and threats to switch provider (H2b).

Organizational justice theory is widely used to understand customers’ reactions following service failures and recovery efforts (Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011). Perceived justice refers to the degree to which customers feel that they were treated fairly following the complaint handling process after poor service experiences (Kim, Kim, & Kim, 2009). Within the service failure/recovery context, perceived justice with its three subcomponents (i.e., procedural, interactional, distributive justice) explains how customers experience service failures and their satisfaction from firms’ recovery efforts for counterbalancing the resource loss they experienced (Grégoire et al., 2018).

Perceived customer justice is a direct antecedent of customers’ intentions to spread negative word-of-mouth as well as customer switching intentions (Aksoy & Yazici, 2023). Relatedly, service provider unfairness can even lead to revengeful/retaliatory behaviors such as

vindictive complaining and third-party complaining to gain publicity (Kim et al., 2009; Grégoire, Laufer, & Tripp, 2010). Finally, justice restoration is a key mediating mechanism between service recovery efforts and customers’ intentions to keep on spreading negative word-of-mouth (Grégoire et al., 2018). In other words, similarly to psychological reactance and rumination, lower customer justice perceptions could act as motivators for customer threatening behaviors (see Fig.1). In all, we hypothesize that.

**H3.** Customer justice perceptions negatively affect their intentions to engage in threats to NWOM (H3a) and threats to switch provider (H3b).

4.2. Methods

4.2.1. Sample

For this study we sought to collect a sample of UK-based travelers. Our sample consists of 504 randomly selected responses from Prolific online panel. For eligibility, participants had to travel more than four times per year for work (Millán, Fanjul, & Moital, 2016). In addition, participants should have experienced a recent service failure incident that negatively affected them with one of the hotels they visited in the past three months (i.e., poor service, service delays, etc.) about which they complained at that time to hotel staff. The study took place in September 2022 in the UK. Participants were first asked to recall and describe this incident and then answer the survey questions in relation to this incident. 22.9% of the participants who visited the hotel before had experienced a similar incident before. In their majority, participants were not serial complainers (40.7% of them rarely complain about goods/services and 38.7% occasionally do so) (the full demographic background is available in Part A- Appendix).

4.2.2. Measures

To measure study 2 constructs, we rely on existing scales. Following recommendations in the psychological reactance research (Mattila & Ro, 2008; Steindl et al., 2015) we employ anger related emotions (i.e., respondents were prompted to recall the extent to which they felt angry, worried, mad, annoyed) as indicators of customer psychological reactance. Customer rumination relies on the scale recommended by McCullough et al. (2007). To measure justice perceptions, we relied on the scale proposed by Smith, Bolton, and Wagner (1999). Finally, to capture threat to NWOM we employed the scale used by Babin, Lee, Kim, and Griffin (2005) whereas, threats to switch provider was measured by the scale of Antón, Camarero, and Carrero (2007) (for all items and descriptive statistics, see Appendix, Part B). All variables are measured with 7-point Likert scales and possess acceptable psychometric properties (see Table 2 below).

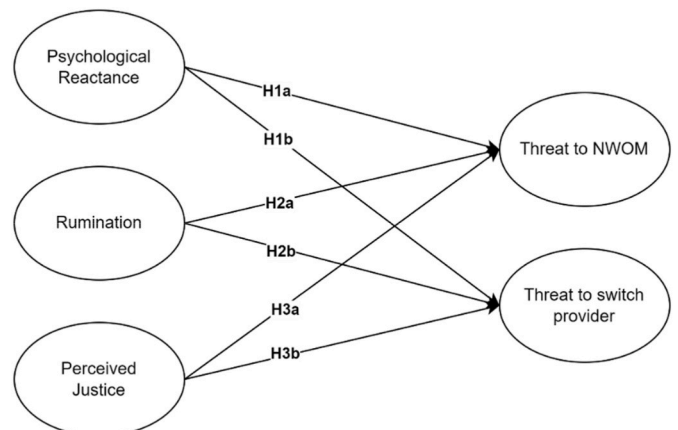


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework of study 2.

**Table 2**  
Descriptive statistics and pairwise correlations of study constructs.

	M(SD)	Skewness	Kurtosis	Cronbach $\alpha$	CR	1	2	3	4	5
1. Psychological Reactance	3.87(1.45)	0.068	-0.853	0.878	0.869	<b>0.629</b>	0.337	0.148	0.258	0.190
2. Rumination	2.42(1.50)	1.125	0.405	0.953	0.955	0.581**	<b>0.811</b>	0.070	0.104	0.057
3. Justice perceptions	4.08(1.62)	-0.198	-1.032	0.929	0.933	-0.385**	-0.265**	<b>0.824</b>	0.331	0.275
4. Threat to NWOM	4.57(1.65)	-0.455	-0.584	0.907	0.914	0.508**	0.324**	-0.576**	<b>0.781</b>	0.316
5. Threat to switch	5.46(1.37)	-0.929	0.595	0.900	0.918	0.436**	0.239**	-0.525**	0.563**	<b>0.788</b>

Notes: Average variance extracted values are on the diagonal, and squared correlations are above diagonal. \*\* denotes significance at the 1 % level.

4.3. Results

To test the hypothesized relationships, structural equation modelling was run on SPSS Amos 22.0, to check whether the model fits the data collected. In this model psychological reactance, rumination, and justice perceptions acted as the independent variables and threats to NWOM and to switch were the dependent variable. Results suggest that this model possesses adequate fit ( $\chi^2 = 331.186, df = 123, p = 0.000, IFI = 0.976, CFI = 0.976, RMSEA = 0.05$ ). With regards to the hypothesized relationships result from this structural equation model suggest (see Table 3 and Part C at the Appendix) that psychological reactance significantly and positively affects both threat to NWOM and threat to switch, providing with support H1(a) and H1(b). Contrary to expectations, results suggest that rumination does not have a significant effect on either threat to NWOM or threat to switch, failing to provide support for H2(a) and 2(b). Finally, as expected results suggest that justice perceptions negatively affect both threat to NWOM and threat to switch, supporting H3(a) and H3(b).

5. Study 3 –The role of recovery strategies in mitigating customer threats

Through a scenario-based approach, study 3 investigates whether customers’ intentions to engage in the two main forms of threat are affected by two important aspects of threat incidents. First, we focus on the type of service failure that customers experience (i.e., outcome vs. process failures), as studies in tourism and hospitality consider it a key determinant of recovery efforts and compensation effectiveness (e.g., Lee & Cranage, 2018; Shin, Perdue, & Kang, 2019). Second, acknowledging the rise of technology-mediated interactions with guests including robot concierges, and mobile check-in (e.g., Shin et al., 2019), we assess the efficacy of two recovery strategies (i.e., human-based vs. self-service technology (SST) recovery).

5.1. Hypotheses development

The customer complaint management literature distinguishes two main types of service failures: outcome and process (Sivakumar, Li, & Dong, 2014; Smith et al., 1999). Outcome failures refer to situations whereby tourism and hospitality providers fail to deliver their core promise to customers (e.g., room overbooking). Process failures are

**Table 3**  
Structural Equation Modeling results.

Hypothesized effects	Unstandardized Regression weights (t-values/p-values)
H1(a): Psychological Reactance→Threat to NWOM	0.394(6.539/p = 0.000)
H2(b): Psychological Reactance→Threat to switch	0.371(5.413/p = 0.000)
H2(a): Rumination→Threat to NWOM	0.050(1.171/p = 0.242)
H2(b): Rumination→Threat to switch	0.084(1.683/p = 0.092)
H3(a): Justice Perceptions→Threat to NWOM	-0.414(-10.500/p = 0.000)
H3(b): Justice Perceptions→Threat to switch	-0.448(-10.153/p = 0.000)

associated with deficiencies or flaws in service delivery and reflect functional failures (e.g., check-in delays) that to a lesser or greater extent affect the firms’ promise to customers (Luo & Mattila, 2020). Outcome failures are associated with utilitarian exchanges and the losses deriving from outcome failures tend to be more economic in nature; process failures involve more symbolic exchanges where the (resource) losses tend to be primarily social/symbolic ones (Luo & Mattila, 2020).

Outcome failures tend to generate more severe and intense psychological responses among customers (e.g., rage, revenge), as the provider fails to deliver their core offering to customers, preventing them from reaching their goals (Obeidat, Xiao, Iyer, & Nicholson, 2017). Outcome failures also generate lower attributional uncertainty than process ones as customers often associate process failures more with non-controllable factors (e.g., store business) than outcome ones (Van Vaerenbergh, Orsingher, Vermeir, & Larivière, 2014). Hence, customers are more likely to place the blame on the service provider (than to external factors) and this makes them more likely to exhibit stronger reactions when dealing with outcome failures (Bougie, Pieters, & Zeelenberg, 2003). As customers face a direct breach of the hotel’s core promise and a direct (financial) resource loss during outcome failures, firms’ recovery and compensation expectations are anticipated in a timelier manner than in process failures (Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2014).

In outcome failures, higher attributions of blame to the service provider as well as the increased severity of the failure are more likely to result in higher levels of anger (Bougie et al., 2003; Soscia, 2007) and a more negative psychological state among customers (Smith et al., 1999). This will also render customers more impatient to undertake action in the present (than in the future) and will generate higher expectations for immediate compensation (Liu, Jayawardhena, Dibb, & Ranaweera, 2019), making customers more prone to reciprocate the firm with a direct threat (i.e., threat to switch) where firm response immediacy is expected to be higher. Hence, it is hypothesized that.

**H4a.** When an outcome failure occurs, customers are more likely to threaten to switch, compared to a process failure.

Process failures are associated with inadequate service delivery and mostly reflect operational/functional deficiencies from the provider’s side (Kim & So, 2022). Scholars indicate that process failures involve reduced interpersonal quality that result in a loss of social/symbolic resources for customers (e.g., status, esteem – Choi, Mattila, & Bolton, 2021); as a result, when customers suffer a social resource loss, they will be more prone to engage in acts that primarily cause reputational damage by harming the provider’s reputation, in line with resource exchange theory (Obeidat et al., 2017; Smith et al., 1999). Moreover, customers tend to be less certain about the attribution of process failures (i.e., whether it is internal or external) (Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2014). This higher attributional uncertainty might render them more prone to launch a subtle confrontation and engage in a more indirect form of threat (i.e., threat to NWOM) (Grégoire et al., 2018). In process failures, there is a lower goal incongruity between the actual situation and the customers’ mental representation of the desired state (or goal) than in outcome failures (Soscia, 2007). Hence, the form of threat that customers will consider adopting is likely to be a less severe and more indirect one (i.e., threat to switch). Therefore, it is hypothesized that.

**H4b.** When a process failure occurs, customers are more likely to

threaten to NWOM, compared to an outcome failure.

Extant research has identified a plethora of factors that shape customers' satisfaction with recovery efforts such as the size and type of compensation, the speed of recovery and employees' behavior (e.g., Kim & So, 2022; Rosch & Gelbrich, 2014). Our focus lies on two recovery strategies. SST refers to technological interfaces that enable customers to perform services without the involvement of FLEs. An increasing body of studies examine the antecedents and consequences of SST adoption for performing service-related activities (e.g., Chen, Mohanty, Jiao, & Fan, 2021) and the effectiveness of service recovery following SST failures (e.g., Chen et al., 2021; Kim & So, 2022). However, to this point, there are no studies exploring the role of SST-based recovery at mitigating customers' threatening behaviors.

We argue that human-based recovery will result in lower threat intentions for both forms of customer threat. Evidence shows that the levels of perceived care and attention that customers associate with automated technology are lower than those entailing actual FLEs (Gielhausen, Robinson, Sirianni, & Brady, 2014). Also, customers perceive humans as having greater warmth and, therefore, a greater capacity to deliver warm and friendly service than service robots (van Doorn et al., 2017). Customers tend to rate their interactions with SST as having lower level of personalization and lower interpersonal fairness (Davenport, Guha, Grewal, & Bressgott, 2020) (See Fig. 2). Therefore, it is hypothesized that.

**H4c.** Compared to SST, human-based recovery to a service failure is less likely to result in customer threats to NWOM or threats to switch.

5.2. Method

5.2.1. Participants & stimuli

For study 3, we recruited 200 UK-based participants using the Prolific panel (December 2022). Our focus was participants who were business travelers. For inclusion, participants were pre-screened based on their frequency of travel in past few months; 23.5% of them travelled for work more than once in the month prior to data collection, 42.5% them travelled for work more than once in during the three months prior to data collection, and 34% them travelled for work more than once in the six months prior to data collection (for full demographic background see Appendix - Part A).

To test our hypotheses, a scenario-based approach was selected using a between-subjects experiment. Participants were asked to read one of the four scenarios (see Appendix, Part D) that presented a service failure they faced at a hotel when travelling for a business meeting. In the first part of the scenarios, the type of service failure was manipulated, and participants have either experienced a process failure (i.e., check-in

delay that resulted in delaying their business meeting) or an outcome failure (i.e., overlooked hotel that resulted in postponing the meeting for the next day). The latter part of the scenarios manipulated the service recovery strategy that the hotel adopted (i.e., SST vs human-based recovery strategy). In all scenarios, participants were compensated with a complementary drink either via another FLE (human-based recovery) or via a chatbot that displayed an automated message to the customer (self-service recovery) (see Appendix, Part D). The manipulation used worked well ("To what extent do you consider this scenario realistic"; 1(not at all realistic) to 7(extremely realistic); M = 5.11(1.28); t = 56.38; df = 199; p < 0.001).

5.2.2. Measures

Similarly to study 2, threat to NWOM was measured via the scale used by Babin et al. (2005) whereas, threats to switch to another provider was measured by the scale of Antón et al. (2007). All variables are measured with 7-point Likert scales and possess acceptable psychometric properties (threat to switch: M(SD) = 5.27(1.39); Cronbach a = 0.87, AVE = 0.69, CR = 0.87; threat to NWOM: M(SD) = 4.94(1.40); Cronbach a = 0.88, AVE = 0.72, CR = 0.88). For both constructs, skewness and kurtosis are within the suggested limits (S<sub>switch</sub> = -0.889; K<sub>switch</sub> = 0.608; S<sub>NWOM</sub> = -0.696; K<sub>NWOM</sub> = 0.028).

5.3. Results

An ANOVA was used to test H4a; the main effect of service failure on threat to switch intentions was significant [F = 7.76; p < 0.01]. Participants reported significantly higher threat to switch intentions for outcome failures [M<sub>OUT</sub>(SD) = 5.54(1.29)] than for process failures [M<sub>PROC</sub>(SD) = 5.00(1.44)], confirming H4a. Results also showed that the main effect of service failure type on threat to NWOM intentions was also significant [F = 25.64; p < 0.001], but, against our initial hypothesis, participants reported significantly higher threat to NWOM intentions for outcome failures [M<sub>OUT</sub>(SD) = 5.40(1.15)] than for process ones [M<sub>PROC</sub>(SD) = 4.48(1.48)], rejecting H4b. The effect of service recovery strategy on threat to NWOM intentions was significant [F = 11.48; p < 0.001]. Participants reported significantly higher threat to NWOM intentions after SST-based recovery [M<sub>SST</sub>(SD) = 5.23(1.29)] than after human-based one [M<sub>HUM</sub>(SD) = 4.63(1.45)]. On the contrary the effect of service recovery strategy on threat to switch is not significant [F = 3.56; p > 0.05; M<sub>SST</sub>(SD) = 5.38(1.47); M<sub>HUM</sub>(SD) = 5.16(1.30)], leading to partially accepting H4c.

Overall, study 3 results demonstrate that the impact of service failure type on different forms of threat that customers enact is asymmetric. Outcome failures are more likely to trigger customer threats to switch provider as well as induce threats to NWOM, compared to process failures. Finally, when recovery from service failure is provided by FLEs (compared to SST) customers are less likely to threaten to NWOM. However, customers are equally likely to threaten to switch service providers following service failure, irrespective of whether recovery is provided by FLEs or non-human agents.

6. Discussion

This work explores the nature and distinctive features of customer verbal threats following service failure incidents (study 1) as well as some key antecedents of such customer behaviors (study 2) in a hospitality context (Grégoire et al., 2018; Zhao et al., 2023). Our findings (study 3) also provide insights regarding the efficacy of two service recovery approaches (i.e., human-based vs. SST) at mitigating customer threats, extending work around how hotels can cope with demanding and manipulating customer acts (e.g., Chen et al., 2021; Hogreve, Bilstein, & Hoerner, 2019).

Results of study 1 suggest that customer threats take the form of either negative advocacy (NWOM) (towards the provider or an employee) or/and threat to switch to another provider and interrupt the

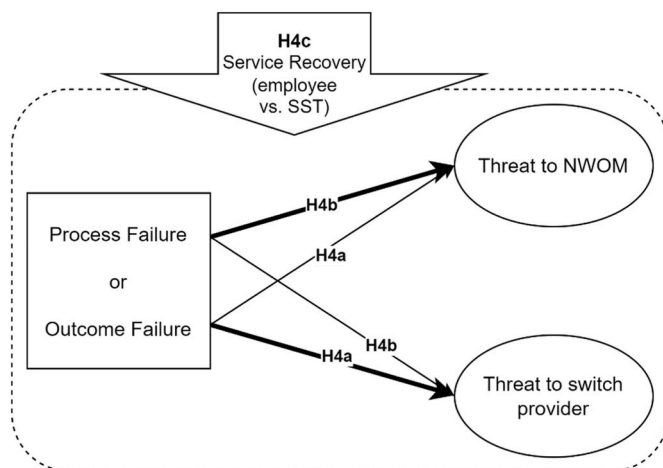


Fig. 2. – Conceptual framework of study 3.



service relationship (exit). It is noted that customers' threats arise after service failure and/or unsuccessful service recovery (i.e., double deviation) incidents where customers often escalate their unresolved complaints; on such occasions, customers often register for threat to NWOM. As such, the current research contributes to the post-service recovery literature (e.g., Hogreve et al., 2019; Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2019) by uncovering a new form of illegitimate customer complaining about which firms have no processes and service standards in place yet (Huang & Miao, 2016).

In exploring this issue, we reveal some key distinctions between the two forms of threat and explicate how they differ in terms of direction, timing, aims, impact, legitimacy, motives, and firm response immediacy (see Table 1). Our findings also highlight customers' preference towards expressing threats via indirect verbal channels, which often become perceived by FLEs from their retribution element. These findings expand the classification of direct customer and indirect customer revenge behaviors of Grégoire et al. (2010), by shedding light into a demanding communication approach that could underlie such behaviors. In the majority of incidents, some form of financial reparation was expected from interviewees. This further supports the directions provided by Jerger and Wirtz (2017) into how firms should manage threat episodes due to the monetary losses that they need to use to meet customer demands.

Study 2 confirms that customers' psychological reactance and justice perceptions are key drivers of both forms of customer threats. When customers experience anger-related emotions after service failures or unsuccessful service recovery, they become (marginally) more likely to threaten to NWOM (than to switch). On the contrary, when customers experience increased unfairness or injustice in their interactions with hospitality providers (often due to unfair treatment from staff, extra charges or inconsistent customer experience - Schoefer & Ennew, 2005), they become more likely to engage in a threat to switch (than to NWOM). These findings corroborate research that has placed justice perceptions as the key mechanism driving customer complaining (Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011), onto an unexplored to this point type of such behaviors, namely customer threats.

However, we extend research in service failure/recovery literature by demonstrating the critical role of psychological reactance in propelling this specific type of customer complaining behavior (i.e., threats). Finally, concordant with the original work in rumination (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008), results suggest that rumination does not have a motivational effect (i.e., non-significant effects of rumination on both forms of threat in study 2) on this specific type of customer demanding behavior. Rather it makes customers overthink the service failure episode without taking any action, at least not one that would impinge a threat to the perpetrator(s) of the service failure.

Our findings also extend work in service recovery in two ways. First, hotel customers are more likely to threaten hotels with negative reviews and/or to switch when they face outcome failures (rather than process ones). Against our expectations, customers are more likely to threaten with negative advocacy when hotels cannot deliver their main promise rather than when they face severe delays. Second, the choice of the service recovery strategy also matters for customers' inclination to threaten (Lee & Cranage, 2018). When SST recovery is adopted, hotel customers are more likely to deploy threats than when interactions with FLEs takes place for the same incident. This finding extends the SST recovery literature (Lee & Cranage, 2018; Shin & Perdue, 2019) in identifying another dark consequence of automated service recovery for hotels, for which limited directions exist for FLEs.

## 7. Managerial implications

In highlighting the pervasiveness and forms of customer reprisals post service failure, this work explores an understudied phenomenon that has implications for both managers and FLEs in tourism. Considering increasingly demanding customers, service failure scripts should

be enriched with guidance for FLEs' responses in two directions. First, to inform FLEs of the potential source/background of the threat incident and, second, to customize their responses to different types of customer threats.

As differing types of threats are grounded in differing motives and with distinct aims, FLEs should be trained in recognizing different types of service threats and their potential sources so that they can better inform their evaluation of the incident. For instance, FLEs should be aware that threats to switch tend to be more driven by increased unfairness or injustice among customers, often generated by unfair treatment from staff, inconsistent service delivery, or extra charges (Schoefer & Ennew, 2005). Hence, FLEs should seek to identify potential sources of injustice that might drive customers to engage in threats to switch. Threats to NWOM, however, emerge more in response to customers' ego protection after the loss of individual resources (e.g. self-image) following service failures or unsuccessful service recovery. In this case, FLEs should aim to focus more on managing customers' negative emotional state (psychological reactance).

Hotel responses to customers' threat to switch should be prioritized above other less potentially damaging complaints. In such incidents, compensation should be more oriented to rectifying the reduced fairness or injustice that the customer is experiencing; hence, the use of social (vs monetary) rewards might prove more effective for alleviating threats to switch as they better stimulate consumers' relational behaviors towards firms (Lee, Tsang, & Pan, 2015). Moreover, tourism and hospitality providers' responses to such events need to be more immediate than threats to NWOM, due to the increased risk for customer switching. Conversely, as threats to NWOM tend to derive mostly from ego-related motives (e.g., entitlement, revenge), tourism and hospitality providers' efforts should focus more on managing customers' expectations and designing tailored and detailed service scripts for FLEs to de-escalate such incidents. As more revengeful behaviors are associated with threats to NWOM, hotel managers should standardize the steps in handling of such incidents to avoid further escalation. At the same time, they should regulate the benefits (e.g. immediate rewards) provided to customers to avoid social learning from other customers.

Our work also provides some implications for managing and training FLEs who regularly experience threats in their role capacity. FLEs view threats to switch as more legitimate and justifiable, compared to threats to NWOM. As threats to NWOM are perceived as less ethical, FLEs might experience increased feelings of unfairness and lack of firm support due to the satisfaction of such customer demands. In this regard, FLE training should be enriched with clear organizational guidance and scenario-based learning regarding the judicious handling of such episodes. While such actions may not reduce threat incidents, the potential harm of such events on FLEs could be managed by astute and proactive management.

A last group of implications relates to the use of automated complaint management processes for service recovery purposes. As technology-mediated services are expanding across tourism and hospitality operations, managers should be aware that the lack of human interaction makes customers more likely to engage in threatening behavior in this context. Therefore, managers might want to deploy self-service technologies in less complex steps of service provision such as reservations, and check-in/check-out, and retain the FLEs' for the more complex and delicate steps of service provision such as handling customer complaints and service recovery whereby customers are more likely to engage in threatening acts when they deal with technology-mediated channels.

## 8. Limitations and future research

This work also has some limitations. Although study 1 includes data from both perpetrators and recipients of threats, studies 2 and 3, only rely on customer data, without capturing the coping strategies that FLEs might adopt in response to threat incidents. Second, our participants are mostly customers that have suffered service failures during their trips,

without capturing guests who proactively engage in threatening communications to maximize their benefits from their interactions with service providers. In addition, we do not collect data on potential managerial interventions that can support FLEs and/or provide benefits to customers, both of which future researchers could explore. Third, the effect of threatening intentions on customers' purchase behavior was not captured. As such, the extent to which they might turn their intended threats into actions remains unknown. Last, our work does not account for any cultural communication differences (e.g. high vs low contexts) that could affect perpetrators' threat communication and employees' perceptions of it.

To overcome these limitations, three main approaches paper especially fruitful. First wider research into consumer threats in culturally differing contexts would be valuable. Second, in order to understand further the dynamics between perpetrators and recipients, future research should explore the various tactics and strategies that customers deploy to validate their threat requests when interacting with FLEs and the outcomes of such variations. Finally, researchers could explore how hotel guests differentially negotiate and communicate their demands with employees, in both physical and online settings.

### Impact statement

The current research is exploring a workplace phenomenon with important ramifications for the experience and wellbeing of both customers and employees as well as the financial health of tourism and hospitality service providers. Societies face many forms of social and environmental threats, such as pandemics and climate change. The current work points to a less discussed but widespread source of threat, namely the threats that customers direct towards employees and their organizations. By studying the nature, motivation, and situational conditions propelling such threatening behaviours, the current research informs tourism and hospitality organizations about the arrangements they could implement for reducing the occurrence of customer threats in the first place but also actions that could help them mitigate the materialization of threats once they have been openly expressed by customers. As such, this research contributes to several of the WTO SDGs, including good health and wellbeing, decent work, and peace and justice.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Achilleas Boukis:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Lloyd Harris:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Project administration, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Christos D. Koritos:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Writing – review & editing.

### Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the author(s) have used NO Generative AI or AI-assisted technologies.

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### Declaration of competing interest

None.

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none.

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2024.104927>.

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