

It's not just the victim: Bystanders' emotional and behavioural reactions towards abusive supervision¹

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Abstract

In this study, we used deonance theory, attribution theory, spillover effects, and power distance to explore how abusive supervision influences bystanders in the hospitality and tourism industry. In-depth semi-structured interviews revealed an integrated representation of bystanders' emotional and behavioural reactions, ranging from negative emotions to unconcerned and exclusionary feelings, from supportive behaviours to avoidance, gossip, and learning behaviours. We also identified important factors influencing these emotional and behavioural reactions such as trust, power distance, social-cultural context, the tourism and hospitality context, victims' spillover, and bystanders' attribution. This study is one of the first to investigate the influence of abusive supervision from a bystander's perspective. Thus, the findings provide a novel perspective for assessing and understanding abusive supervision through a critical and comprehensive theoretical lens.

Keywords: Abusive supervision; Bystander; Attribution theory; Spillover effects; Power distance; China

1. Introduction

Leadership is a complex social phenomenon that is difficult to define. Researchers have provided various angles and perspectives for understanding leadership (e.g., Deanne & Paul, 2013; Hemphill & Coons, 1957). Abusive supervision, a negative type of leadership, has been explored since 2000, and in recent years, this topic has been investigated extensively (Tepper et al., 2008). Tepper (2000, p. 178) defined abusive supervision as "subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors." Many studies on abusive supervision have investigated subordinate-level consequences such as organisational citizenship behaviour and turnover intention (Lyu et al., 2016; Xu et al., 2018) and supervisor-level consequences such as recovery level (Qin et al., 2017). However, most of these studies have focused on the victims' personal experience with abusive supervision, determined through self-reported surveys. Little attention has been

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given to bystanders' experience with abusive supervision. In this study, we filled this knowledge gap by further investigating this complex issue and by extending the understanding of abusive supervision beyond the supervisor–victim dichotomy.

A bystander refers to someone who is watching something happening but not taking part in it (Twemlow et al., 2004). In this study, a bystander in abusive supervision is defined as a colleague who directly knows about the abusive supervisory incident, regardless of their position. For example, a bystander can be a co-worker of the victim or another random supervisor.

Although bystanders do not directly experience abusive supervision, it may influence them to some extent (Chen & Liu, 2019; Mitchell et al., 2015). Bystanders are potential “secondary victims,” and therefore their emotions and reactions deserve adequate attention and comprehensive understanding, which can help an organisation improve the work environment for all of its employees. However, the scale and depth of research on bystanders has been limited. Although some studies have investigated abusive supervision from the perspective of bystanders in the general business field (e.g., Ma et al., 2017; Priesemuth, 2013), to the best of our knowledge, no study has explored this topic in the hospitality and tourism context. As often mentioned in hospitality and tourism studies, it is not always possible to apply the knowledge of issues in other fields to similar issues in these very specific sectors (Li et al., 2017; Wu et al., 2020). The specific context of tourism and hospitality, characterised by factors such as seasonality, high turnover rate, relatively large group of interns and students in the workforce, and hierarchical structure (Yu et al., 2020), calls for studies on issues related to abusive supervision, and thus offers opportunities to revise or expand existing theoretical frameworks. These studies may reveal novel findings relevant to the unique characteristics of the tourism and hospitality industry.

Cultural diversity complicates the theoretical understanding of abusive supervision (Yu et al., 2020). The effects of social-cultural contexts on organisational behaviours have been widely discussed (Li et al., 2017). Studies have reported that alternative cultural contexts in the tourism and hospitality sector can potentially reveal further complexity in the knowledge gained and can enrich the theoretical contribution to the literature, which appears to focus on the Western context (Li et al., 2017; Wu et al., 2020). Moreover, Zhang and Liao (2015) raised awareness of the inconsistent impact of abusive supervision in countries with different cultural backgrounds by investigating the role of national culture as a moderator. Socio-cultural contexts may influence the perception and reaction of bystanders to abusive supervision and are therefore worth exploring. In this study, we explored whether the Chinese cultural context can potentially influence the impact of abusive supervision on bystanders, and if so, how the findings can expand knowledge about abusive supervision in the tourism and hospitality context.

Thus, in this study, we addressed the above gap in the literature by investigating the reaction of bystanders to abusive supervision in the Chinese tourism and hospitality context. We also sought to expand the theoretical understanding of bystanders in this context by exploring the potential social-cultural complexity of abusive supervision from the perspective of bystanders. The findings of this study provide an integrated image of the impact of abusive supervision on bystanders by developing a comprehensive theoretical framework consisting of various influencing factors. This framework supplements the research landscape in abusive supervision by providing a novel angle to the topic.

2. Literature Review

We review the literature from three domains: abusive supervision and bystanders, abusive supervision and power distance, and abusive supervision and attribution style. First, an overview of studies on abusive supervision and bystanders is presented and discussed. After a review of these empirical studies, power distance is adopted to explain the reactions influenced by the hierarchical relationship. Last, attribution style is reviewed as a contributor to the potentially different views of bystanders on abusive supervision. Referring to these three domains of research, in this study, we drew on deonance theory, attribution theory, and spillover effects, along with fairness and power distance, to investigate bystanders' emotional and behavioural reactions towards abusive supervision.

2.1 Abusive supervision and bystanders

Tepper's (2000) definition triggered research on abusive supervision, leading to many studies in the field over the last two decades. However, few studies have investigated abusive supervision from a bystander's perspective compared with those that have focused on victims. Studies exploring the perspective of bystanders have widely used justice- and fairness-related theories to understand bystanders' emotional and behavioural reactions to abusive supervision. For instance, Priesemuth and Schminke (2019) used justice- and fairness-related theories to explore bystanders' prosocial behaviour; they found that fair norms and principles prompted bystanders to direct their deontic anger towards their co-workers' protective responses and that overall justice moderated the relationship between deontic reaction and co-workers' protective behaviour through ethical efficacy. Similarly, based on justice- and fairness-related theories, Mitchell et al. (2015) found that bystanders' exclusionary beliefs about the victim, defined as "individuals' beliefs about the degree to which another person deserves unfair treatment" (p. 1041), moderated the relationship between abusive supervision and their anger/contentment. In addition to the family of deonance theory, these studies have empirically identified important factors that can influence bystanders' emotional and behavioural reactions to abusive supervision, i.e., (un)fairness, bystanders' exclusionary beliefs, and their moral identity. As a result, in this study, we used some of the reactions examined in the aforementioned studies, such as anger, contentment, frustration, protection, support, and exclusion, to design the template codes for the data analysis.

Many studies have used "workplace bullying" or "supervisory undermining" to describe the phenomenon in which bystanders experience emotional influences similar to those experienced by victims (e. g., Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007; Totterdell et al., 2012). These findings reveal a spillover effect, which is the tendency of a person's emotions to influence the feelings of those around them (Pierce et al., 2016). In other words, the victim's feelings and emotions affect those of their co-workers, including bystanders.

Studies on the spillover effects of abusive supervision have explained how emotions or reactions in the workplace can spill over into other scenarios, such as the family domain. For example, Isenhour et al. (2012) investigated the negative spillover effects of abusive supervision on the victim's family, such as work-family conflict and family undermining. Carlson et al. (2011) found that the victim's experience of abusive supervision influenced relationship tension and family satisfaction. These findings extend the understanding of the phenomenon and suggest that, supported by the theory of spillover effects, the negative emotions of victims are likely to influence how bystanders react to abusive supervision. These factors verified in the aforementioned studies, together with the spillover effects, constitute the theoretical basis of the present study.

2.2 Abusive supervision and power distance

Differing from the concept of workplace bullying, abusive supervision is limited to the supervisor-subordinate relationship. This hierarchical relationship is associated with power differences. Studies have found that abusive supervision is closely related to power distance (Lian et al., 2012). Power distance is defined as "the degree of inequality among people which the population of a country considers as normal" (Hofstede, 1993, p. 91). Power distance has been examined as a moderator of abusive supervision from a victim's perspective. For example, Lian et al. (2012) demonstrated that subordinates in high power distance cultures like China were less likely to view abuse as unfair. Wang et al. (2012) found that power distance weakened the negative relationship between abusive supervision and interactional justice. This line of research has identified the association between power distance and the supervisor-subordinate relationship (Harris et al., 2013). The hierarchical relationship in the workplace is not restricted to the victim. Similar to the role played by power distance in abusive supervision from the victim's perspective, we can argue that power distance also potentially influences bystanders' acceptance, attitudes, and behaviours with regard to abusive supervision. For instance, abusive supervision may be acceptable in a workplace in which power distance is high, and power distance tends to influence how a bystander responds to abusive supervision. Therefore, we used the concept of power distance in this study as a theoretical underpinning to understand how bystanders

react to abusive supervision.

2.3 Abusive supervision and attribution style

In attribution theory, attribution refers to how individuals determine the reason for an event and how they react to this ascription (Heider, 1982). According to this theory, three attribution styles exist in the context of abusive supervision: dispositional attribution, situational attribution, and relational attribution (Burton et al., 2014). According to Martinko et al. (2011), victims' attribution style is closely related to how they perceive and react to abusive supervision. For example, how victims attribute the reasons for abusive supervision can influence their actions at work, particularly their productivity (Bowling & Michel, 2011), citizenship behaviours (Burton et al., 2014), communication with supervisors, and their leader-member exchange relationship (Martinko et al., 2011). Specifically, Bowling and Michel (2011) found that when victims attributed abusive supervision to their organisation, this attribution strengthened the relationship between abusive supervision and their counterproductive work behaviour.

As a victim's attribution may influence their perception of and reaction towards abusive supervision (Bowling & Michel, 2011; Martinko et al., 2011), it can be argued that bystanders' attribution of abusive supervision may also influence their emotions and behaviours, leading to changes in their behaviour in the workplace. Therefore, beyond victims, attribution theory can also be useful in investigating and understanding bystanders' reactions towards abusive supervision. Chen and Liu (2019) found that supervisor-directed attribution mediated the relationship between vicarious abusive supervision and supervisor-directed deviance.

Based on the empirical studies and theories reviewed in this section, in this study, we drew on three main theories (i.e., deonance theory, attribution theory, and spillover effects), along with fairness and power distance, to investigate and understand bystanders' emotions and their reactions to or intention to react towards abusive supervision.

3. Research design and methods

The constructivist and exploratory nature of this study led us to adopt a qualitative approach. In-depth semi-structured interviews were used to investigate 29 Chinese bystanders' perceptions of abusive supervision over a period of nine months.

At the start of sampling, two key informants were identified and approached using convenience sampling. One of them was an early career employee at a five-star hotel in Shanghai and a former colleague of the lead author who had witnessed abusive supervision. The other informant was an experienced human resources (HR) director of an international hotel chain; she was chosen because of her experience in witnessing abusive supervision and her broad network within the hospitality workforce. Through snowball sampling, we identified other potential interviewees with the help of these two key informants; some of them declined the interview invitation due to the sensitivity of the topic, whilst others consented to participate. A combination of decline and consent reoccurred as we continued to use the same sampling method to collect more data until data saturation was achieved. One hundred and twenty employees from 22 hotels and 2 tourism companies (Interviewee 4 and Interviewee 5) were identified and contacted, of whom 29 participated in this study.

The background information of the participants is shown in Table 1. Their positions varied from frontline employees to middle managers. Unrelated to the sampling criteria, the relatively high proportion of front desk staff in the sample reflects to some extent that abusive supervision is more likely to occur in this customer-facing unit of a hotel (Al-Hawari et al., 2020). Although equal gender distribution was not a sampling criterion in the data collection process, the sample was balanced in terms of gender. It can also be observed that the participants were at different stages of their careers, such as interns, full time early career workers, and experienced workers. The diverse backgrounds of the participants enabled a comprehensive investigation of the research question in this study.

Table 1 Characteristics of the Participants

| No. | Gender | Age | Educational background | Position | Working years |
|-----|--------|-----|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------|
| 1 | M | 26 | Master's degree | Marketing intern | 1.5 years |
| 2 | F | 23 | Bachelor's degree | Rotation intern | 1 year |
| 3 | F | 40 | Vocational qualification | Housekeeper | 20 years |
| 4 | F | 22 | Master's degree | Product operations | 1 year |
| 5 | F | 24 | Master's degree | Product operations | 2 years |
| 6 | F | 23 | Bachelor's degree | Front desk | 2 years |
| 7 | F | 30 | Bachelor's degree | Front desk | 8 years |
| 8 | F | 23 | Bachelor's degree | Front desk | 1 year |
| 9 | F | 36 | Vocational qualification | HR vice-director | 12 years |
| 10 | M | 40 | High school diploma | Chef | 22 years |
| 11 | M | 28 | Vocational qualification | Front desk | 7 years |
| 12 | F | 31 | Bachelor's degree | Housekeeper | 8 years |
| 13 | F | 24 | High school diploma | Catering service | 7 years |
| 14 | F | 33 | Bachelor's degree | Marketing vice-director | 10 years |
| 15 | M | 27 | Vocational qualification | Gym coach | 5 years |
| 16 | F | 36 | Bachelor's degree | HR officer | 14 years |
| 17 | M | 25 | Bachelor's degree | Front desk intern | 8 months |
| 18 | F | 36 | Master's degree | Marketing vice-director | 13 years |
| 19 | M | 40 | Vocational qualification | Security manager | 19 years |
| 20 | M | 24 | Bachelor's degree | Salesperson (hotel's luxury shop) | 1 year |
| 21 | F | 27 | Master's degree | Public relations (PR) | 4 years |
| 22 | M | 23 | Master's degree | Front desk | 1 year |
| 23 | M | 22 | Bachelor's degree | Front desk | 1 year |
| 24 | F | 25 | Vocational qualification | Housekeeper | 5 years |
| 25 | M | 24 | Bachelor's degree | Catering service group leader | 1 year |
| 26 | M | 27 | Bachelor's degree | HR | 5 years |
| 27 | M | 27 | Bachelor's degree | Marketing | 3 years |
| 28 | M | 24 | Bachelor's degree | Front desk | 1 year |
| 29 | M | 26 | Bachelor's degree | Front desk | 1.5 years |

To enable a wide reach to the participants and mitigate distance constraints in China, the interviews were conducted by phone, with the majority of calls lasting approximately 40 min. The approved institutional ethics procedures were strictly followed, and consent from the participants was obtained prior to the interviews. The in-depth semi-structured interviews contained questions related to four aspects: the interviewees' demographic background, descriptions of the cases of abusive supervision, the interviewees' emotions, and their reactions/ intention to react as bystanders of abusive supervision. The maximum depth of each interview was reached when no new information regarding the four aspects was provided by the interviewee. The key interview questions are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Key Interview Questions

| Aspect | Key interview questions |
|--|--|
| Demographic background | What is your gender? How old are you? How long have you been working? What is your highest educational qualification? |
| Description of the case(s) of abusive supervision | When did the incident of abusive supervision occur? How did you know about it? Please describe the case(s). What did the supervisor do? How often did the supervisor behave in an abusive way towards this colleague? How did the supervisor behave towards others? (Any similarity or difference?) How did other people behave towards this colleague? (Compared with the supervisor, was any similarity or difference observed?) In your opinion, was there someone who was responsible for this case? |
| Emotions towards abusive supervision | How did you feel about that case of abusive supervision? Do you remember approximately how long that feeling lasted? Why did you feel so? How did you feel about the supervisor? And why? What was your relationship with the supervisor? How did you feel towards the colleague being abused? And why? What was your relationship with the colleague being abused? |
| Reactions to/intention to react towards abusive supervision | What did you do after witnessing the case(s) of abusive supervision? Why? Did you do anything for the colleague being abused? (If the interviewee did help) What did you do to help? (If the interviewee did not help) Why? Did you do anything about the supervisor who committed the abuse? If yes, what did you do? Why? Did you do anything differently in your job afterwards? If yes, what did you do? Why? |

All of the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the first author, and NVivo was used for thematic analysis of the data. Reflexivity was applied to examine the researchers' positionality in the research process and, particularly, in the data analysis (Palaganas et al., 2017). The researchers' potential subjectivity and influences on the participants and the data were closely examined during the data analysis. To ensure the credibility of the data analysis and interpretation, investigator triangulation was applied by two authors conducting thematic data analysis (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Each of their interpretations was compared to test for consistency. When differences were found, they discussed the data analysis until an interpretation that could best explain the meaning of the data was mutually agreed on (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). This process was further supported by a member check in which the relevant participants were asked to confirm the data interpretation and analysis (Anderson, 2017).

Following thematic analysis procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2006), first, template codes developed from the literature were used to support primary coding and analysis (Saldaña, 2015). As discussed and summarised in the literature review, these template codes included power distance, deontic reactions, attribution, spillover, (un)fairness, moral identity, personal belief, anger, contentment, protection/protective, support/supportive, exclusion, (counter)productive performance, and citizenship behaviours. For example, when the data revealed that a participant was available to support the victim and was a compassionate listener, support/supportive was used as a primary code to conceptualise such

behaviour. If none of the template codes were suitable for conceptualising the data, new codes were developed, such as depressed, afraid, sad, empathetic, content, unconcerned, avoidance, gossip, learning, trust, and culture. During secondary coding and analysis, all of the codes (those from the literature and those that were newly generated from the data) were grouped into clusters and the relationships between them were analysed. The analysis related to the research objectives of this study provided a basis for the research findings discussed in the next section.

4. Findings and discussion

In this study, we sought to understand how abusive supervision influences bystanders in the workplace by investigating how they feel about abusive supervision and how they react to it. The findings and discussion offer responses to these two key questions. In this study, a variety of bystanders' emotional reactions towards abusive supervision were identified, such as depressed, afraid, sad, empathetic, angry, content, and unconcerned. Five types of bystanders' behavioural reactions were also identified: support, avoidance, gossip, self-protection, and learning. Furthermore, the results revealed important factors influencing bystanders' emotional and behavioural reactions to abusive supervision: trust, power distance, the socio-cultural context, the tourism and hospitality context, victims' spillover, and bystanders' attribution. Three key aspects of the findings of this study are discussed in detail below. These findings led to the development of a conceptual framework of the impact of abusive supervision on bystanders in the hospitality and tourism context.

4.1 Bystanders' emotional reactions

Studies have reported two main types of emotional reactions from bystanders: anger and contentment (Mitchell et al., 2015; Priesemuth & Schminke, 2019). In this study, we identified an extended range of emotional reactions. The bystander participants reported experiencing emotions such as being depressed, afraid, sad, empathetic, angry, unconcerned, or content when they were aware of the occurrence of abusive supervision in their workplace. For example, some of the interviewees revealed experiencing depression: "People all over the company think he (the supervisor) is really making people depressed" (Interviewee 5). Some of the bystanders were afraid that they would face a similar situation one day and were extremely careful to avoid it: "It's particularly tiring, I have to be especially careful at work" (Interviewee 8). The emotions of feeling depressed or afraid were internalised by the bystanders.

In addition to these internally oriented feelings, the interviews revealed that the bystanders' emotions of sadness, empathy, and anger were externalised by the victims and the supervisors. Some of the participants expressed sadness ("When seeing her cry, I also wanted to cry"; Interviewee 6), and their overall mood was affected ("It had a huge influence on my mood"; Interviewee 7). Some felt empathetic towards the victims and angry towards the abusive supervisors: "I experienced that before when I was a newcomer. Nobody can feel good about that. I know she was uncomfortable" (Interviewee 24). The participants also expressed anger: "I'm angry with the supervisor. He (abusive supervisor) shouldn't treat his subordinates in this (abusive) way" (Interviewee 10). These findings are consistent with the findings of Mitchell et al. (2015) who applied deonance theory to explain bystanders' anger towards abusive supervision. Although these emotions were negative for the bystanders themselves, they showed a supportive attitude towards the victims. Regardless of the negative emotions being internalised or externalised, these bystanders could be considered "secondary victims," who were negatively influenced by abusive supervision as a third party.

However, in this study, we also identified a sense of contentment associated with the bystanders' exclusionary beliefs (Mitchell et al., 2015). For example, an interviewee agreed with the supervisor that the victim was wrong, and he believed that the victim was not suitable for the position and hoped that the victim could leave as soon as possible: "In this department, nobody wants to work with him. I hope he will quit soon" (Interviewee 19). Although the bystanders' emotions with regard to themselves and the abusive supervisors were aligned in one direction (i.e., negative), their emotions with regard to the victims varied, as Mitchell et al. (2015) also suggested in their study. Interviewee 19 viewed the victim as being responsible for abusive supervision. According to attribution theory, this participant held

situational attribution, which contributed to his contentment in the face of abusive supervision: “He (the victim) was wrong. He didn’t deserve sympathy, and the supervisor just did the right thing.” In line with Bowling and Michel’s (2011) finding, the results showed that *attribution* influenced the bystanders’ reactions to abusive supervision. This finding expands the application of attribution theory in abusive supervision research. A neutral emotional reaction—unconcerned—also emerged in this study. This reaction indicated that the bystanders were not interested in the abusive supervision incidents; they were neither worried about themselves nor empathetic or exclusionary towards the victims. Some of the participants explained their reactions:

How the boss treats him is none of my business. (Interviewee 10)

Honestly, it’s common in the workplace, and I’m not interested in her experience. The only thing I need to pay attention to is my own job. (Interviewee 5)

Upon further exploring the reasons, we found that the interviewees considered such incidents to be the norm in the industry. The nature of work in the hospitality industry was described as follows: “In the hotel industry, employees are often super busy during working hours. It’s common for supervisors to become prickly. Almost every subordinate has experienced that” (Interviewee 29). This type of response offers evidence of a relatively high frequency of abusive supervision in the tourism and hospitality industry (Yu et al., 2020). This industry-specific context influenced the bystanders’ unconcerned emotions towards abusive supervision: “I’ve worked in the hotel industry for years. This isn’t a big deal” (Interviewee 16). Such an unconcerned reaction was expressed by the interviewed bystanders from different positions and backgrounds. This finding implies that abusive supervision may have little impact on some bystanders because they are used to it.

The negative influences of abusive supervision on bystanders’ emotional reactions revealed in the data are in line with the negative influences on victims’ emotional reactions (e.g., being depressed, afraid, sad, and angry), as evidenced in previous studies (Hoobler & Hu, 2013; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007). Although bystanders are not direct victims, their emotions can be negatively affected by abusive supervision.

Furthermore, spillover effects were observed in the data. Often, the victims’ sadness spilled over into the bystanders and influenced their feelings (e.g., sadness), as evidenced above. In the literature, spillover effects have been applied to explain the effects of abusive supervision in other contexts, such as family (Isenhour et al., 2012). The spillover effects of the emotions of victims on those of bystanders found in this study expand the application of spillover effects in abusive supervision studies. Such spillover effects suggest that the impact of abusive supervision does not necessarily originate only from abusive supervisors but may also originate from the victims themselves. The findings revealing the complex dynamics between supervisor, victim, and bystander are illustrated in Fig. 1. We also conceptualise the impact of abusive supervision on bystanders’ emotional reactions, providing a holistic perspective to understand the workplace under abusive supervision.

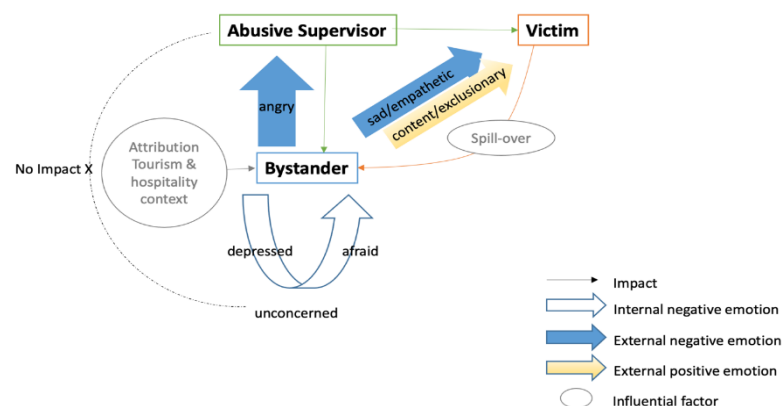


Figure 1 Theoretical Framework for the Influence of Abusive Supervision on Bystanders’ Emotional Reactions

4.2 Bystanders' behavioural reactions

The data showed five main types of behaviour related to how the bystanders reacted to abusive supervision: supporting the victim, avoiding the abusive supervisor, gossiping with colleagues, (bystanders) protecting themselves, and learning. Most of the supportive behaviours included listening to the victims' abusive experience and comforting them:

I've listened to her ... that was the only thing I could do (Interviewee 13)

I've comforted him (Interviewee 1)

These can be viewed as soft supportive behaviour, in which the bystander does not confront the abusive supervisor but rather supports the victim by comforting them, without exposing their own attitude towards or stand on the case. In some cases, the bystanders *confronted* the abusive supervisors and provided "stronger" support to the victims, including voice behaviour, which refers to "openly stating one's views or opinions about workplace matters, including the actions or ideas of others, suggested or needed changes, and alternative approaches or different lines of reasoning for addressing job-related issues" (Premeaux & Bedeian, 2003, p. 1538). For example, a participant spoke up and reported abusive supervision: "I've reported it (abusive supervision) to a higher-level supervisor ... all colleagues in my team know what I've done" (Interviewee 4).

By further exploring the two levels of support to victims, we identified the factors that influenced the bystanders' supportive behaviours. The bystanders' negative emotions of fear discouraged stronger supportive behaviours towards the victims. Some of the participants revealed that they were afraid of any risk associated with being exposed to abusive supervision and wanted to *protect* themselves. When asked why they did not offer more support than soft support, they explained the following:

I wouldn't argue (with my supervisor). I wouldn't dare. Although we (the bystander and the victim) have a good relationship, I couldn't argue with my supervisor and support him (the victim) at that time. She's also my supervisor ... If I comment or suggest that the supervisor shouldn't be abusive, the supervisor may be angry with me, then I would be totally screwed. (Interviewee 8)

Although subtle and implicit, it can be argued that such reluctance to provide stronger support was a reaction of *self-protection* on the part of the bystander.

Additionally, when the bystanders were under the supervision of the abusive supervisor, they were more reluctant to provide stronger support to the victims. As illustrated in the quote above, as the abusive supervisor also supervised the bystander, the bystander was afraid of being mistreated and decided to protect herself by remaining silent. The presence of such a supervisor-subordinate relationship is likely to prevent a stronger (and therefore, riskier) supportive reaction from bystanders. As another participant said: "In fact, I really wanted to help her (the victim), but I couldn't ... She (the abusive supervisor) is also my boss" (Interviewee 6). If the abusive supervisor does not supervise the bystander, the bystander is more likely to speak up for the victim. For example, a participant explained: "She couldn't punish me. She isn't my supervisor" (Interviewee 4). The positioning between bystanders and supervisors can influence how bystanders perceive the risk associated with their reaction, which in turn determines how they react to abusive supervision. Specifically, the absence of a supervisor-subordinate relationship between the abusive supervisor and bystanders is likely to encourage stronger supportive behaviours from bystanders towards victims. By identifying the differences between different helping behaviours this can help the organisation establish relevant policies and channels to support bystanders' helping behaviour.

Without quantifying the data, the results showed that no participant (bystander) in this study who was also a subordinate of the abusive supervisor provided stronger support to the victims than listening and comforting. Studies have examined the impact of power distance embodied in supervisor-subordinate relationships (Lian et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2012) and how this influence can vary in different cultural contexts (Zhang & Liao, 2015). China's high power distance embedded in its socio-cultural context cultivates silence regarding unequal supervisor-subordinate relationships in the workplace. In addition, employees tend to obey those in a higher position, even if they disagree with

them (Hofstede, 1993), and are more likely to accept abuse or unfairness (Lian et al., 2012). Conducted in a Chinese socio-cultural background, the results of this study revealed the amplified influence of power distance on bystanders' behavioural reactions to abusive supervision and confirmed the role of the social-cultural context in abusive supervision studies (Lian et al., 2012). Furthermore, the highly hierarchical work environment in the *tourism and hospitality context* cultivates the effects of power distance (Yu et al., 2020), increasing its influence on bystanders' supportive behaviours towards victims.

The data revealed two types of avoidance behaviour: avoiding direct contact with the abusive supervisor and leaving the organisation (voluntary turnover). For example, a participant commented:

Whenever I had to work with her, I tried not to appear in her field of vision ... And since I was leaving, I stopped working on check-in for guests, so nobody would complain about my service, and thus I could avoid any contact with her. I feel like I gave up a better job to avoid contact with her. (Interviewee 8)

This participant not only tried to avoid contact with the abusive supervisor at work but also left the organisation to avoid this supervisor permanently. Such determination and a high level of avoidance were also observed in other participants. For example, an interviewee commented: "He's really dictatorial, and he really doesn't know how to manage a company. I'm determined to leave" (Interviewee 5). Although they are not direct victims, bystanders are also likely to experience difficulties with the abusive supervisor; therefore, they avoid contact. Moreover, the presence of abusive supervision can be seen as portraying a negative image or culture of the organisation, which contributes to the failure of talent retention in such a problematic workplace: "His behaviour makes me feel that the whole company is hopeless" (Interviewee 5). This finding can be linked to the literature reporting that abusive supervision is negatively related to victims' attitudes and behaviours towards the organisation (e.g., organisational commitment and organisational citizenship behaviour) (Liu & Wang, 2013; Tepper et al., 2008). The results of this study indicated that the impact of abusive supervision went beyond the victims and that the bystanders' responses towards the organisation were likely to be just as catastrophic. From this perspective, these bystanders could be considered as secondary victims. The negative impact on bystanders, such as turnover, may encourage the organisation to create a better work environment for all employees.

Another interesting behaviour emerged from the data: gossip with colleagues. For example, a participant said: "I discussed it (abusive supervision) with my co-workers" (Interviewee 25). Upon further investigation, we found that such gossip-related behaviour seemed to occur under the influence of *trust* between colleagues, which means that some of the participants would not gossip with colleagues in the absence of sufficient trust between them. For example, a participant expressed their opinion: "I won't share this with my co-workers. We aren't that close. Who knows whether they'll tell my supervisor or not" (Interviewee 20).

Last, the bystanders exhibited some learning behaviours. As observed in the data, some of the participants learnt that they needed to work carefully under the same abusive supervisor to avoid being abused. For example: "I'm extremely careful when the supervisor is looking at me. I'm afraid they will treat me in the same (abusive) way" (Interviewee 23). Interestingly, a majority of the participants learnt from the harmful impact of abusive supervision and decided not to commit such abusive supervision later in their careers. For example, some of the participants noted the following:

I definitely won't do this to my subordinates. I know how this can harm employees ... (Interviewee 13)

I won't be abusive towards my subordinates. As I know how it (abusive supervision) feels as a bystander, I'll be more mindful about my own leadership. (Interviewee 14)

I think the (abusive) supervisor should do better. Scolding is useless. ... I won't be a supervisor like him. (Interviewee 20)

As a type of positive behaviour that has an effect of abusive supervision, the finding regarding the learning behaviour of bystanders is new to existing knowledge on abusive supervision. It is possible

that being a bystander rather than a victim provides a space for calm reflection and observation and, eventually, learning.

The six types of bystanders' behavioural reactions influenced by abusive supervision identified in this study were all related to key stakeholders in the workplace. Supportive behaviours were associated with victims, confrontation and avoidance were associated with supervisors and organisations, gossip was associated with teams and colleagues, and self-protection and learning were internally associated with the bystanders themselves. These behaviours present a comprehensive structure (see Fig. 2) for probing the impact of abusive supervision, that is, it influences every key stakeholder within an organisation. These findings enrich the understanding of abusive supervision and offer a new perspective to investigate its impact.

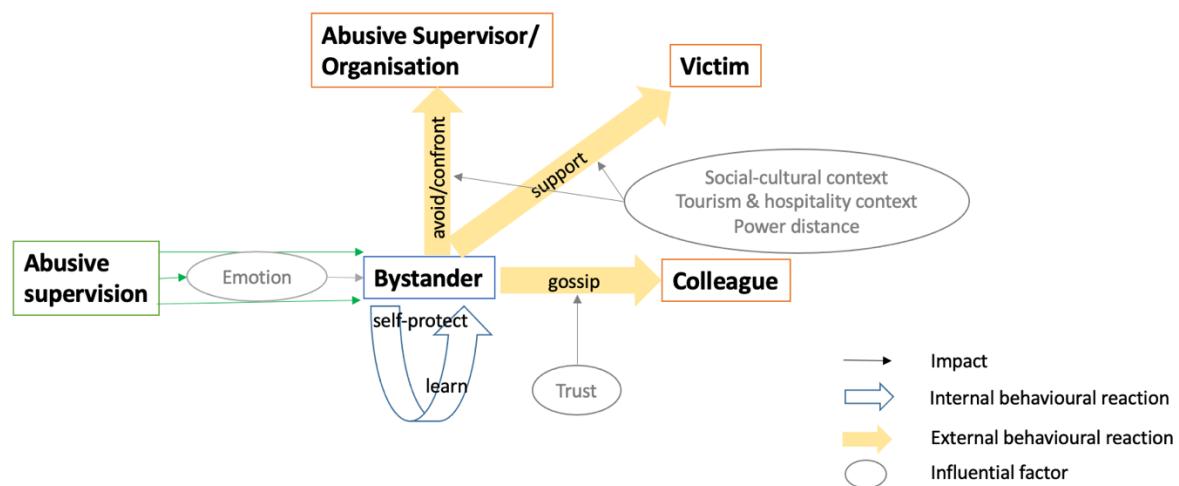


Figure 2 *Theoretical Framework for the Influence of Abusive Supervision on Bystanders' Behavioural Reactions*

4.3 Conceptualisation of the impact of abusive supervision on bystanders

This study explored how abusive supervision affects bystanders' emotions and reactions/intention to react in the workplace in the hospitality and tourism context. A range of reactions were identified, revealing diverse associations with key stakeholders in the workplace: victims, colleagues, supervisors, organisations, and bystanders. We showed that the complexity and dynamics between these key stakeholders were amplified under the impact of abusive supervision by various influencing factors. The conceptual framework in Fig. 3 was developed to illustrate the complexity and the overall theoretical contribution of this study.

Compared with previous studies, which mainly examined bystanders' responses to one category of stakeholders (Mitchell et al., 2015; Priesemuth & Schminke, 2019), the conceptual framework derived from this study reveals a more complete image of bystanders' reactions towards abusive supervision, covering their emotional and behavioural changes with regard to themselves, the victims, their other colleagues, the abusive supervisor, or their organisation.

Furthermore, as shown in the conceptual framework, various factors influence bystanders' reactions towards abusive supervision. In line with the studies by Lutgen-Sandvik et al. (2007) and Totterdell et al. (2012), in this study, we also found that victims' spillover to bystanders influences bystanders' reactions to abusive supervision. Although the role of power distance and bystanders' attribution has already been demonstrated in the abusive supervision literature concerning victims (e.g., Lian et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2012), this study is among the first to empirically show that these factors influence bystanders' reactions towards abusive supervision. In addition, the conceptual framework

presents three new influencing factors revealed in this study: trust, social-cultural context, and the tourism and hospitality context, which play influential roles in the balance between the supervisor–subordinate relationship and subordinates’ acceptance of abusive supervision.

Fig. 3 summarises the key findings of this study: bystanders’ reactions towards abusive supervision in the hospitality and tourism industry. The results of this study extend current knowledge on abusive supervision by illustrating the complexity of its impact on bystanders.



Figure 3 *Conceptual Framework for the Impact of Abusive Supervision on Bystanders*

5. Conclusions

This study fills a gap in the literature on abusive supervision by examining the impact of abusive supervision on bystanders in the hospitality and tourism industry. Based on the key findings of this study, important theoretical and practical implications are identified.

5.1 Theoretical contributions

the best of our knowledge, this study is among the first to examine abusive supervision from the perspective of bystanders in the hospitality and tourism context, thereby enriching the literature on abusive supervision and bystanders. Drawing on deonance theory, attribution theory, spillover effects, and power distance, this study shows that abusive supervision affects not only victims but also bystanders. It provides new and critical theoretical insights into abusive supervision.

Second, the complexity of the effects of abusive supervision on bystanders is reflected in the identified range of emotional and behavioural reactions. Going beyond anger or content (Mitchell et al., 2015), we revealed the presence of extended emotions, such as being depressed, afraid, sad, empathetic, and unconcerned. The absence of impact on bystanders (unconcerned) further extends the literature on abusive supervision, not only empirically evidencing a neutral impact on bystanders but also revealing the discrepancy from impacts on victims. In addition to support or exclusion (Mitchell et al., 2015), we identified other behaviours of bystanders, such as avoiding the abusive supervisor or leaving the organisation, gossiping with colleagues, self-protection, and learning. These findings extend current knowledge on abusive supervision and bystanders.

Third, the findings related to bystanders’ emotional and behavioural reactions provide a novel approach and perspective to assess and understand abusive supervision. As illustrated in the overall conceptual framework of this study (Fig. 3), bystanders’ reactions can be categorised into five groups corresponding to the five key types of stakeholders in the workplace: victim-oriented reactions,

supervisor-oriented reactions, organisation-oriented reactions, colleague-oriented reactions, and bystanders' self-oriented reactions. This conceptual framework not only provides a new structure and perspective to investigate the various impacts of abusive supervision in the workplace but also extends knowledge on abusive supervision.

Moreover, the identification of factors influencing bystanders' reactions to abusive supervision provides a critical and comprehensive theoretical lens on this topic and enriches the understanding of this phenomenon. Besides victims' spillover (Totterdell et al., 2012) and bystanders' exclusionary beliefs (Mitchell et al., 2015), we identified new factors that play a key role in how bystanders react to abusive supervision, such as power distance, the socio-cultural context, trust, and the tourism and hospitality context.

Although studies have found that bystanders' perception of (un) fairness and their moral identity are influential (Mitchell et al., 2015; Priesemuth & Schminke, 2019), these influences may be hidden or suppressed by China's high power distance embedded in its socio-cultural context. The lack of power of bystanders' perception of (un)fairness and their moral identity and subsequent behaviours towards victims may be the result of the specific and dominant socio-cultural context. This conclusion aligns with the finding of P"oyh"onen et al. (2012) that bystanders' behavioural responses are not always consistent with their personal feelings. This study is among the first empirical studies to report that the influence of power distance extends beyond victims and can significantly affect bystanders' reactions.

Although not reported in previous studies, we showed the influence of the tourism and hospitality context (high hierarchy and prevalence of abusive supervision; Yu et al., 2020) on bystander's reactions to abusive supervision. Arguably, such a specific context of high hierarchy can amplify the impact of high power distance on bystanders, and the prevalence of abusive supervision can influence bystanders' attribution, leading them to feel unconcerned.

The conceptual framework developed in this study provides a holistic summary of the key findings and depicts the impact of abusive supervision on bystanders' reactions and the associated influencing factors. Therefore, this framework provides a useful theoretical contribution to dialogue in abusive supervision studies from a hospitality and tourism perspective. Furthermore, in this study, we applied organisational psychology theories in the Chinese context, thus contributing to the literature by extending these theories with a different cultural lens. By investigating the dark side of leadership—abusive supervision—from a bystander's perspective in the hospitality and tourism industry, this study complements the research landscape in leadership.

5.2 Practical implications

This study provides useful managerial insights for practitioners in the hospitality and tourism industry. An understanding of abusive supervision from a bystander's point of view is beneficial in explaining and influencing subsequent behaviours of subordinates and supervisors. From this study, practitioners should note that abusive supervision negatively affects not only victims but also bystanders. Therefore, supervisors should receive sufficient training to eliminate abusive behaviour (Harris et al., 2013), which could improve the work environment for all employees.

As bystanders may also be influenced by abusive supervision, organisations should focus on offering help not only to victims but also to bystanders, for example, creating regular activities and opportunities to encourage employees to speak up about any negative experiences and emotions, and offering counselling support to a wider group of the workforce when abusive behaviour is reported. Activities that allow employees to engage in voice behaviour, including seeking feedback from employees on their leaders' behaviours, could also help reduce abusive behaviour by supervisors. Considering the potential influence of power distance or organisational hierarchy, a policy or system that not only encourages employees' voice behaviour but also protects them from exposure to secondary abuse could also be useful. As Frey et al. (2009) suggested, empowering bystanders and encouraging them to stand up for victims is an effective intervention against workplace abuse. In addition, as identified in this research, abusive supervision has negative impacts on not only primary victims but also bystanders as secondary victims. Organisations should establish relevant policies to eliminate

abusive supervision behaviours in the workplace in order to create a positive workplace environment for all.

In addition, organisations could establish suitable policies to protect or improve employees' well-being, particularly when abusive supervision is reported, to reduce employee turnover intention. Some strategies that could be adopted include sitting face to face in a private and relaxing setting where personal conversation and emotional release are allowed, playing down differences in authority, and listening patiently. As bystanders can be seen as secondary victims, these strategies would benefit not only victims but also bystanders by acknowledging their presence and encouraging them to speak up in the organisation.

5.3 Limitations and future research

Although the key finding related to the influence of social-cultural context significantly extends the existing body of knowledge on the topic of abusive supervision and bystanders, this finding is specific to the Chinese context. Engaging in voice behaviour can be particularly difficult in a high power distance culture like China because unequal power distributions are expected and accepted (Pless & Maak, 2004). However, in countries with low power distance cultures, such as the US, bystanders and employees may have very different attitudes towards power imbalance, fairness, and, therefore, abusive supervision. There is no interviewee in our research who has experienced supervisors from different culture backgrounds. Except for exploring this topic in low power distance cultures, future research could consider exploring the bystander's past working experiences in different cultural contexts, which could significantly enrich the understanding of this important and complex topic.

Furthermore, although our interviewees included three interns, we did not find any evidence to indicate that they had different reactions because of their status as interns. We acknowledge that there may be differences between interns and formal employees, and researchers could explore this issue further in future research. Additionally, although we identified key reactions and some influencing factors in this study, we did not examine the relationships between different factors (i. e., antecedents, consequences, and moderators). Future research could use quantitative research methods to further examine these relationships, thereby enhancing knowledge in this area. Quantitative methods could also be used to examine whether demographic characteristics, such as previous work experience in China or abroad, have a significant influence on bystanders' reactions to abusive supervision.

Author statement

Yitong Yu: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Investigation, Writing - Original Draft; Yanning Li: Investigation, Writing - Review & Editing; Conceptualisation; Shi (Tracy) Xu: Writing - Review & Editing; Supervision; Gang Li: Writing - Review & Editing; Supervision.

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