

The dark side of perspective-taking: Intensifying negative meta-stereotypes among frontline employees exposed to customer mistreatment

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ABSTRACT

Perspective-taking, or adopting the customer's point of view, is an effective intervention for helping frontline employees manage customer mistreatment. However, by drawing on fluency misattribution theory and social identity threat theory, this study reveals the dark side of perspective-taking. Results from five experiments involving 878 frontline employees show that inadvertently adopting customers' perspectives to understand customer mistreatment intensifies employees' negative meta-stereotypes about how customers think of them, but only among those frequently exposed to such mistreatment. This effect is driven by these employees' bias attribution, whereby they tend to attribute customer mistreatment to customer bias against them. Furthermore, these effects are mitigated when frontline employees are encouraged to make non-bias attribution or when perspective-taking interventions are framed positively. Overall, this work reveals why the dark side of perspective-taking is likely to appear in hospitality and tourism and suggests how organizations can tackle it.

1. Introduction

Imagine a frontline employee feeling frustrated after being verbally abused by a customer for an unclean room, even though the issue was outside the employee's control. The employee shares the experience with a supervisor to seek support, who advises the employee to put themselves in the customer's shoes and try to understand the reason behind the mistreatment.

Frontline employees in the hospitality and tourism industry frequently report customer mistreatment (Porath, 2022). However, organizations' steadfast commitment to the "customer-is-king, service-with-a-smile" philosophy constrain employees' ability to manage such encounters. As a result, frontline employees may suffer from emotional exhaustion and job burnout, leading to deviant workplace behaviors and higher turnover rates (Ma et al., 2025; Madera et al., 2017). One seemingly fail-safe strategy to address these challenges is to instill perspective-taking, or encouraging frontline employees to adopt the customer's point of view to better manage mistreatment. A robust line of research shows that perspective-taking can reduce frontline employees' negative emotions, foster empathy toward customers, and improve service outcomes when they face customer mistreatment (Lee, 2022; Lee et al., 2020; Lee & Madera, 2021; Song et al., 2018).

Despite these benefits, evidence from the intergroup relations literature suggests that when perspective-taking is applied to ingroup members who expect to be evaluated by an outgroup, the interventions may prompt ingroup members to focus on how they are seen by the outgroup (Vorauer, 2013; Vorauer et al., 2009). In turn, ingroup members may activate and apply negative meta-stereotypes (Lammers et al., 2008), defined as expectations regarding the way their own ingroup is stereotyped by a particular outgroup (Vorauer et al., 1998). Consistent with this logic, encouraging frontline employees to take consider the customer's perspective to understand customer mistreatment is likely to activate and apply their negative meta-stereotypes regarding how customers think of them, given that being evaluated by customers is an inherent feature of frontline work.

However, the effect of perspective-taking on frontline employees' negative meta-stereotypes has received limited scholarly attention. This is a significant oversight considering that an emerging body of hospitality and tourism research shows that such meta-stereotypes can impair frontline employees' service delivery quality (Mikolon et al., 2016; Xu et al., 2024, 2026) and thus undermine organizational effectiveness (Bal et al., 2015; Ren et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2025). Therefore, the first purpose of this study is to explore whether perspective-taking exacerbates frontline employees' negative meta-stereotypes.

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Integrating fluency misattribution theory (Birch et al., 2017) and social identity threat theory (Steele et al., 2002), this study proposes that perspective-taking intensifies negative meta-stereotypes among frontline employees with greater exposure to customer mistreatment but mitigates them among those with fewer such experiences. According to fluency misattribution theory, when frequently mistreated employees consider customers' perspectives to make sense of customer behavior, they rely on prior, similar firsthand experiences that come to mind more fluently (Birch et al., 2017). This fluency may lead them to read customers' mistreatment as bias against them because social identity threat theory posits that chronically stigmatized individuals tend to attribute negative treatment by outgroup members to identity-based bias (Steele et al., 2002; Vorauer, 2006). In light of the fact that frontline employees are heavily and chronically stigmatized (Lv et al., 2024), such bias attributions are likely (Boukis et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2025), and prior work shows that these attributions can give rise to negative meta-stereotypes (Vorauer, 2006).

Conversely, frontline employees with fewer mistreatment experiences lack firsthand experience on which to base bias attributions. Therefore, when taking customers' perspectives, they are more likely to attribute mistreatment to situational factors rather than to intentional bias against them (Todd et al., 2012; Vescio et al., 2003). This shift in attributional thinking can deepen frontline employees' understanding of why customers act out and thus reduce their expectations that customers see them through the lens of stereotypes (Lee & Madera, 2021; Todd & Burgmer, 2013; Xu et al., 2025). In short, this study argues that variation in the degree to which perspective-taking shapes negative meta-stereotypes stems from differences in frontline employees' prior experiences of customer mistreatment. As such, the second purpose of this study is to investigate whether such experiences moderate the effect of perspective-taking on negative meta-stereotypes.

Additionally, recognizing the psychological mechanism whereby mistreatment experiences lead frontline employees to make bias attributions, this study further theorizes that reducing this attributional tendency mitigates the effect of perspective taking on negative meta-stereotypes. Two interventions are therefore proposed: guiding frontline employees to make non-bias attributions for customer mistreatment (Todd et al., 2012) and encouraging perspective-taking in contexts that feature positive customer behavior toward frontline employees rather than mistreatment (Todd & Burgmer, 2013). Accordingly, the third purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of these two interventions in addressing the dark side of perspective-taking.

The contributions of this study are as follows. First, it challenges the predominantly positive narrative suffused throughout hospitality and tourism research on perspective-taking by revealing that perspective-taking can paradoxically exacerbate negative meta-stereotypes among frequently mistreated frontline employees. Second, by integrating attribution theory with the social identity threat perspective, this study introduces a novel theoretical lens for developing a more nuanced understanding of the psychological processes through which perspective-taking shapes negative meta-stereotypes. Third, it furthers theoretical understanding of the potential costs of perspective-taking interventions in contexts of customer mistreatment and identifies actionable managerial strategies for translating these insights into organizational practices.

2. Theory and hypotheses

2.1. Frontline employees' negative meta-stereotypes

Frontline roles in the hospitality and tourism sector are often not viewed as decent work (Lee & Yu, 2023; Li et al., 2020). Evidence suggests that frontline employees often expect to be stereotyped by customers as having low social status and held in low esteem (Alcalde-González et al., 2021; Shrestha et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2024). Conceptually, such expectations about how one's group is viewed by

others are known as negative meta-stereotypes (Vorauer et al., 1998). For frontline employees, these meta-stereotypes are particularly troubling, as they compel employees to deliver positive service experiences with a smile even in environments saturated with customer stereotyping (Lee & Madera, 2019; Lv et al., 2024). In an industry that demands intense emotional labor, this may pose a significant challenge to maintaining service quality and safeguarding employee well-being (Diefendorff et al., 2019).

Consistent with this view, several studies report that negative meta-stereotypes contribute to frontline employees' anxiety over saying the wrong thing or behaving inappropriately when dealing with customers (Xu et al., 2024), reduce their willingness to exert effort in those encounters, and increase customer sabotage (Mikolon et al., 2016; Xu et al., 2026). These dynamics erode employees' sense of organizational belonging, lower job satisfaction, and increase their intentions to leave their roles (Ren et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2025). Collectively, these findings call on the hospitality and tourism sector to proactively identify factors that may intensify negative meta-stereotypes and develop targeted interventions that address their adverse effects on frontline employees.

2.2. The bright side of perspective-taking: Mitigating customer mistreatment

Another unique challenge facing frontline employees is customer mistreatment, defined as rude, disrespectful, and uncivil customer behavior (Bellamkonda & Sheel, 2024). Unfortunately, the hospitality and tourism industry perpetuates a cultural norm in which frontline employees are expected to tolerate such mistreatment (Madera et al., 2017). This norm tacitly fosters an asymmetrical power dynamic between customers and frontline employees, encouraging customers to exploit their power during service encounters, such as by treating frontline employees as convenient targets for venting frustration and anxiety (Morgan, 2022). A large-scale investigation reveals that nearly 80 % of frontline employees report monthly encounters with customer mistreatment and perceive a significant escalation in customer incivility over the past five years (Porath, 2022).

In hospitality and tourism research, customer mistreatment has been strongly linked to frontline employees' higher emotional exhaustion (Huang, 2022), role stress (Boukis et al., 2023), service sabotage (Boukis et al., 2020), and turnover intentions (Han et al., 2016), as well as lower job satisfaction (Alola et al., 2019), proactive customer service performance (Cheng et al., 2020), and organizational citizenship behavior (Kim & Qu, 2019). Against this backdrop, scholars have identified the role of frontline employees' perspective-taking in mitigating the wide-ranging negative effects of customer mistreatment (Arnold & Walsh, 2015; Dong & Hon, 2025; Ho & Gupta, 2012; Huo et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2025; Wieseke et al., 2012).

However, much of this research conceptualizes perspective-taking as a stable trait that reflects individual differences, overlooking its potential to be situationally induced and intervened upon (Hoever et al., 2012; Ku et al., 2015), which limits its practical relevance for management. One notable exception is a line of research that frames perspective-taking as an actionable intervention, showing that experimentally encouraging frontline employees to adopt customers' viewpoints can reduce their negative emotions in response to customer mistreatment, foster their empathy toward customers, and increase their willingness to compensate and help customers (Lee, 2022; Lee et al., 2020; Lee & Madera, 2021; Song et al., 2018).

2.3. The dark side of perspective-taking: Intensifying negative meta-stereotypes

Although evidence from hospitality and tourism studies supports perspective-taking as an intervention for customer mistreatment, research in social psychology points to its potential costs (Lammers et al., 2008; Vorauer, 2013; Vorauer & Sucharyna, 2013; Vorauer et al.,

2009). These studies have found that when perspective-takers become aware that they are being evaluated by an outgroup, they ironically become preoccupied with imagining how they themselves are perceived (Vorauer et al., 2009). In other words, in attempting to see the world through an outgroup member's eyes, the first thing they see is not the outgroup member, but themselves. Consequently, perspective-takers may activate and apply negative meta-stereotypes (Lammers et al., 2008). Plausibly, because customer evaluation is a routine feature of frontline work, employees who attempt to adopt a customer's perspective may likewise activate and apply their negative meta-stereotypes about how customers view them. This possibility is particularly concerning given the well-documented detrimental effects of negative meta-stereotypes on frontline employees.

However, a small number of studies suggest a more nuanced picture. The effects of perspective-taking on negative meta-stereotypes can be mixed. For example, evidence indicates that when perspective-takers with lower outgroup prejudice become aware of an outgroup's hardships, they may anticipate being seen more favorably than their ingroup's stereotype would suggest, which can mitigate their negative meta-stereotypes (Vescio et al., 2003; Vorauer et al., 2009). Conversely, those with higher levels of outgroup prejudice may find themselves caught in a cycle of anticipating negative evaluation, thus reinforcing their negative meta-stereotypes (Vorauer & Sasaki, 2009). This pattern is particularly pronounced when perspective-takers feel powerless to alter outgroup perceptions (Vorauer, 2013). Research on close relationships also echoes these findings, showing that perspective-takers with low self-esteem, compared with their higher self-esteem counterparts, are more likely to hold stronger negative meta-perceptions (Vorauer & Quesnel, 2013). These mixed findings raise an interesting question: Is the effect of frontline employees' perspective-taking on their negative meta-stereotypes positive or negative?

2.4. Integrating fluency misattribution theory and social identity threat theory

To answer this question, the present study draws on fluency misattribution theory and social identity threat theory. Fluency misattribution theory suggests that when perspective-takers lack personalized information about their target, they tend to rely on information that comes to mind more fluently to make attributions about the target's thoughts and behavior. Such fluency can incur a "curse of knowledge" and lead to misattributions (Birch et al., 2017). Social identity threat theory holds that chronically stigmatized group members are predisposed to interpret negative treatment from outgroup members as indicative of bias against their stigmatized social identity (Steele et al., 2002).

Integrating these accounts, the present study argues that when frontline employees adopt customers' perspectives to make sense of customer mistreatment, they are likely to recall similar past experiences. This, in turn, increases their likelihood of attributing customer mistreatment to bias against their stigmatized occupational identity, resulting in greater expectations of customer stereotyping (Boukis et al., 2023; Steele et al., 2002; Xu et al., 2025). By contrast, frontline employees with limited prior experiences are less likely to attribute customer mistreatment to identity-based bias. Consequently, perspective-taking is more likely to promote self-outgroup merging and foster understanding of customer mistreatment, thereby reducing expectations of being stereotyped by customers (Lee & Madera, 2021; Todd & Burgmer, 2013; Xu et al., 2025).

2.5. Bias attribution from perspective-taking

In intergroup contexts, evidence suggests that adopting the perspectives of outgroup members prompts ingroup members to reflect on the causes of outgroup members' behavior (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000; Vescio et al., 2003). Similarly, perspective-taking may lead

frontline employees to reason why customers mistreat them (Fan et al., 2025; Garcia et al., 2019). According to fluency misattribution theory, this reasoning is likely shaped by the information that most readily and fluently comes to mind in the moment (Birch et al., 2017; Todd & Tamir, 2024). Since most frontline employee-customer interactions occur in relatively unfamiliar contexts, employees are unlikely to have personalized information about the customers they encounter. Contextually, this study argues that frontline employees with more frequent experiences of customer mistreatment are likely to fall into the curse of knowledge—that is, they tend to over-rely on their own past similar experiences to make sense of the mistreatment following perspective-taking.

As a result of this tendency, an intriguing question arises: How do employees cognitively process information from their past experiences? According to social identity threat theory, individuals with stigmatized social identities are highly sensitive to any cues in social environments that might indicate a potential identity-based threat, thereby initiating a cognitive process in which they tend to overinterpret such cues, even neutral or absent ones, as signs of bias against them (Steele et al., 2002; Vorauer, 2006). For instance, Black Americans who experience chronic stigmatization tend to attribute any unfair treatment they encounter to bias against their skin color, whereas White Americans are less likely to do so (Gomez & Wilson, 2006). This pattern is also observed among individuals who are overweight (Deabler, 2018), have low income (Jacob et al., 2022), or have low social status (Johnson et al., 2011). Recent research in hospitality also indicates that frontline employees tend to view their occupations as stigmatized, which likely leads them to perceive customer mistreatment as a signal of identity-based bias (Boukis et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2025). Thus, frontline employees who have long endured customer mistreatment may be more likely to attribute such mistreatment to customer bias.

By contrast, this study argues that frontline employees with limited exposure to customer mistreatment are less likely to make bias attributions. Although their interactions with customers may not always be pleasant, they are less likely to interpret occasional mistreatment, perhaps resulting from service failures, as a signal of identity-based bias. Rather, evidence shows that they tend to view such incidents as clear indications that proactive efforts are required to address customer concerns and remedy their issues (Homburg et al., 2009; Vorauer & Sasaki, 2009). In such a case, the result of perspective-taking might be self-outgroup merging (Todd & Galinsky, 2014). Specifically, adopting an outgroup member's perspective can prompt ingroup members to see more of their ingroup in the outgroup, thus encouraging them to interpret the outgroup member's behavior from a self-referential perspective (Todd & Burgmer, 2013). For example, frontline employees may rely more on their own experiences as customers rather than on their mistreatment experiences to interpret instances of customer mistreatment. Consequently, they are more likely to attribute mistreatment to situational factors rather than to bias (Todd et al., 2012; Vescio et al., 2003). This positive shift in attributional thinking has been shown to enhance frontline employees' empathy toward customer mistreatment, thereby reducing their expectations or concerns about being stereotyped by customers (Lee & Madera, 2021; Todd & Burgmer, 2013; Xu et al., 2025). Thus, we hypothesize.

H1. Employees with greater (vs. fewer) experiences of customer mistreatment show higher negative meta-stereotypes when engaging in perspective-taking that features customer mistreatment.

H2. Employees with greater (vs. fewer) experiences of customer mistreatment are more likely to make bias attributions following perspective-taking, which in turn contributes to their negative meta-stereotypes.

2.6. Reducing the dark side of perspective-taking

If the proposed effect of perspective-taking on frequently mistreated

frontline employees' negative meta-stereotypes arises because employees tend to make bias attributions when reasoning about customer mistreatment, reducing this tendency should mitigate this effect. As theorized above, the root cause of misattribution lies in perspective-takers' tendency to rely on information that comes to mind more fluently when reasoning about others' thoughts and behavior (Birch et al., 2017; Todd & Tamir, 2024). For example, a frontline employee who chronically experiences customer mistreatment may disproportionately rely on previous mistreatment experiences as the informational basis for attributing customers' behaviors, owing to the fluency with which these experiences come to mind. Therefore, the present study expects that if customers' intent behind their mistreatment is attributed to external reasons (e.g., real service issues), the employee will be less likely to assume that the customer is acting out of bias and may instead perceive customer behavior as justifiable (Todd et al., 2012). In other words, intentionally encouraging frontline employees to make non-bias attributions is expected to reduce their reliance on past mistreatment experiences when reasoning about customer mistreatment, which, in turn, lowers negative meta-stereotypes. Formally,

H3. Negative meta-stereotypes among frequently mistreated frontline employees are reduced following perspective-taking when they are encouraged to make non-bias attributions.

Alternatively, rather than having frequently mistreated frontline employees consider customers' perspectives related to mistreatment, employees could imagine themselves in customers' shoes to understand customers' positive treatment (e.g., compliments about their service). This is because if perspective-taking about customer mistreatment is precisely what makes frontline employees' previous mistreatment experiences most fluently come to mind, preventing them from engaging in such perspective-taking should naturally short-circuit the activation of these experiences. This notion is corroborated by previous research showing that perspective-taking among ingroup members concerning positive intergroup events can affirm positive self-views, thereby rendering stereotypical representations of their own groups less cognitively accessible (Todd & Burgmer, 2013). As such, this study expects that frontline employees' perspective-taking efforts in response to customers' positive treatment can evoke positive self-views, which, in turn, diminish the cognitive accessibility of past mistreatment experience and thus reduce negative meta-stereotypes. Formally,

H4. Negative meta-stereotypes among frequently mistreated frontline employees are reduced when their perspective-taking efforts are made in response to positive customer treatment.

3. Methodology

Five controlled experiments were conducted (see Table 1).

Table 1
Design of each experiment.

Experiment	Design	Operationalization of perspective-taking	Operationalization of bias attribution	Test
1	2 (perspective-taking vs. control) × (mistreatment experiences: scale)	Perspective-taking in response to customer mistreatment featured a scenario in which a customer mistreated a front-desk employee over a room booking issue	–	H1
2	2 (perspective-taking vs. control) × (mistreatment experiences: scale)	Perspective-taking in response to customer mistreatment involved employees recalling a personal experience of being mistreated by a customer	Bias attribution measured by a thought-listing task	H1 and H2
3	2 (perspective-taking vs. control) × (mistreatment experiences: scale)	Perspective-taking in response to customer mistreatment featured a scenario in which a customer mistreated a front-desk employee due to a delayed wake-up call	Bias attribution measured by a self-reported scale	H1 and H2
4	2 (perspective-taking vs. control) × 2 (bias attribution correction vs. control) × (mistreatment experiences: scale)	Perspective-taking in response to customer mistreatment featured a scenario in which a customer mistreated a room service attendant because room cleaning was not done	Bias attribution manipulated using a moderation-of-process approach	H2 and H3
5	2 (perspective-taking vs. control) × (mistreatment experiences: scale)	Perspective-taking in response to positive customer treatment featured a scenario in which a customer praised a room service attendant for their service	–	H4

Specifically, **Experiment 1** provided initial evidence that when instructed to adopt the perspective of customers who mistreated them, frontline employees with extensive customer mistreatment experiences experienced an intensification of their negative meta-stereotypes. **Experiment 2** confirmed the effect observed in **Experiment 1** by manipulating perspective-taking through employees' recollection of customer mistreatment rather than a hypothetical mistreatment scenario. It also examined the mediation of bias attribution using an open-ended thought-listing task. **Experiment 3** validated the previous findings by manipulating perspective-taking through a different scenario than used in **Experiment 1**. It also provided convergent evidence by testing measured bias attribution as the key process while testing evaluative concern as an alternative explanation. Using a moderation-of-process approach, **Experiment 4** demonstrated that the effect of perspective-taking among frequently mistreated employees was reversed when they attributed customer mistreatment to situational factors rather than to bias against them. Finally, **Experiment 5** showed that perspective-taking efforts in positive scenarios, such as receiving customer praise rather than experiencing customer mistreatment, reversed the aforementioned effect.

Notably, all data were collected between January 7 and 20, 2025. **Appendix A** reports demographic information for all studies. **Appendices B** and **C** present the experimental stimuli and measures used across experiments. All measures were back-translated to ensure linguistic accuracy and cultural relevance, reviewed by an expert panel to resolve discrepancies, and validated by two postgraduate students in hotel management. **Appendix D** reports confound checks for all experiments.

3.1. *Experiment 1*

Experiment 1 aimed to provide a preliminary examination of the main effect. It was based on perspective-taking manipulation paradigms but modified to apply to scenarios involving customer mistreatment, as proposed by Lee et al. (2020).

3.1.1. *Participants and design*

Experiment 1 featured a mixed design, with perspective-taking (vs. control) manipulated between participants and mistreatment experiences measured. All participants were recruited from a sample pool on [Credamo.com](https://www.credamo.com), which is composed entirely of hotel employees. The sample pool was established through a screening questionnaire and further validated by cross-checking participants' IP addresses and requiring them to describe their daily work routines, ensuring that their current occupation was in the hospitality industry (see **Appendix F**). Only those who performed customer-facing tasks were allowed to participate to ensure employee eligibility.

A total of 160 qualified employees took part in the experiment for

compensation, but three were excluded because they provided nonsensical responses during the perspective-taking manipulation. The remaining 157 employees (59.2 % female; $M_{\text{age}} = 31.22$, $SD = 7.75$) were presented with a scenario describing customer mistreatment of front-desk employees (Lee et al., 2020).

All employees, irrespective of condition, were instructed to write a 100-word essay from a first-person perspective (Vorauer & Quesnel, 2016). Employees assigned to the perspective-taking condition described their thoughts and feelings as if they were customers in the said situation, while those in the control condition described their thoughts and feelings as front-desk employees in the identical scenario (see Appendix B, Table 1).

3.1.2. Measures

Mistreatment experiences were rated on a 14-item scale (e.g., "How often have you experienced customer mistreatment such as being verbally abused"; 1 = *never*, 7 = *very frequently*; $\alpha = 0.96$) modified from Stephan et al. (2002). Negative meta-stereotypes were measured on a six-item scale (e.g., "I believe customers perceive us as not being highly respected"; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha = 0.93$) developed by Xu et al. (2024).

Several controls were measured across all experiments, including self-esteem (Vorauer & Quesnel, 2013), prejudice against customers (Vorauer et al., 2009), public self-consciousness (Vorauer et al., 2000), and self-categorization as a hotel employee (Mikolon et al., 2016), all of which have been shown to affect either perspective-taking manipulations or negative meta-stereotypes.

Specifically, self-esteem was rated on a 10-item scale (e.g., "I certainly feel useless at times"; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha = 0.90$) adapted from Rosenberg (1989). Prejudice against customers was measured using a single-item scale (i.e., "How prejudiced do you think you are against customers?" 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*) adapted from Vorauer et al. (2009). Public self-consciousness was rated on a seven-item scale (e.g., "I'm usually aware of my appearance"; 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*; $\alpha = 0.88$) adapted from Fenigstein et al. (1975). Finally, self-categorization was measured using a single-item pictorial scale adapted from Schubert and Otten (2002).

To address the possibility that reading a scenario depicting customer mistreatment may unintentionally influence employees' ratings of their mistreatment experiences, the mistreatment experience scale was randomly presented either before or after the scenario. The order of presentation (1 = *before*, 0 = *after*) was used as a control. Scenario realism was assessed using a two-item scale (e.g., "The role-play scenario was realistic"; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) sourced from Dabholkar and Spaid (2012). Lastly, demographic information such as gender, age, education, monthly income, working hotel type, tenure, and position level was collected.

3.1.3. Results

The employees' responses were reviewed to ensure compliance with the instructions. An overwhelming majority of employees wrote essays that aligned with the instructions (98.1 %), suggesting a successful manipulation (Lee et al., 2020). The scenario's realism was supported by a one-sample *t*-test ($M = 6.24 > 4$, $SD = 0.73$, $t = 107.68$, $p < 0.001$). A *t*-test was conducted to analyze whether perspective-taking (=1, control = 0) impacted negative meta-stereotypes, and the results showed no significant difference across conditions ($M_{\text{perspective-taking}} = 3.95$, $SD = 1.73$ vs. $M_{\text{control}} = 4.29$, $SD = 1.37$; $t = -1.39$, $p = 0.165$, $d = -0.22$).

However, the interaction between perspective-taking and mistreatment experiences (PROCESS Model 1; Hayes, 2017) was significant ($\beta = 0.64$, $SE = 0.13$, 95 % CI = [0.38, 0.90]). Perspective-taking reduced negative meta-stereotypes among employees with fewer mistreatment experiences ($-1 SD$: $\beta = -1.19$, $SE = 0.26$, 95 % CI = [-1.69, -0.68]) but increased them among those with greater mistreatment experiences ($+1 SD$: $\beta = 0.59$, $SE = 0.26$, 95 % CI = [0.08, 1.09]). The results' pattern remained unchanged even after controlling for all confounding

variables (see Appendix D).

A floodlight analysis showed the Johnson-Neyman points of 3.26 and 4.56 (Spiller et al., 2013), indicating that for employees who scored 3.26 or lower on mistreatment experiences, perspective-taking efforts reduced their negative meta-stereotypes. However, for those who scored 4.56 or higher, their perspective-taking efforts increased their negative meta-stereotypes (see Fig. 1). Thus, H1 is supported.

3.1.4. Discussion

Experiment 1 provided initial evidence that frontline employees with more frequent customer maltreatment are more likely to develop higher levels of negative meta-stereotypes following perspective-taking. In contrast, less mistreated frontline employees benefit from perspective-taking, showing lower levels of negative meta-stereotypes. These mixed findings build upon prior research on perspective-taking, which has shown that its effects on negative meta-stereotypes may vary based on outgroup prejudice (Vorauer et al., 2009) and self-esteem (Vorauer & Quesnel, 2013). The results add to this body of work by suggesting that such effects may also depend on frontline employees' mistreatment experiences. Particularly, since no evidence was found that supports the conclusion that outgroup prejudice and self-esteem moderated or confounded the proposed effects of perspective-taking (see Appendix D for further details), the results may represent a unique insight specific to the frontline employee–customer dyad.

The findings of Experiment 1 also raise an important question: Why do mistreatment experiences drive such divergent outcomes of perspective-taking? The next experiment sought to examine whether bias attribution might serve as the process mechanism explaining these differences.

3.2. Experiment 2

Experiment 2 tested the mediation of bias attribution, measured through a thought-listing task in which employees responded to an open-ended prompt explaining why they believed customers had mistreated them (Vorauer et al., 2009). This thought-listing methodology is widely employed in social psychology (Vorauer & Quesnel, 2013) and consumer behavior research (Stuppy et al., 2020) to capture underlying processes, and has been adapted for hospitality and tourism research contexts (Hu et al., 2024; Xu et al., 2025). Experiment 2 also sought to confirm the findings observed in Experiment 1 by manipulating perspective-taking in a recalled customer mistreatment context (Vorauer & Sucharyna, 2013), in which employees were asked to recall a personal experience of customer mistreatment. In other words, participants responded based on their actual mistreatment experiences rather than hypothetical scenarios provided to them. This approach enhanced

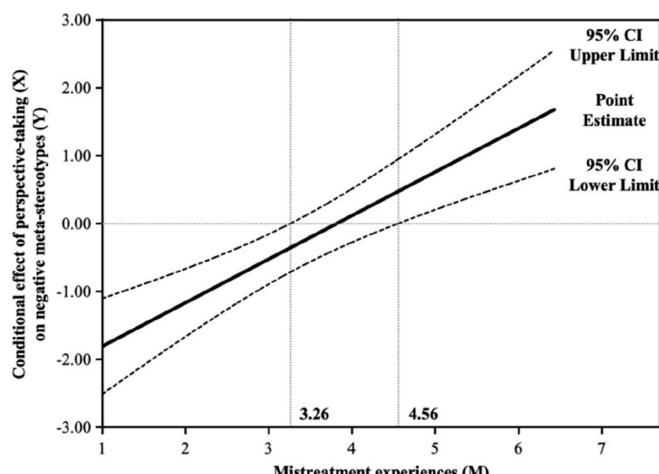


Fig. 1. Experiment 1 interaction effects.

the external validity of the findings from [Experiment 1](#).

3.2.1. Participants and design

[Experiment 2](#) adopted a mixed design, with perspective-taking (vs. control) manipulated between participants, and mistreatment experiences measured. Unlike [Experiment 1](#), only employees who performed customer-facing tasks and had prior experiences of customer mistreatment were eligible to participate in this experiment. As a result, 160 qualified employees were initially recruited from the same sample pool as in [Experiment 1](#), but four were excluded for providing nonsensical responses during the perspective-taking manipulation. The remaining 156 employees (57.7 % female; $M_{\text{age}} = 30.79$, $SD = 6.68$) were then asked to recall their recent experience of customer mistreatment, following the perspective-taking manipulation proposed by [Vorauer and Sucharyna \(2013\)](#), which was modified to apply to the recall of customer mistreatment.

As in [Experiment 1](#), irrespective of condition, employees were instructed to compose a 100-word essay from a first-person perspective. Specifically, employees in the perspective-taking condition were asked to write about how they would think and feel if they were in the customers' shoes during the mistreatment experience, whereas those in the control condition were instructed to write about how they thought and felt during their own mistreatment experience (see [Appendix B, Table 2](#)).

3.2.2. Measures

After the manipulation, employees participated in a thought-listing task in which they were asked to write approximately 100 words explaining why customers might have treated them in this way ([Vorauer et al., 2009](#)). Following the procedure outlined by [Stuppy et al. \(2020\)](#), two coders (i.e., research assistants), blinded to the research aims, rated the extent to which each employee attributed customer mistreatment to bias against them (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*). For example, responses such as "I think the customer might inherently hold a bias against us" or "sometimes, customers simply look down on service industry employees" were coded as clear indicators of strong bias attribution. It was expected that employees with greater exposure to customer mistreatment in the perspective-taking condition would be more likely to attribute customer behavior to bias in their responses. Intercoder readability was high ($\beta = 0.90$, $p < 0.001$); thus, the two coders' ratings were averaged to generate a bias attribution index, with higher values indicating a stronger tendency toward bias attribution.

Additionally, employees completed the same scales measuring mistreatment experiences ($\alpha = 0.94$) and negative meta-stereotypes ($\alpha = 0.94$) as used in [Experiment 1](#). Additional measures, including self-esteem ($\alpha = 0.88$), prejudice against customers, public self-consciousness ($\alpha = 0.84$), and self-categorization were included. To mitigate potential biases in employees' ratings caused by recalling prior experiences of customer mistreatment, the presentation order of the mistreatment experience scale was also controlled, as in [Experiment 1](#). Finally, demographics were collected.

3.2.3. Results

An overwhelming majority of employees wrote essays that aligned with the instructions (98.7 %), suggesting a successful manipulation. A nonsignificant effect of perspective-taking (=1, control = 0) on negative meta-stereotypes was revealed ($M_{\text{perspective-taking}} = 4.46$, $SD = 1.78$ vs. $M_{\text{control}} = 4.10$, $SD = 1.37$; $t = 1.44$, $p = 0.151$, $d = 0.23$).

However, a significant moderated mediation (index = 0.26, $SE = 0.10$, 95 % CI = [0.09, 0.48]) was identified using PROCESS Model 8, with perspective-taking as X, mistreatment experiences as W, bias attribution as M, and negative meta-stereotypes as Y. Further analysis indicated that perspective-taking (=1, control = 0) significantly and negatively influenced negative meta-stereotypes for employees with fewer customer mistreatment experiences ($-1 \text{ SD: } \beta = -0.53$, $SE = 0.23$, 95 % CI = [-1.00, -0.07]), but had a positive effect for employees with

greater mistreatment experiences ($+1 \text{ SD: } \beta = 0.94$, $SE = 0.24$, 95 % CI = [0.47, 1.40]). The results held even after controlling for all confounds.

A floodlight analysis indicated that perspective-taking reduced negative meta-stereotypes for employees with mistreatment experiences of 2.44 or lower but increased them for those with experiences of 3.67 or higher (see [Fig. 2](#)). Thus, [H1](#) is supported.

Additionally, the mediation of bias attribution followed the same pattern ($-1 \text{ SD: } \beta = -0.32$, $SE = 0.16$, 95 % CI = [-0.67, -0.04]; $+1 \text{ SD: } \beta = 0.31$, $SE = 0.17$, 95 % CI = [0.02, 0.66]), in support of [H2](#).

3.2.4. Discussion

[Experiment 2](#) confirmed the conjecture that frequently mistreated frontline employees exhibit stronger negative meta-stereotypes following perspective-taking manipulations because they are more likely to attribute customer mistreatment to bias. In contrast, less mistreated employees are less likely to make such attributions, which allows their perspective-taking efforts to help reduce their concerns about being stereotyped. These findings highlight a unique attributional thinking among frequently mistreated frontline employees, who tend to link their mistreatment experiences to customer bias against them. This suggests that perspective-taking, when used as an intervention to address customer mistreatment, should be approached with caution. While it may encourage employees to better understand and empathize with customer behavior in the moment, it could also increase their vulnerability to negative meta-stereotypes, potentially resulting in long-term adverse mental and physical outcomes ([Dickerson, 2008](#)). To strengthen confidence in bias attribution as the key process mechanism, the next experiment aimed to replicate this mediation while addressing a theoretically plausible alternative explanation (i.e., evaluative concern).

3.3. [Experiment 3](#)

[Experiment 3](#) aimed to confirm the proposed process account using a measured bias attribution scale ([Dabholkar & Spaid, 2012](#); [Martinko et al., 2007](#)). Additionally, previous studies suggest that perspective-taking might prompt ingroup members to focus on how outgroup members evaluate them, thus facilitating the formation of negative meta-stereotypes ([Vorauer, 2006](#)). Following this logic, frontline employees might also report higher levels of negative meta-stereotypes due to evaluative concerns about how customers perceive them, rather than as a result of bias attribution. To explore this possibility, the experiment examined evaluative concern as an alternative explanation. Furthermore, [Experiment 3](#) was designed to replicate the results of [Experiment 1](#) by employing an alternative perspective-taking manipulation, featuring a scenario involving customer mistreatment directed at room service attendants.

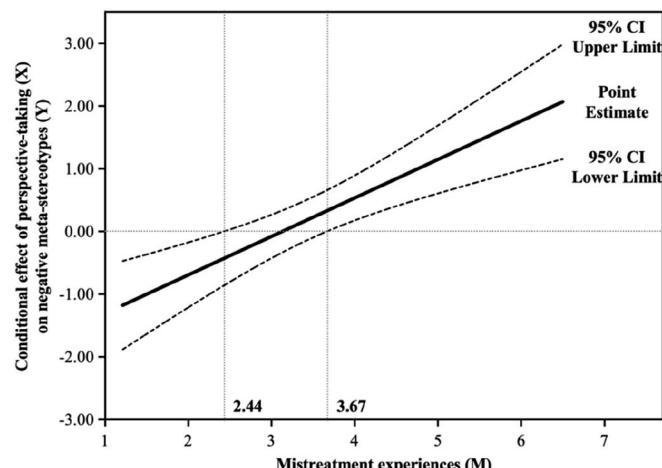


Fig. 2. [Experiment 2](#) interaction effects.

3.3.1. Participants and design

Using the same employee recruitment method used in [Experiment 1](#), 160 qualified employees participated in a mixed-design experiment, with perspective-taking (vs. control) manipulated between participants, and mistreatment experiences measured. After excluding one employee for nonsensical responses during the perspective-taking manipulation, the final sample consisted of 159 employees (64.8 % female; $M_{age} = 31.61$, $SD = 7.95$). Employees were then presented with a scenario in which a customer vented their anger toward a front-desk employee because a wake-up call was not delivered as expected. Inspired by [Lv et al. \(2021\)](#), the scenario was further refined to align with the current experiment's aims. The perspective-taking manipulation mirrored the procedure implemented in [Experiment 1](#) (see [Appendix B, Table 3](#)).

3.3.2. Measures

Bias attribution was assessed using a three-item scale extracted from [Martinko et al. \(2007\)](#) and [Dabholkar and Spaid \(2012\)](#). Employees evaluated the extent to which they believed the customers' behaviors, such as interrupting, scolding, and venting at the front-desk employee, were either completely due to the employee or other situational factors (=1) or completely due to the customer's bias against the employee (=7) ($\alpha = 0.93$). Employees then completed an eight-item scale assessing evaluative concern (e.g., "I worry about what customers say about me"; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha = 0.90$), sourced from [La Greca and Lopez \(1998\)](#).

In line with [Experiments 1–2](#), employees' mistreatment experiences ($\alpha = 0.96$) and negative meta-stereotypes ($\alpha = 0.95$) were measured, with the same controls included: self-esteem ($\alpha = 0.89$), prejudice against customers, public self-consciousness ($\alpha = 0.85$), self-categorization, scenario realism, and the presentation order of the mistreatment experience scale. Finally, employees provided demographic information.

3.3.3. Results

Most employees wrote essays that aligned with the instructions (98.1 %), suggesting that the manipulation was successful. A one-sample *t*-test confirmed that the scenario was perceived as realistic ($M = 6.24 > 4$, $SD = 0.70$, $t = 112.71$, $p < 0.001$). A nonsignificant difference across conditions in negative meta-stereotypes was revealed ($M_{perspective-taking} = 3.66$, $SD = 1.76$ vs. $M_{control} = 4.07$, $SD = 1.54$; $t = -1.56$, $p = 0.120$, $d = -0.25$).

However, a significant moderated mediation (index = 0.22, $SE = 0.08$, 95 % CI = [0.08, 0.37]) was observed through analysis using PROCESS Model 8. Perspective-taking (=1, control = 0) had a significant negative direct effect on negative meta-stereotypes among employees with lower levels of mistreatment experiences (-1 SD: $\beta = -0.94$, $SE = 0.29$, 95 % CI = [-1.51, -0.38]) but a significant positive effect among those with greater mistreatment experiences (+1 SD: $\beta = 0.63$, $SE = 0.29$, 95 % CI = [0.06, 1.20]). The patterns of the results remained unchanged after accounting for all confounding variables.

A floodlight analysis further revealed that perspective-taking reduced negative meta-stereotypes for employees with mistreatment experiences of 2.86 or lower but increased them for those with experiences of 4.47 or higher (see [Fig. 3](#)). Thus, [H1](#) is supported.

Additionally, the mediation of bias attribution followed the same pattern (-1 SD: $\beta = -0.30$, $SE = 0.12$, 95 % CI = [-0.56, -0.10]; +1 SD: $\beta = 0.28$, $SE = 0.13$, 95 % CI = [0.05, 0.54]). Again, [H1](#) and [H2](#) were supported.

As a conservative test, evaluative concern and bias attribution were simultaneously entered into PROCESS Model 8 ([Hayes, 2017](#)) to examine whether they explained the interaction between perspective-taking and mistreatment experiences on negative meta-stereotypes. The results revealed an insignificant mediation of evaluative concern (index = 0.02, $SE = 0.04$, 95 % CI = [-0.05, 0.10]).

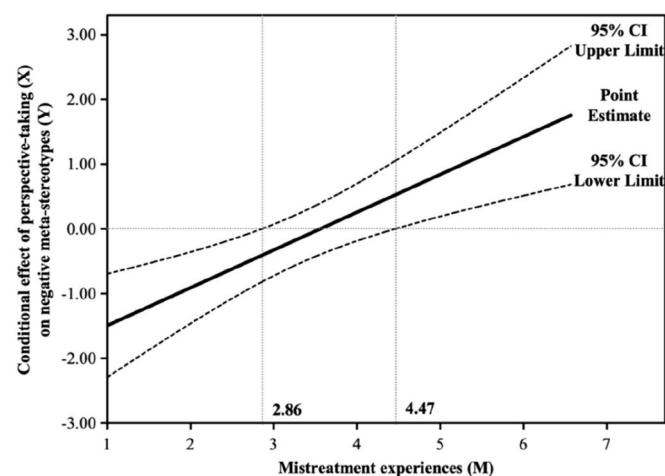


Fig. 3. [Experiment 3](#) interaction effects.

3.3.4. Discussion

[Experiment 3](#) provided converging evidence with [Experiment 2](#), supporting the prediction that frequently mistreated employees experience stronger negative meta-stereotypes due to their tendency to make bias attributions following perspective-taking. Furthermore, evaluative concern did not mediate the proposed effect, further reinforcing the role of bias attribution as the key process mechanism.

Recognizing bias attribution as the key process mechanism further informed the design of interventions to address the negative consequences of perspective-taking, specifically by reducing frontline employees' tendency to make bias attributions. Following this reasoning, two interventions were developed. The first intervention prompted frontline employees to make non-bias attributions for customer mistreatment ([Experiment 4](#)), while the second encouraged their perspective-taking efforts aimed at understanding positive treatment from customers rather than mistreatment ([Experiment 5](#)).

3.4. [Experiment 4](#)

[Experiment 4](#) primarily aimed to test whether prompting frontline employees to make non-bias attributions could mitigate the backfire effects of perspective-taking. To this end, [Experiment 4](#) used a moderation-of-process approach, a widely used method in psychology research ([Spencer et al., 2005](#)) that has recently been applied in hospitality and tourism research ([Hu et al., 2024; Xu et al., 2025](#)), in which bias attribution was experimentally manipulated. The rationale was simple: If frequently mistreated frontline employees experience stronger negative meta-stereotypes because perspective-taking leads them to attribute customer mistreatment to bias, then experimentally reducing employees' tendency to make such attributions should alleviate or even reverse this effect.

In line with this reasoning, the experiment manipulated bias attribution by shifting the focus of employees' attributions (e.g., redirecting to a no-bias explanation) regarding customer mistreatment ([Lee et al., 2020](#)). By doing so, this experiment also provides additional process evidence for the role of bias attribution ([Todd & Burgmer, 2013](#)). Additionally, [Experiment 4](#) was expected to further validate the robustness of previous findings by presenting employees with a mistreatment scenario that differed from those used in [Experiments 1 and 3](#).

3.4.1. Participants and design

After excluding three participants for providing nonsensical responses to the writing task, 247 qualified employees (64.8 % female; $M_{age} = 32.04$, $SD = 8.23$) participated in a mixed-design experiment. Perspective-taking (vs. control) and bias attribution correction (vs.

control) were manipulated between participants, and mistreatment experiences were measured. All employees read a scenario in which a customer vented their anger at a room service attendant because the room-cleaning service had not been completed before the customer returned.

The perspective-taking manipulation mirrored the procedure implemented in [Experiment 1](#). For the bias attribution manipulation, employees in the correction condition were informed that the customer's anger was primarily due to the housekeeping department's failure to schedule room cleaning, as well as the assignment of an uncleaned room on the customer's check-in day. No additional information was provided to the control group (see [Appendix B, Table 4](#)).

3.4.2. Measures

In this experiment, the bias attribution scale from [Experiment 3](#) was used as a manipulation check ($\alpha = 0.89$). Participants then reported their mistreatment experiences ($\alpha = 0.96$), negative meta-stereotypes ($\alpha = 0.93$), self-esteem ($\alpha = 0.85$), prejudice against customers, public self-consciousness ($\alpha = 0.83$), self-categorization, and scenario realism. Additionally, the presentation order of the mistreatment experience scale was considered a control. Finally, demographic information was collected.

3.4.3. Results

An overwhelming majority of employees wrote essays that aligned with the instructions (98.0 %), suggesting a successful manipulation. Moreover, employees in the non-bias attribution condition were less likely to make bias attributions compared to those in the control condition ($M_{\text{non-bias}} = 2.70$, $SD = 1.27$ vs. $M_{\text{control}} = 3.74$, $SD = 1.59$; $t = -5.64$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.72$). A one-sample t -test confirmed that the scenario was perceived as realistic ($M = 6.17 > 4$, $SD = 0.79$, $t = 123.51$, $p < 0.001$).

Negative meta-stereotypes (Y) were analyzed using PROCESS Model 3, with perspective-taking (=1, control = 0) as X, non-bias attribution (=1, control = 0) as Z, and mistreatment experiences as W. The analysis revealed a significant three-way interaction ($\beta = -0.47$, $SE = 0.22$, 95 % CI = [-0.91, -0.03]). Simple slopes analyses demonstrated that in the control condition, perspective-taking had a significant negative effect on negative meta-stereotypes among employees with lower mistreatment experiences (-1 SD: $\beta = -1.06$, $SE = 0.32$, 95 % CI = [-1.69, -0.44]) but a significant positive effect among those with greater mistreatment experiences (+1 SD: $\beta = 0.75$, $SE = 0.31$, 95 % CI = [0.15, 1.36]).

In the non-bias attribution condition, the negative effect of perspective-taking among employees with lower mistreatment experiences remained significant (-1 SD: $\beta = -1.08$, $SE = 0.32$, 95 % CI = [-1.69, -0.44]). Interestingly, among employees with greater mistreatment experiences, the effect of perspective-taking on negative meta-stereotypes became negative but not statistically significant (+1 SD: $\beta = -0.57$, $SE = 0.31$, 95 % CI = [-1.19, 0.04]). In other words,

shifting frequently mistreated employees' attributions to a no-bias focus mitigated the otherwise expected effect of perspective-taking, which would have led to greater negative meta-stereotypes among these employees. Controlling for all confounding variables did not alter these results.

A floodlight analysis further revealed that in the control condition, perspective-taking reduced negative meta-stereotypes for employees with mistreatment experiences of 2.94 or lower but increased them for those with experiences of 4.68 or higher. However, in the non-bias attribution condition, perspective-taking no longer significantly increased negative meta-stereotypes for employees with mistreatment experiences above 4.95 (see [Fig. 4](#)). Thus, [H3](#) is supported.

3.4.4. Discussion

[Experiment 4](#) manipulated bias attribution using a moderation-of-process approach ([Spencer et al., 2005](#); [Todd & Burgmer, 2013](#)). The results showed that when frequently mistreated frontline employees were prompted to make non-bias attributions for customer mistreatment (e.g., being informed that the customer's behavior was indeed due to a service error on their part), their perspective-taking efforts no longer backfired. This finding supports the notion that frontline employees tend to make bias attributions partly because, aside from their own past mistreatment experiences, they lack sufficient alternative information to make sense of customer mistreatment. As a result, their stigmatized occupational identity drives them to attribute such behavior to customer bias.

By nature, this predisposition is an involuntary response that protects group self-esteem by attributing negative treatment from out-groups to bias ([Sherman & Cohen, 2006](#)). However, this may incur a cost of exaggerating the negativity that frontline employees assume customers hold toward them. The next experiment further explored an alternative method for mitigating the costs of perspective-taking.

3.5. [Experiment 5](#)

[Experiment 5](#) tested whether the effect of frontline employees' perspective-taking efforts on negative meta-stereotypes disappears when those efforts are made in response to positive customer treatment, such as receiving customer praise, rather than encountering customer mistreatment. The rationale is that in positive scenarios, frequently mistreated employees are less likely to detect evidence or cues of customer bias.

3.5.1. Participants and design

Following the exclusion criteria established in earlier experiments, one employee was excluded for providing a nonsensical response to the writing task. The remaining 159 qualified employees (61.0 % female; $M_{\text{age}} = 31.18$, $SD = 7.37$) participated in a mixed-design experiment, with perspective-taking (vs. control) manipulated between participants

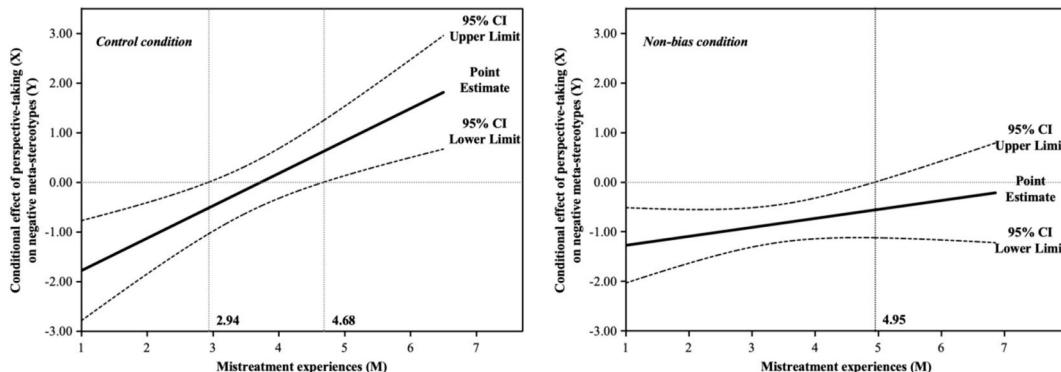


Fig. 4. [Experiment 4](#) interaction effects.

and mistreatment experiences measured. The experimental procedure closely followed that of [Experiment 3](#), with the only variation being that all participants read a scenario in which a customer praised a room service attendant for cleaning the room exceptionally well (see [Appendix B, Table 5](#)).

3.5.2. Measures

Following the manipulation, participants reported their mistreatment experiences ($\alpha = 0.96$), negative meta-stereotypes ($\alpha = 0.94$), self-esteem ($\alpha = 0.84$), prejudice against customers, public self-consciousness ($\alpha = 0.84$), self-categorization, scenario realism, and demographics, all of which were identical to those used in [Experiment 4](#).

3.5.3. Results

Most employees wrote essays that aligned with the instructions (97.5 %), suggesting that the manipulation was successful. A one-sample *t*-test confirmed that the scenario was perceived as realistic ($M = 5.97 > 4$, $SD = 1.05$, $t = 71.71$, $p < 0.001$).

A marginally significant reduction in negative meta-stereotypes was observed in employees assigned to the perspective-taking condition compared to the control ($M_{\text{perspective-taking}} = 3.01$, $SD = 1.49$ vs. $M_{\text{control}} = 3.46$, $SD = 1.50$; $t = -1.89$, $p = 0.060$, $d = -0.30$). In other words, engaging in perspective-taking in response to positive customer treatment may help mitigate frontline employees' concerns about being stereotyped by the customer group.

Analysis using PROCESS Model 1 indicated a significant interaction between perspective-taking and mistreatment experiences ($\beta = 0.28$, $SE = 0.13$, 95 % CI = [0.02, 0.54]). Perspective-taking significantly and negatively affected negative meta-stereotypes among employees with fewer mistreatment experiences ($-1 SD$: $\beta = -0.70$, $SE = 0.25$, 95 % CI = [-1.19, -0.22]). However, although the effect remained negative, it was not statistically significant among employees with greater mistreatment experiences ($+1 SD$: $\beta = 0.03$, $SE = 0.25$, 95 % CI = [-0.45, 0.52]). The results remained robust after controlling for all potential confounds.

A floodlight analysis showed that perspective-taking significantly reduced negative meta-stereotypes among employees whose mistreatment experience scores were below 3.00, but the effect was not significant beyond this threshold (see [Fig. 5](#)). In summary, framing perspective-taking positively mitigated frequently mistreated employees' negative meta-stereotypes, even when they engaged in perspective-taking efforts. Thus, [H4](#) is supported.

3.5.4. Discussion

[Experiment 5](#) operationalized perspective-taking differently by instructing employees to engage in perspective-taking after reading a

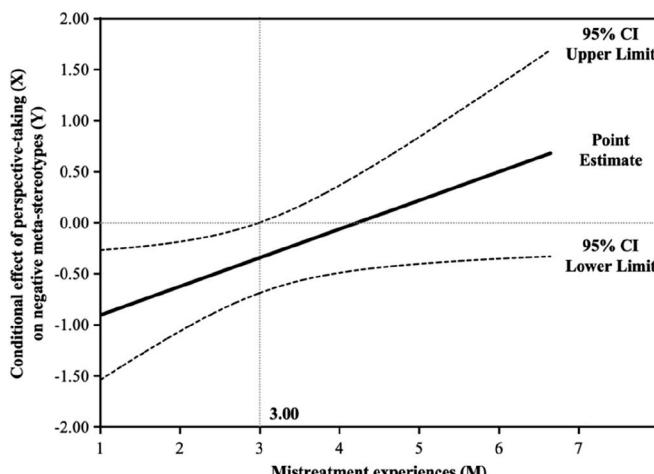


Fig. 5. [Experiment 5](#) interaction effects.

scenario depicting positive customer treatment, rather than the customer mistreatment scenarios used in previous experiments. As expected, frequently mistreated employees did not experience an increase in negative meta-stereotypes following perspective-taking. This finding is important as it may present a more practical and cost-effective alternative to encouraging frontline employees to make non-bias attributions. Developing such attributions requires employees to empathize with customers, even when mistreated, and understand their challenges while considering alternative explanations for their behavior, which often requires long-term training ([Fan et al., 2025](#)). In contrast, prompting employees to reflect on why customers treat them positively is much simpler. Managers only need to encourage employees to recall past instances of positive treatment and consider the reasons behind it.

4. General discussion

Although the hospitality and tourism literature is imbued with optimism about perspective-taking as an intervention to help frontline employees navigate customer mistreatment, this study partially challenges that narrative by presenting a case against perspective-taking. The findings reveal that perspective-taking, though well-intentioned and aimed at fostering greater understanding of customers' needs, may instead deepen the misunderstandings that frequently mistreated frontline employees hold about their customers.

[Experiment 1](#) found that frontline employees' perspective-taking efforts to understand why they are mistreated are beneficial only for those with limited exposure to such experiences. However, for employees with greater exposure to customer mistreatment, perspective-taking is likely to backfire and reinforce their concerns about being negatively stereotyped by their customers. Integrating fluency misattribution theory ([Birch et al., 2017](#)) with social identity theory ([Steele et al., 2002](#)), [Experiments 2 and 3](#) revealed that perspective-taking backfired among frequently mistreated frontline employees partly because these employees attributed customer mistreatment to bias against them. Building on these findings, [Experiment 4](#) showed that guiding employees to recognize that customer behavior is not driven by bias reduced their concerns about being stereotyped. Finally, [Experiment 5](#) demonstrated that framing perspective-taking efforts around customers who show appreciation, rather than those who mistreat employees, alleviated the negative meta-stereotypes that might otherwise be reinforced.

4.1. Theoretical implications

The current research makes multiple contributions to the literature on perspective-taking, customer mistreatment, and attribution. First, it advances the understanding of the role of perspective-taking in hospitality and tourism. Previous research provides solid evidence supporting the benefits of perspective-taking in mitigating frontline employees' negative reactions to customer mistreatment ([Lee, 2022; Lee et al., 2020; Lee & Madera, 2021; Song et al., 2018](#)). Informed by social psychology research on perspective-taking in intergroup contexts ([Vorauer, 2013; Vorauer et al., 2009](#)), this research challenges the prevailing positive narrative about perspective-taking by showing that it can intensify frontline employees' negative meta-stereotypes, especially when they frequently experience customer mistreatment. This finding is important because it suggests a previously unrecognized negative consequence of customer mistreatment—namely, negative meta-stereotypes—in the literature. These preexisting beliefs about how customers stereotype them have been found to impose significant psychological and physiological tolls on frontline employees ([Dickerson, 2008; Xu et al., 2024](#)).

Second, the findings expand our understanding of frontline employees' attributions regarding customer mistreatment. By integrating fluency misattribution theory with social identity threat theory, this research introduces a novel attribution type for customer mistreatment. Although previous studies have explored how frontline employees

attribute customer mistreatment, most stop at understanding who is to blame (e.g., attributing it to either the organization or the customers) (Cheng et al., 2020; Fan et al., 2025; Garcia et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2020). This research goes one step further by identifying an attribution centered on customer bias—that is, engaging in perspective-taking leads frontline employees to believe that customer mistreatment arises from their bias against the occupational group they represent. This insight is particularly significant in the hospitality and tourism industry because, theoretically, it may represent a misattribution of customer mistreatment, given that the customer may not have intended any bias. Consequently, frequently mistreated frontline employees could become trapped in a negative spiral in which repeated mistreatment reinforces their misperception of customers over time.

Third, recognizing bias attribution as the key process lays the theoretical groundwork for interventions designed to mitigate the intensified negative meta-stereotypes resulting from perspective-taking. This research proposes two interventions, both grounded in the core notion of fluency misattribution theory that people naturally rely on information that comes to mind more fluently during perspective-taking (Birch et al., 2017). The results demonstrate that both prompting non-bias attributions and encouraging perspective-taking in response to positive customer treatment can disrupt the fluency with which frontline employees retrieve past mistreatment experiences, thus reducing their tendency for bias attribution. These findings provide solid evidence supporting fluency misattribution theory in the hospitality and tourism context and, to our knowledge, mark the first time this theory has been applied in an organizational context.

Lastly, by demonstrating the effectiveness of these two interventions, this research provides some of the first insights into addressing the unintended consequences of perspective-taking. In their review of the case against perspective-taking, Sassenrath et al. (2016) noted that such consequences often emerge when the target of perspective-taking poses a threat to the perspective-taker's self-relevant domain, such as when the target's behavior undermines their positive self-concept (Vorauer & Sasaki, 2009). Instructing frontline employees to adopt the perspective of customers who mistreat them exemplifies this form of self-relevant threat. Similar cases of perspective-taking involving threatening targets have been widely observed in intergroup dynamics, such as comprehending opposing political parties' policy stances (Lees & Cikara, 2020) or interpreting adversarial groups' intentions during violent conflicts (Waytz et al., 2014). Therefore, the proposed interventions have the potential to be applied in such cases, particularly when perspective-taking occurs between tension-filled groups, to prevent it from backfiring.

4.2. Managerial implications

This research offers significant managerial implications. First, the study's findings reveal that perspective-taking can backfire among frontline employees who are frequently mistreated by customers. Since customer mistreatment is widespread in the hospitality and tourism industries (Ma et al., 2025; Porath, 2022), this ought to serve as a warning to organizations to carefully identify employees who perceive themselves as consistently mistreated before encouraging perspective-taking. For example, organizations could use simple pen-and-paper surveys to pinpoint such employees and design targeted training interventions to prevent perspective-taking from exacerbating their misunderstandings of customers.

Second, beyond identification, managers can also reframe customer mistreatment by offering non-bias explanations to address the backfiring effects of perspective-taking. For example, managers can train frontline employees to recognize external factors such as booking errors or service disruptions that may have contributed to customer mistreatment (Fan et al., 2025). They can also encourage employees to imagine the customer's difficult circumstances, such as being fatigued after a long journey to the hotel (Lee & Madera, 2021). These strategies can reduce

employees' tendency toward bias attributions, which in turn may alleviate their concerns about being stereotyped by customers.

Third, perspective-taking training in hospitality and tourism organizations should not only be viewed as an intervention to manage customer mistreatment but also as a tool to strengthen relationships between frontline employees and customers. This research demonstrates that encouraging employees to take customers' perspectives to understand why they are treated positively reduces the risk that perspective-taking backfires. This approach may help maximize the benefits of perspective-taking interventions, such as fostering empathy and understanding toward customers (Todd & Galinsky, 2014) and promoting greater inclusion and acceptance of customer behaviors (Adida et al., 2018).

4.3. Limitations and avenues for future research

This work has some shortcomings that warrant consideration. Perhaps most notably, the findings are based on a sample of Chinese frontline employees, which raises concerns about cross-cultural validity, especially given evidence suggesting that the effect of perspective-taking on bias reduction has cultural boundaries (Wang et al., 2018). As such, the extent to which these findings apply to other cultural settings calls for future cross-cultural investigation and replication.

Second, this research only focused on negative meta-stereotypes as the dark side of perspective-taking, without further examining their downstream consequences. Previous studies have demonstrated that negative meta-stereotypes induced by perspective-taking can also derail prosocial behavior (Sassenrath et al., 2022), suggesting that frequently mistreated frontline employees may exhibit lower prosociality toward customers as a result of perspective-taking. However, evidence from the service literature shows that perspective-taking promotes customer-oriented citizenship behaviors (Ho & Gupta, 2012) or extra-role behaviors (Huo et al., 2019), both of which are common forms of prosocial behavior in frontline service settings. These conflicting findings imply that the positive effects of perspective-taking on prosocial behavior may vary with the extent of frontline employees' mistreatment experiences. This warrants further empirical investigation.

Third, two studies that manipulated perspective-taking in response to customer mistreatment reported increases in frontline employees' empathy toward customers (Lee, 2022; Lee & Madera, 2021). This seems to suggest that perspective-taking indeed enhances frontline employees' understanding of customer mistreatment, which, logically, should reduce bias attribution. However, these findings do not necessarily contradict the current results. In fact, participants in those studies may have unintentionally received non-biased explanations of customer mistreatment, echoing the intervention tested in *Experiment 4*. Moreover, empathy and negative meta-stereotypes are not an either-or-option; rather, they can and often do occur alongside each other (Vorauer & Quesnel, 2016). Therefore, future research could examine both variables within the same framework to determine whether perspective-taking simultaneously activates mistreated frontline employees' empathy and exacerbates their negative meta-stereotypes.

Fourth, a key premise underlying the present theory is the potential for evaluation—that is, the possibility that frontline employees may be evaluated by customers. The current research was conducted outside the actual back-and-forth interactions between these parties, which raises concerns about ecological validity. Future research is encouraged to explore whether these findings hold in real-world interactions. That being said, the findings can be expected to be generalized to real-world contexts, as previous research has indicated that merely perceiving evaluative potential from outgroup members following perspective-taking manipulations can produce effects similar to those observed during actual interactions (Vorauer, 2013). Imagining customers mistreating frontline employees inherently involves perceptions of customer evaluations.

Lastly, as perspective-taking is a common strategy among frontline employees across industries beyond hospitality and tourism, future work could test whether the present findings generalize to other service sectors, such as retail, call centers, and banking.

5. Conclusion

Although perspective-taking offers some benefits for frontline employees in managing customer mistreatment, this study shows that it may simultaneously bring unintended costs. Drawing on fluency misattribution theory and social identity threat theory, the five experiments conducted in this study revealed that perspective-taking intensifies negative meta-stereotypes among frequently mistreated frontline employees but reduces them for those with fewer such experiences. These contrasting effects make valuable contributions to the literature of perspective-taking, customer mistreatment, and attribution. They also call on future scholars to take a more balanced look at the pros and cons of perspective-taking in hospitality and tourism, as well as to explore strategies to address potential downsides.

Impact statement

This research reveals the dark side of perspective-taking interventions in hospitality and tourism contexts, highlighting that frontline employees who suffer customer mistreatment may develop intensified negative meta-stereotypes regarding how customers see them. This occurs because exposure to customer mistreatment leads employees to attribute customers' behavior to bias against them, a novel theoretical insight integrating fluency misattribution theory and social identity threat theory. Practically, these findings alert hospitality and tourism organizations to carefully implement perspective-taking training. Managers should first identify employees who are exposed to customer mistreatment and tailor interventions accordingly. They should also proactively reframe mistreatment incidents as situational rather than as customer bias. Furthermore, encouraging employees to adopt customers' perspectives in response to positive customer treatment can mitigate the negative meta-stereotypes that might otherwise be exacerbated. This research offers actionable guidance for hospitality and tourism managers on optimizing perspective-taking interventions, thereby reducing their unintended costs.

Declaration of competing interest

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research and/or publication of this article.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2026.105392>.

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