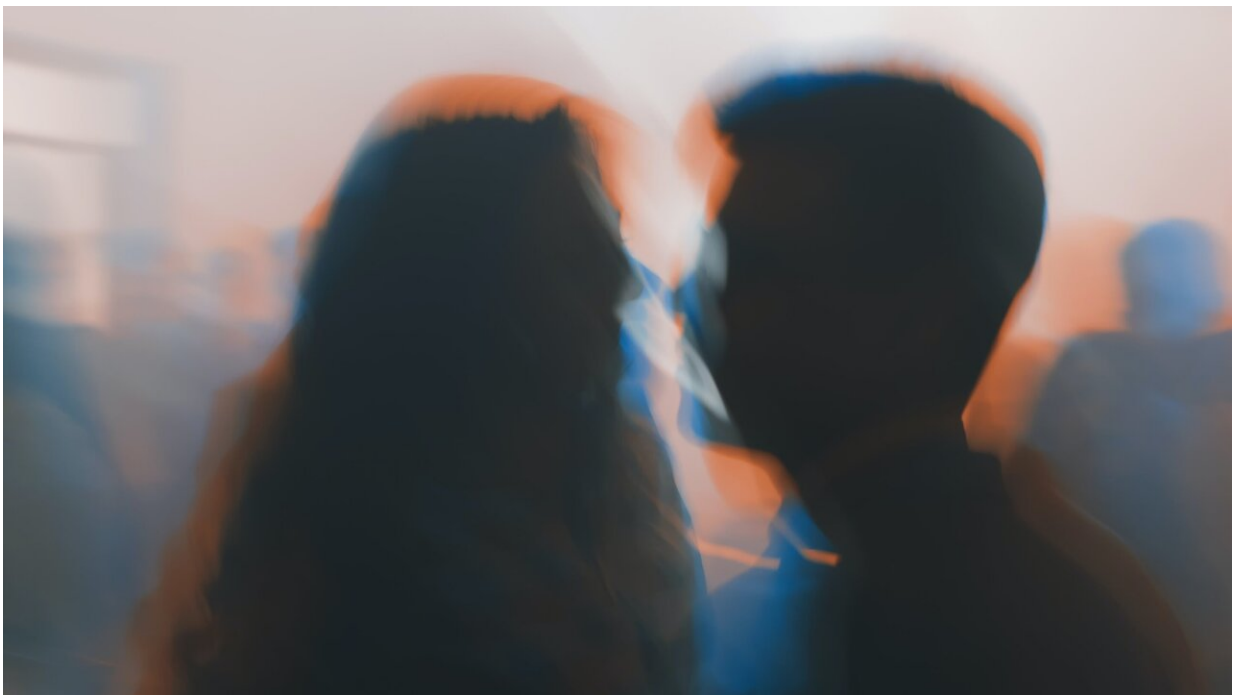


Co-worker interventions can moderate customer sexual harassment in service industry

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Although the #MeToo movement raised public awareness of sexual harassment in Hollywood and other high-profile industries, comparatively little attention has been paid to the rampant sexual harassment experienced by frontline service workers such as waitresses,

baristas, bartenders and retail clerks. A new paper co-written by a team of University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign experts who study occupational stress and employee well-being finds a potential avenue to blunt the unwanted advances and unwelcome behavior by customers.

Bystander employees who intervene when their co-workers are victims of customer sexual harassment can be a potential shield to protect their colleagues, with bystander empathy playing a significant role, says research from Yijue Liang and YoungAh Park.

"The service industry is rife with customers who sexually harass workers, and it's a big problem for managers and employees," said Liang, a graduate student at Illinois. "There's been a lot of focus on sexual harassment that comes from within an organization, but there hasn't been as much focus on sexual harassment that comes from outside an organization, from people who aren't subject to the company's rules and regulations. The service industry and its employees have less guidance about how to deal with customer sexual harassment compared with something like intraoffice sexual harassment.

"Also, employers may tolerate harassment from customers because they fear driving customers away."

"Customer sexual harassment is a persistent problem that harms worker well-being in many service-sector industries," said Park, a professor of labor and employment relations at Illinois. "In turn, bystander interventions in the workplace are critical for preventing and stopping customers' inappropriate behaviors as well as mitigating the detrimental effects of such harassment on workers. We hope this research will bring more attention to employers' and organizations' roles in protecting employees from customer sexual harassment and supporting their employees' bystander intervention."

Liang and Park conducted two online surveys with a diverse pool of more than 280 service employees who interacted with customers daily, taking measures of customer sexual harassment observation and their experience, age, gender, empathy, moral ideologies and financial reliance on customers' tipping.

Results demonstrated that when bystander employees observe more frequent customer sexual harassment in their workplace, they will develop stronger empathy toward their targeted co-workers and will be more proactive in bystander intervention actions such as disrupting the harassment and comforting their co-worker.

More importantly, for employees with higher measures of moral idealism – a strong belief that "right" actions always lead to desirable outcomes – their empathy toward co-workers from frequent observation of customer sexual harassment was more strongly associated with their bystander intervention, the researchers said.

Customer sexual harassment can be especially prevalent in jobs in which the business places a premium on customer satisfaction and tipping accounts for the bulk of a worker's wages.

For employees whose pay relied less on customer tips, their empathy was more strongly associated with bystander intervention, as opposed to those with a heavy reliance on tips, which had a weaker relationship between empathy and intervention actions, according to the paper.

"Awareness of the problems with U.S. tipping culture and customs appears to be growing, as more and more data seem to show that reliance on tipping not only increases workers' vulnerability to mistreatment at work but also worsens racial and gender inequality and worker exploitation," Liang said. "We strongly encourage employers and employees' advocacy groups to actively discuss and create a public

discourse about how to reduce workers' pay reliance on tipping – for example, by providing a higher minimum wage or replacing tipping with a fixed hourly wage – to better protect service workers from customer sexual harassment."

The paper was published in the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*.

More information: Yijue Liang et al, Because I know how it hurts: Employee bystander intervention in customer sexual harassment through empathy and its moderating factors., *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1037/ocp0000305](https://doi.org/10.1037/ocp0000305)

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