

Guest Theft in Hospitality Businesses: Sample of Kuşadası

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Abstract

Guest theft, which is among the negative customer behaviours, has significant effects on businesses, employees and other consumers. In this context, the aim of the research is to reveal the processes related to guest theft in hospitality businesses. In the research, semi-structured interview technique, one of the qualitative research methods, was used because it allows for an in-depth examination of the subject. The population of the research consists of house-keeping and front office department employees working in 5-star hospitality businesses operating in Kuşadası. In this regard, interviews were conducted with a total of 20 front office department employees. MaxQDA 24 Pro software was used in the content analysis of the obtained data. Upon examination of the findings, it was determined that there is no standard regarding which products guests can take from their rooms in hospitality businesses. A wide range of items have been found to be subject to guest

theft, from toilet paper in guest rooms to overhead projectors in public areas. Research findings indicate that guests have stolen items from their rooms, common areas, and other guests. While thefts from hotel rooms and public areas cause financial losses in Hospitality Businesses, thefts from other guests lead to loss of prestige. When guest theft is noticed, front office department employees generally intervene based on the monetary value of the stolen item. It is also among the findings that employees ignore customer theft incidents because interventions will result in negative comments on social media sites and create a bad impression for their business.

Keywords: Theft, Guest Theft, Hospitality Businesses.

JEL Codes: M0, M1, Z3

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1. Introduction

Tourism is considered one of the economic activities where security and safety issues have important consequences. Crime in the tourism sector is considered a serious problem (Hua et al., 2020). Moira et al. (2013) stated that the hospitality industry, which is an important component of the tourism sector, appears to be vulnerable to crime cases. All kinds of criminal behaviour are occurring in the facilities, raising questions and concerns about their management by hoteliers. The nature of hotel crime is generally considered to be opportunistic and convenient, and the hospitality sector is noted to be particularly vulnerable to criminal activity in tourist destinations (Ho et al., 2016). Hotels have also been shown to be unique contexts facing a wide range of crime issues. There are two main issues that make the hospitality industry unique. First, hotels face the paradoxical problem of encouraging guests to use the hotel as a second home, while also securing the hotel against a wide range of criminal activities (Gill et al., 2002). The unique characteristics of these events, combined with the need to ensure privacy and silence of customers, raise a reasonable debate about the management of such events.

Tourist misbehaviour is of increasing interest to academic researchers and practitioners in the hospitality and tourism sector (Wan et al., 2021). Because unethical consumer practices in the hospitality industry constitute a global problem. These problems are encountered in countries and regions where the tourism sector is developing rapidly and the number of tourists is increasing (Omeland & Raczkowski, 2020). Ethical issues in the hospitality industry are not considered of a new phenomenon and this reflects the challenges that arise in a cash-based, people-intensive industry (Stevens, 2011). Although much of the service literature is based on the assumption that customers behave ethically, extensive research evidence has shown that customers habitually and intentionally engage in devious behaviour (Reynolds & Harris, 2009). Fombelle et al., (2020) stated that although the phrase "The customer is always right" suggests that customers provide universal benefits for firms, customer deviance has been on the rise in recent years, and discussed customer deviance ranging from classic examples such as shoplifting to hostile anti-brand behaviour on social media and even breaking established norms such as trespassing in stores after closing hours. Moira et al. (2013), in his study with hotel managers, found the existence of all kinds of crimes such as theft, drug use/abuse, prostitution, fraud, domestic violence.

Customer abuse is common in the service sector (Kashif et al., 2017). Theft, which is among the deviant behaviours of customers, is considered as a phenomenon that the entire business world faces and threatens businesses (Alan et al., 2010). Abdelhadi

et al. (2014) stated that the most common customer misbehaviour is consumer theft. Theft also appears to be a significant problem for hospitality businesses. Guest theft is among the ethical problems commonly encountered in hotel businesses and this situation causes financial losses in hotel businesses (Yilmaz et al., 2021). Crime prevention in the hotel environment faces special challenges due to the strong customer focus and guests' desire for privacy. This means that hotel managers have to use a less intrusive set of methods, often relying on alert, well-trained staff. This study provides a qualitative perspective on crime and security management in the hotel industry, but further research is needed to determine the roles and responsibilities of security managers and the crime prevention techniques that are most successful in this unique environment (Gill et al., 2002). In this context, the aim of the research is to reveal the processes related to customer theft in hospitality businesses. In line with the objectives of the research, the following questions were developed:

Research question 1: Which products do guests steal at the workplace?

Research question 2: Which of the items taken by guests at the workplace are considered theft?

Research question 3: What are the strategies to reduce guests theft in the workplace?

2. Conceptual Framework

Organizations face the risk of fraud and theft by managers, employees, customers, suppliers, and other parties (Clifton, 2023). The illegal taking of another person's property without that person's consent is considered theft (Clifton, 2023; Ünal, 2020). In legal terms, theft is defined as the unlawful taking of a person's property or services without the owner's consent. There are two basic elements that constitute the crime of theft: (1) the taking of property from its rightful owner, and (2) the attempt to permanently deprive the rightful owner of his/her property (Yang & Chen, 2023). Theft incidents can be encountered in many businesses. Businesses that have assets that are easy to move, have easy access to cash or have various stocks are much more likely to face theft incidents. Theft often results in traumatic events and causes great harm to the person (Ünal, 2020).

Theft is a universal problem in many sectors (Yang & Chen, 2023). Numerous studies have investigated theft in the workplace in various sectors (Goh & Kong, 2016). Korgaonkar et al. (2021), has made great efforts to understand and theorize consumer misbehaviour in marketing literature. However, there is little research examining shoplifting theoretically. This is surprising, considering that the annual cost of shoplifting in the United States is currently close to \$50 billion. In addition, retailers and local govern-

ments lose revenue due to theft and consumers inevitably pay higher prices. In 2018, the amount lost due to employee theft per incident was determined to be \$1,361.

The hospitality industry is growing rapidly as a result of high demand and service needs among customers (Rahman et al., 2021). However, since hospitality facilities are open to the outside, they are the primary target for theft incidents (Çevik, 2006). Therefore, hospitality businesses are also significantly affected by theft incidents. In the tourism sector, guests who have no intention of paying for a service and those who steal items from the hotel room or on the plane are considered thieves (Pratt, 2020; Chebli et al., 2024). Gill et al. (2002) categorizes theft incidents in a hotel as the theft of customers' valuables etc., the theft of hotel property and the theft of staff assets. Stevens (2011) found that instances of insider theft are common in the hotel industry and that theft by employees and guests is a significant problem. They also believed that theft was an industry-wide problem and inherent in the industry, a fact supported by research.

It is observed that the products subject to theft in hospitality businesses vary. Gill et al. (2002) stated that theft could involve hotel assets, staff property or guest property, and revealed that all of the hotels in his study experienced property theft. He noted that these thefts ranged from the theft of ashtrays or cutlery by guests to the theft of quite large antiques by strangers. A study conducted by the Mediterranean Touristic Hoteliers Association in 105 hotels in Antalya in 2003 reveals the prevalence of guest theft in hotels. According to the study, guests most often steal towels from hotels, as well as bathrobes, ashtrays, hotel emblems and plastic shoes (Akyol, 2004). Stevens (2011) reported that at the end of a trade show at a hotel, a 42-inch flat-screen TV disappeared from the stage area while vendors were loading their equipment, and hotel managers and police could not determine whether a hotel employee or another vendor was responsible, and that guests stole lamps and television sets. Moira et al. (2013) emphasized that thefts in hotels are frequent, twenty-five cases were reported, and the top two types were theft against customers and theft within the hotel. The value of the stolen goods can range from minimal, such as stealing supplies from a stroller maid, to high-value items like cash, jewelry, or computers. The thefts take place both inside the hotel (room service) and in public areas (parking service, hotel beach, etc.).

Theft is costly for all sectors and difficult to control (Poulston, 2008). Research on the cost of customer-related theft has focused on the retail sector (Broadhurst et al., 2011; Dootson et al., 2023). Theft incidents committed by guests in hotels cause financial losses to businesses (Alan et al., 2010), reduce the motivation of employees and cause businesses

to lose their prestige (Olçay et al., 2018). Leasca (2023) states that the American Hotel and Lodging Association estimates that theft causes \$100 million in losses to hotels annually. Aksoy (2004) states that items stolen from hotels amount to 1.2 trillion dollars. In light of this data, it seems important to reveal the causes of guest theft. In this regard, Pratt (2022) states that the boundaries are not clear about which items are owned by guests who pay for a hotel room. Huefner & Hunt (2000) found that customers may steal as a retaliatory behavior not to get the product for free but to get back at the business. Yılmaz et al. (2021) emphasizes that guest theft is committed for reasons such as personality disorders, mental illnesses, the idea of taking a souvenir from the hotel, habits, evaluating the products within the scope of the service purchased and need for them. Leasca (2023), on the other hand, states that theft by consumers is carried out with the concern that the products offered in businesses (shampoo, etc.) cannot be found elsewhere.

Given the significant impact of guest theft on businesses, employees and other consumers, it is important for hospitality businesses to take measures to prevent guest theft. According to the research findings, strategies developed from the guests' point of view to prevent theft in hotels include using products without logos, taking deposits for certain products (e.g., towels and bathrobes), securing items, observation, strict control, and product usage cards (e.g., towel cards) (Yılmaz et al., 2021). Moira et al. (2013) highlights that the company implements several measures to prevent incidents, including hiring security personnel, installing security cameras, using electronic keys/cards to track room access, and screening incoming customers. In addition, Ho et al. (2016) state that security cameras are considered one of the most effective tools in hotel environments to monitor and deter potential criminals inside or outside the hotel. However, hotels cannot install such security cameras in the hotel room due to various legal restrictions such as invasion of privacy. It is stated that these arrangements may cause guests to feel uncomfortable due to constant monitoring in the name of security.

Despite precautions, there are still issues in preventing theft in hospitality businesses. Gill et al. (2002), discovered that hospitality businesses often tolerate petty theft by customers. Ho et al. (2016) stated that, due to commercial concerns, hotels may be reluctant to report any incidents that occur in the hotel environment to the police. Abdelhadi et al. (2014) emphasised the impact of cultural differences on customer theft, highlighting that while Western hotels implement policies to prevent the theft of hotel items, the same behaviour is considered excusable in Libya. Yılmaz et al. (2021) determined that hotels mostly do not impose sanctions regarding guest theft. The reasons for this are usually explained as

the difficulty of proving that the guest commits the theft and the fact that the theft is discovered after the guest leaves the hotel. Some managers who imposed sanctions said they contacted the guest (or the agency, if applicable) to request the product or fee. When examining legal sanctions for guest theft, Leasca (2023) found that in 2010, a woman was sentenced to three months in prison for stealing two towels from the Transcorp Hilton Abuja Hotel in Nigeria.

In the light of the data obtained, guest theft has serious economic and social consequences for accommodation establishments. For this reason, Gill et al. (2002) stated that more research is needed to determine the extent of guest theft. As a result of the literature review, it has been observed that there is a limited number of studies on guest theft in accommodation businesses. For example, Yilmaz et al. (2021) interviewed 12 senior managers of large-scale hotels and addressed the issue of guest and employee theft together. However, there is no research that reviews the processes experienced by front office department employees who are faced with guest theft and need to produce solutions in a holistic process. In this context, the research aims to reveal the processes faced by front office department employees regarding guest theft and their methods of solving the problem.

3. Methodology

Qualitative research explores real-world issues, providing deeper insights into them. Qualitative research involves collecting information about participants' experiences, perceptions and behaviours. One of the strengths of qualitative research is its ability to describe processes and patterns of human behaviour which are difficult to quantify (Tenny et al., 2017). Due to the limited number of studies on customer theft in hospitality businesses in the national and international literature, the subject of the research, a qualitative research method was chosen. This was necessary in order to address the issue with a detailed and holistic approach, and to examine the participants' experiences, perceptions and behaviours towards customer theft in depth. This study was designed using a phenomenological approach, which is one of the qualitative research designs. For this research, ethics committee permission was obtained from Adnan Menderes University Social and Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee dated 09/07/2024 and numbered 15/14.

3.1. Obtaining Data

The quality of the data collected is important in qualitative research, depending on the method used (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017). Interviews form the backbone of primary data collection in qualitative research designs. They also provide participants with

the flexibility to explain topics based on their level of knowledge. Semi-structured and unstructured interviews mostly allow the researcher to intervene when necessary, facilitating the subject's understanding of the topic or question under investigation (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017). Kallio et al. (2016) stated that the reason why semi-structured interviews are a popular data collection method is that they are both versatile and flexible. In the light of these data, a semi-structured interview form was used to obtain qualitative data. The semi-structured interview form, conducted via conversation with one participant at a time, uses a mix of closed and open-ended questions and often includes processes accompanied by why or how questions (Adams, 2015). In this regard, the interview form prepared by the researcher consisted of 2 parts, and the participants' opinions were obtained with a semi-structured interview form that included the demographic information of the participants and interview questions. The interview form primarily includes personal information and interview questions regarding the participants' age, gender, educational status, working position and the number of years they have been working in the field of tourism. Interviews were conducted individually with each participant and lasted an average of 20 minutes. In order to avoid data loss during the interviews, audio recordings were made with the permission of the participants.

Questions asked to participants during the interviews:

- 1- Do you encounter guest theft in your working life? How do you feel when you encounter it?
- 2- Have you received any training on guest theft? If yes, what was the training like?
- 3- How do you deal with customer theft? (Do you blacklist them? Do you keep statistics? Do you transfer information about the theft to other hotels?)
- 4- Which products are counted as theft if the customer takes them away or which products are counted as theft or which products can be taken away? What products do guest steal from your business?
- 5- Do you think there is a difference in the cases of guests showing theft behavior according to nationality/age/gender?
- 6- Why do you think guest steal?
- 7- Are there any theft cases that you ignore or tolerate?
- 8- Do you take any measures to reduce theft (products with logo / products without logo)? Are there any problems you have in taking precautions? How can they be solved?
- 9- If you were to make a ranking when negative customer behaviors are examined, where would you put guest theft?
- 10- Can you share an experience you have had regarding guest theft? How did it happen? What did you do?

3.2. Study Group

Apart from choosing a research topic and an appropriate research design, there is no more fundamental research task than obtaining a sufficient sample to create a reliable study. Ensuring sufficient data is the precursor to reliable analysis and reporting. However, as in many disciplines, little attention is paid to estimating sample size in qualitative interviews. This may be partly because qualitative research emerges from an emergent design paradigm, with hesitancy to estimate sample size in the often variable and undefined initial stages of research (Marshall et al., 2013). In qualitative studies, sample sizes need to be determined as in quantitative studies, but they should not be determined with the same methods (Malterud et al., 2016). Determining the sample size in qualitative research is contextual and partly depends on the scientific paradigm in which the research is conducted. For example, qualitative research on positivism will require larger samples than in-depth qualitative research so that a representative picture of the entire population studied can be obtained. However, the paper concludes that sample sizes of a single case can be highly informative and meaningful, as illustrated by examples from management and medical research. Unique examples of research using a single example or case but involving new areas or findings that are highly relevant to the topic may be worth publishing. Creswell and Creswell (2023) state that phenomenology studies can be conducted with a number of participants between 3-10 people. The dominant concept regarding sample size in qualitative research is "saturation" (Malterud et al., 2016). Theoretical saturation can also be useful as a guide in designing qualitative research; practical research suggests that samples of 12 may be cases where data saturation occurs among a relatively homogeneous population (Boddy, 2016). For this reason, the research data were continuously examined before coding. The interviews were finished after it was observed that similar answers were given. In this

context, the study group of the research consists of 20 front office department employees working in different positions in various hotels in the Kuşadası tourism region.

3.3. Analysis of Data

The research data were analyzed using thematic analysis technique (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2019). In this context, firstly, the interview records were transcribed in detail and read repeatedly in order to become familiar with the data. This process was carried out by the researcher, as suggested by Lester et al. (2020). Each participant's transcription was recorded in a different file and the files were named P1, P2, P3, ... P20. Then, the first coding process was carried out systematically by coding the striking statements in the data. The coding process was carried out inductively. The codes created were grouped according to their similarities and primary themes were developed from these groups. The themes were reviewed in terms of their suitability for the data, and the final themes that provided semantic integrity were identified and named. In the final stage, the created themes were visualized in the findings section and reported, supported by participant statements. This entire process was carried out with MaxQDA 24 Pro software, considering the features of software used in qualitative research, such as ease, speed and minimizing errors (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

4. Results

In this part of the study, the findings obtained as a result of interviews with front office department employees regarding customer theft in accommodation establishments are presented. In this context, data on the descriptive characteristics of the employees who participated in the semi-structured interviews are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics of Participants

Participant No	Age	Gender	Marital Status	Education Status	Sector Experience (years)	Number of Hotels Worked	Position
P1	36	Male	Married	Master	10	6	Chef
P2	35	Male	Single	Lisans	15	3	Assistant Manager
P3	29	Female	Married	University	10	2	Chef
P4	30	Male	Married	University	17	4	Assistant Manager
P5	38	Male	Married	Master	20	5	Manager
P6	29	Male	Married	University	9	3	Chef
P7	42	Male	Married	High School	23	5	Manager
P8	30	Male	Single	University	11	4	Chef
P9	37	Male	Married	University	20	12	Manager

P10	25	Male	Married	High School	7	2	Receptionist
P11	40	Male	Married	University	20	7	Manager
P12	40	Male	Married	University	27	4	Manager
P13	21	Male	Single	High School	5	2	Receptionist
P14	30	Male	Married	Master	15	5	Assistant Manager
P15	30	Male	Single	University	13	2	Shift Leader
P16	35	Male	Single	Master	17	5	Manager
P17	39	Male	Single	University	21	5	Shift Leader
P18	41	Male	Married	University	16	2	Chef
P19	40	Male	Married	University	22	2	Manager
P20	38	Male	Married	University	21	8	Manager

Table 1 summarizes the descriptive characteristics of the individuals who participated in the study. According to the table, the participants are between the ages of 21-42 and the majority of them are male in terms of gender. Most of the participants are university graduates and their sector experience ranges

between 5-23 years. In this context, it can be said that the study group is quite experienced. Additionally, it is seen that the number of hotels where the participants work is between 2-12. Finally, it is understood that the participants take various responsibilities in the front office department.

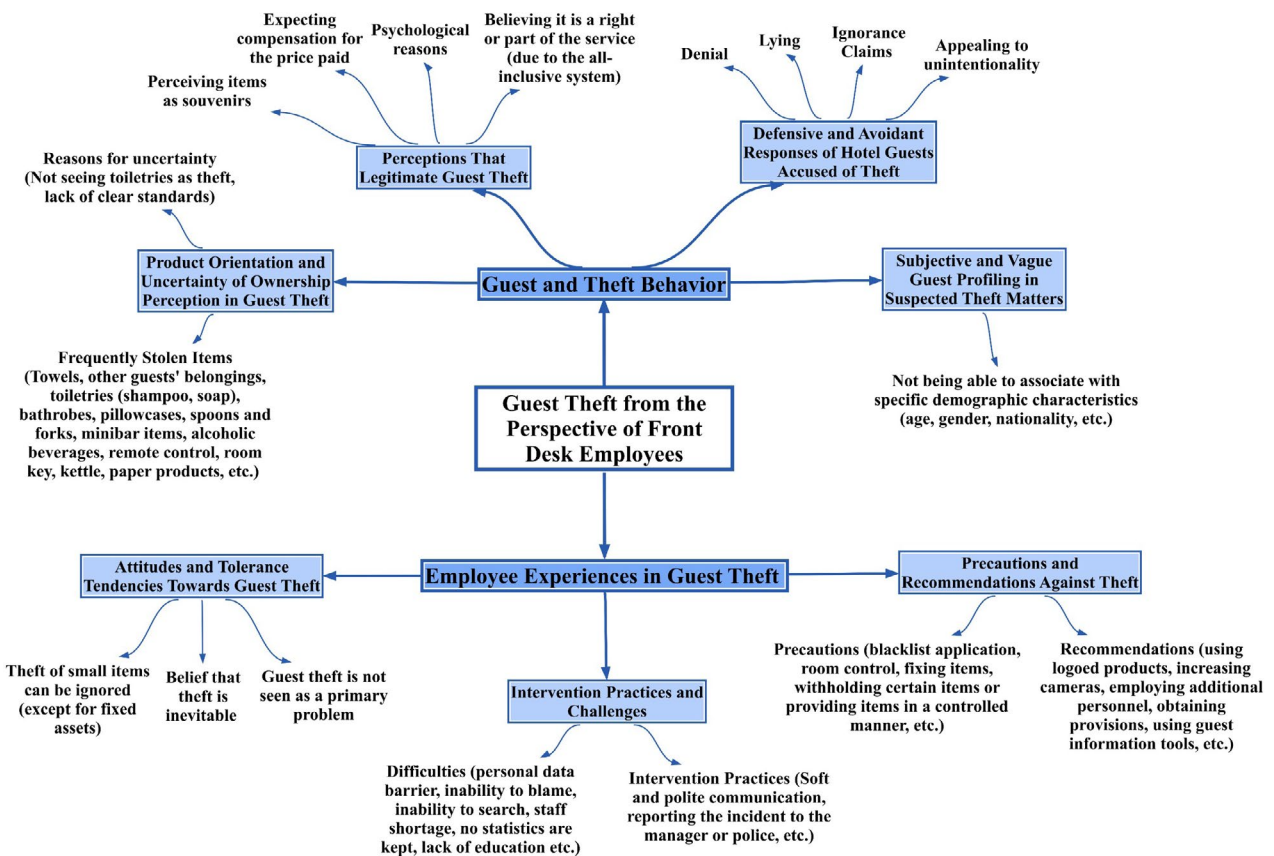


Figure 1. Thematic Map

The thematic map presented in Figure 1 summarizes the themes that emerged within the scope of guest theft from the perspective of the employees of hospitality businesses in the form of a map. According to the figure, the qualitative data obtained from the

front office department employees can be presented in two main themes: "Guest and Theft Behavior" and "Employee Experiences in Guest Theft". Each main theme is explained together with its sub-themes.

4.1. Guest and Theft Behavior

Under this heading, the themes regarding guest and theft behavior from the perspective of the participants are explained. In this context, the title, in its most general form, reveals which types of products guests are more likely to steal, the ways in which they justify theft, their behavior in confronting theft, and whether theft behavior overlaps with certain guest profiles.

Theme 1: Product Orientation and Uncertainty of Ownership Perception in Guest Theft

This theme first explains what types of products guests steal most often. According to the data obtained, it was found that guests steal towels most often, as stated by K19, "usually towels... towels are at a bit high rate for some reason, somehow it has become a habit for hotel guests to take towels." However, in order of frequency, the participants stated that other guests' belongings, boucle products (shampoo, soap), bathrobes, pillowcases, spoon and fork, minibar drinks, alcoholic beverages, remote controls (TV or air conditioner), room card, kettle and paper products such as napkins/toilet paper were targeted by guests. In addition, less frequently mentioned but noteworthy products include items such as televisions, curtains, shower heads, safe boxes and projectors. Some participants stated that they did not consider it as "theft" for guests to take toiletries, slippers, disposable items or minibar drinks, and that such products were considered acceptable, although they may vary from person to person. Participants often stated that the reason for this situation was that guests had already paid for these products. For example, K11's statement that *"it depends on the point of view... I mean, the boucle product is already specially prepared for that guest, it is something that is offered for the use of that guest, it is not considered as theft because the leftovers are thrown away after the guest leaves, but taking the fixed material of the hotel, the reusable and replaceable material is theft."* supports this finding. On the other hand, the statements of one participant as follows: *'We do not have a standard, our guests can take the boucle products, the materials we put in the rooms such as shoehorns, but other than that, towels and sheets, people have accepted this now, hoteliers have accepted this now, they see it as invisible, so these are things that are likely to happen...'* (P16) emphasise that there is no specific standard for what guests cannot take with them in hospitality businesses.

Theme 2: Perceptions That Legitimate Guest Theft

In this theme, how guests justify their theft behavior was examined through employee observations. Participants stated that customers often justify their reasons for stealing with perspectives such as "wanting

to take something as a souvenir," "wanting to get something back for the money paid," and "seeing it as a right." For example, K13 summarizes the result of this situation as *"the guest takes it as a memory, but we already give it to them when they come and request it from the reception. For example, we ordered 5,000 room cards during the last season, that is, during the summer, and the number of cards we had at the end of the season was 380."* In addition, participants stated that customers do not know which products they can and cannot take with them or that they misinterpret the limits of the all-inclusive system. K4's explanations regarding the finding are as follows:

"Some of them take it as a memory, sometimes they see it as a right, they can say that we paid for the hotel and this is also included in the service, some of them say that they thought of it as a gift, or they give what they bought as a gift, and that also happened. For example, one of our guests bought 20 glasses, they were served them at the bar and the glasses were not returned. We had beautiful casablanca glasses, last time we told them, they served you with our glasses, but it's not coming back. He said it was a gift. He said he accepted it as a gift. He said that glass was included in the all-inclusive package."

In addition to all these explanations, employees also associated guests' theft behavior with a character trait, habit or psychological reasons. The underlying reason for these explanations is that the nature of the stolen products seems meaningless to the employees. For example, K12 explains this situation with the following words:

"The guests have cryptomania, meaning they can't rest until they steal it. For example, let me give an example from last season, we have a shopping mall right below. He is not a guest who cannot afford it, he can afford it but he will definitely go there and steal that chocolate. We asked and questioned why he stole it. He says he is sick and he cannot feel comfortable if he does not steal this. You say this and he says I'm sorry. He says I have money and I can buy it but I feel happy when I take it without paying, he says I'm sorry, he says I'll give you more than that... because he did his job and earned his happiness and he took it without paying."

Theme 3: Defensive and Avoidant Responses of Hotel Guests Accused of Theft

This theme explains the reactions of the guests when theft behaviour was realized. The individuals who participated in the research stated that when the theft was noticed, the customers mostly denied the crime, claimed that the incident was accidental, had no knowledge of the issue or lied. Such defensive and avoidant reactions, on the one hand, make the process of theft intervention difficult for employees, and on the other hand, they show that the customer avoids confronting his/her behaviour.

Shower head... I'm talking to the housekeeper and I say, don't you have one? They say, "Mr X, how can we authorise the exit without a shower head? We also ask the guest, we say that there is no shower head, did you put it somewhere or did you take it out, if you took it, you can also say that, you know, it's not a problem. We look, it comes out of the guest's suitcase, and he says, 'is this how it happened again, we were going to change it, and it got into it while we were putting things in.' I told you not to take the shower head with you." (K17)

Theme 4: Subjective and Vague Guest Profiling in Suspected Theft Matters

This theme explains the profile perceptions of employees about customers who steal. Although there is no common demographic characteristic that stands out in the interviews, some employees stated that customers in the middle and upper age group commit theft behaviour more frequently. However, the issue of theft was not significantly associated with either gender or nationality by employees. For example, K1 summarizes this situation with the following statement: *"I think this (theft) has nothing to do with any nationality, age, group or race because some people have acquired it as a habit, so I cannot reduce it to nationality. I have worked with 30-40 different nationalities so far and all of them have theft incidents, although rare."* Therefore, the theme implies that theft behaviour is too diverse or contextually variable to be associated with a specific guest profile.

4.2. Employee Experiences in Guest Theft

Under this heading, the attitudes developed by hotel employees against customer theft, the institutional obstacles they face, and the preventive strategies and suggestions they implement are explained.

Theme 1: Attitudes and Tolerance Tendencies Towards Guest Theft

This theme reveals how employees develop an approach to theft incidents and in which cases they tolerate these behaviours. During interviews, some employees stated that small losses (e.g. toiletries, slippers, towels, etc.) were often overlooked. For example, P15 explains this situation as follows: *"We don't have much especially in repeatable products, for example towels or materials that they can use in the room. Since they are already ordered with a certain capacity, we can't always do that, but in cases in which they can eat or drink, if it is not an alcoholic beverage, for example, they run out of a cola, they say I want to take this, we say okay, take it."* A different participant (P16) said, *"We don't have a standard, our guests can take their boucle products, the shoehorns we put in the rooms. Apart from that, towels, sheets, people have accepted this now. Hotel employees have accepted this now, they see*

these as things that are highly likely to be stolen," revealing that the theft of these products is sometimes considered as an 'accepted' or "inevitable" situation. On the other hand, theft behavior is often not seen as a serious threat, rather direct violent behaviors such as harassment and insults are among the priority problems for employees. This situation once again reveals that employees do not consider theft to be relatively unimportant but rather that it is part of the nature of the job. Although the general perception is as described, one participant ranked guest theft in the first place in terms of the difficulties he experienced in his working life. P11 explains the issue with the following words:

"When we look at those who drink alcohol and harm other guests, it may not cause a problem when they do not drink alcohol, and if they have already drunk too much alcohol, the employees does not give alcohol after a certain point, warns the guest, says that they will not give alcohol until they feel better. We can prevent it like this. We gently warn the disruptive guest and then warn them through security or, if necessary, warn the hotel's department manager and take them under control. But unfortunately theft cannot be prevented. In my opinion, it comes first because it is not possible to prevent it. After a person says he didn't do it and denies it, because he is a guest, in terms of guest satisfaction and assuming that the guest is always right, I can never, ever say that he has stolen without a fixed proof of guilt..."

Theme 2: Intervention Practices and Challenges

This theme covers how employees react to theft incidents, which methods they prefer, and the structural and legal obstacles they face in this process. First of all, all businesses explained that they do not keep statistics on guest theft. However, hotel employees do not know exactly how to act in the face of guest theft and emphasized that they have not received any training on this process. Only P17 explained the training regarding this process with the words, *"We need to stay calm, not blame 100% on things we are not sure about, and use those attitudes."* Even though they are not trained in a similar way, other business employees often avoid making direct accusations in cases of suspected theft and use indirect and polite communication language. Participants stated that *"these issues are really sensitive. You can lose the guest completely, you can make sure that he/she will not come there again, or you can say that it is wrong without offending the guest. Generally, guests are offended about this."* (P9) or *"Let's say there is a pillow missing in the room, we say it in a polite way without accusing the guest that it could be a mistake."* (P18). While one participant stated that a harsher attitude should be displayed as a business in guest theft, he emphasized that negative comments that can be written on the internet are also a deterrent factor for them. The participant's words on this

issue are as follows; *"Actually, we can be harsher on this issue, but we are not being complete. Offending and hurting the guest is not something we do very often. Negative comments have affected tourism in many different ways in the last five years. I mean, if the guest writes five negative comments because we are going to ask for two things, the cost of those five one stars is worth much more."* (P19).

In the post-intervention process, some employees report the case to their managers, while others take the case to the police. Although these practices are not institutionally based on a standard procedure, decisions are generally made on an individual basis. For example, it is among the findings that even the situation of reporting guest theft to the police can be considered as a last resort considering the satisfaction of other guests. P13 explained this situation as follows: *"We talk to the guest first, if the guest says I did absolutely nothing like that, we have to contact the police if necessary. The police coming to the hotel is a very bad sight among so many guests. We definitely have to call the police when we have to, but otherwise we stay away from the police as much as possible."* In addition, many factors such as limited camera recordings, not being able to call customers directly, not being able to file charges, and not having a control staff (housekeeping employee) on night shifts, as required by the Personal Data Protection Law in Turkey, are among the factors that limit employee intervention. It is understood that these situations show that employees are forced to deal with legal boundaries and institutional deficiencies, and sometimes lead them to illegal behavior. For example, the behavior of a business as a result of the inability to search despite the fact that it was understood that the lampshade, which can be expressed as a fixture in the hotel room, was stolen, draws attention. The participant conveys his experience with the following words:

"The housekeeper notices that there is no lampshade in the room after the guest checks out. Since we, as the front office, know the guests more personally, we clearly inform them that they have not checked out yet. There is a problem, we cannot open the luggage. The luggage is also a big one, but there is almost a 5 percent chance that the lampshade could have come out in another way. Either he must have taken it a few days ago and since the cleaning is done every day, it must have been noticed. Considering these possibilities, we realized that the possibility of him taking it when leaving was high. Therefore, there are some legal and illegal researches, of course the inside of the room is not visible, so unfortunately there is an illegal side. After thinking that the lady who cleaned the room, the mini bar attendant, the floor manager and the HK manager who checked the room were sure about this issue, we opened the luggage, regretfully and unwillingly, but of course because our aim in our business is

to protect, by placing staff around when there were no guests, to make sure that no guests had arrived. After seeing the product inside, the guest came to pick up his suitcase and it was determined that it was his. We said we want you to open your suitcase in front of him. He did not want to open it, we informed him that we had to open it in the presence of security, otherwise we would call the police. Since we were sure, we opened it and it came out." (P7)

Theme 3: Precautions and Recommendations Against Theft

This theme includes the strategies developed by employees and businesses to prevent theft cases. According to the findings, the most frequently taken measure is the blacklist application. Employees try to prevent guests from staying again by blacklisting them as a result of their thefts. However, the most common practice is the control practice after the guest checks out, as stated by P18, *"We follow up directly on the day the guest checks out. We immediately tell housekeeping when they check out, they give feedback to us, and if there is a deficiency, we do not let the guest out."* Similarly, control practice is also carried out during the day. One participant summarized this practice in the business as follows: *"For example, when our housekeeping colleagues go to clean during the day, we check if there are any missing items in the room, on a daily basis, in order to prevent such situations. Of course, theft occurs, but we definitely have it checked, so we can prevent any extra items that may occur as a result of the day earlier"* (P15). On the other hand, businesses fix the items with a high risk of loss or give them at the request of the guest. Practices such as boucle products or minibar drinks in limited quantities, distributing towels and bathrobes in a controlled manner, or not placing products with a high risk of theft in the room are prominent. Participants explained this situation as follows: *"This year, they fixed the shampoo and shower gel in the shower area, fixed them in the showers like hand soap dispensers, they fill them and provide service that way. Such a measure was taken this year."* (P10), or *"For example, television remotes, air conditioner remotes, hair dryers, kettle accessories, all of these are very valuable to us, of course we take precautions, we have to"* (P7).

As a result of the interviews, the participants made some suggestions to reduce guest theft. These suggestions are generally centered around placing the company logo on stolen products that guests are unlikely to use, increasing the number of cameras, employing special personnel for control, obtaining provisions for additional fees, or providing information about what guests can and cannot take from the hotel. Especially considering that guests may be uninformed about this issue, it is thought that taking measures to inform them will reduce guest theft. The participant offers the following suggestion on the subject

I think it would be nice if the information sheet we give to the guests included a nice note saying that you cannot take anything belonging to the hotel out of the hotel or that you cannot take anything out of the room.” (P13)

5. Conclusion

This research examines the perceptions of front office department employees in hospitality businesses towards customer theft, their reactions to these behaviors and the difficulties they face at the institutional level, aiming to make visible a problem that is frequently encountered but often goes unreported in the accommodation sector. This is because it is difficult to accurately determine how much and what type of crime is occurring in hotels, as not enough reports are shared (or accessible) by the police or hotels (Ho et al., 2017). The findings obtained show that guest theft cannot be considered as a one-dimensional behaviour. In this context, guest theft has shown that customer perception, service delivery style, organisational procedures and legal regulations shape this situation.

In the research, it was concluded that towels, other guests' belongings, boucle products, bathrobes, pillow cases, spoon-forks, minibar drinks, alcoholic beverages, remote control, room card, kettle and paper products are frequently stolen from an accommodation establishment. It can be seen that the result obtained is in parallel with the literature (Pratt, 2022; Sufi et al., 2023). However, the result obtained is similar to the classification of Gill et al. (2002), but the research did not find any results regarding the theft of hotel employees' assets. Therefore, it is thought that this relative difference is due to the fact that it is very rare for guests to steal the assets of hotel employees.

One of the important results of the research is the areas where customer theft is carried out. As a result of the research, it is seen that the customers perform theft behavior in their room, from other customers and in the general areas of the hotel. Thefts from hotel rooms have serious economic consequences for accommodation businesses. In this context, it was determined that approximately 350 towels were stolen annually in one of the hotels where the research was conducted. Data were obtained that customer thefts against other customers caused a loss of prestige for accommodation establishments. It has been revealed that the victimized customers have an attitude that the accommodation establishments should take responsibility for the theft incident. This result should be taken into consideration for businesses that want to have a good image in the eyes of their customers. In addition, the theft of overhead projectors from the hotel's meeting room or POS machines at the reception shows that the theft behavior of customers is not limited to the rooms and it is

seen that general areas should be carefully controlled. As a result of the research, there are also some results on how front office department employees who experience theft will behave. In particular, employees emphasized that the financial value of stolen goods influenced their understanding of customer intervention. Some hotel employees accepted the theft of small items as well as fixtures as the nature of the business. In line with the literature, small-scale theft of products is tolerated (Gill et al., 2002). Some of the reasons for this are that it is difficult to prove (Yilmaz et al., 2021), it is not reported to the police due to commercial concerns (Hoa, 2016), and it cannot be searched due to the personal data protection law. This situation, as found in the research, brings with it the risk that businesses may sometimes resort to illegal practices such as secret searches in order to protect themselves. In addition, it was found that when theft is discovered, guests often develop strategies such as denial, lying, avoidance or claiming ignorance, while employees have difficulty in confronting these situations. In this context, this results in guests perceiving property boundaries as flexible or ambiguous, and as a result, guests develop defense mechanisms. In addition, the findings regarding the possibility that the interventions made to the customers who committed theft may return as negative comments on holiday social networking sites and that some theft incidents are ignored by the front office department employees are also remarkable data.

It was concluded that the guests considered some products as their own and stole them for souvenir purposes or for psychological reasons (cryptomania, etc.). This result is similar to the results obtained by Yilmaz et al. (2021) and Sufi et al. (2023). A study has found that robbery rates increase in high-priced hotels and that theft rates also increase with the number of security guards (Bach & Pizam, 1996). In addition to this result, this research has reached the conclusion that the all-inclusive system resorts to forms of justification such as guests misinterpreting its limits. Therefore, this study concluded that the all-inclusive system may be a factor that may pave the way for guest-related theft cases. In this respect, the study adds a new dimension to the literature on criminal behavior in tourism (especially guest theft) and makes an important contribution to future research. In addition, in this respect, the research indicates that criminal behavior is shaped by systemic conditions, not individual ones. However, when looking at the existing literature, there are different results regarding the relationship between demographic variables and theft behavior. Huefner and Hunt (2000), who investigated six types of retaliatory behavior by customers, including theft, vandalism, and personal assault, also present evidence that men are more likely than women to engage in these types of crimes. They also argue that people

with lower education are significantly more likely to engage in retaliatory behaviors such as theft, vandalism, and physical aggression. Daunt and Harris (2010) emphasizes that low income is effective in bad customer behavior and that there is a relationship between low income levels and theft behavior. Contrary to these research findings, Ho et al. (2017) stated that the demographic characteristics of hotel guests had no effect on their likelihood of becoming victims of theft. This study brings a new perspective to the field by revealing that these demographic factors are not determinants of guest theft behavior.

In the study, it was concluded that hotel employees did not receive any training on customer theft. In this context, employees primarily show the behavior of communicating with the guest in a polite language in the fight against theft. Similarly, no specific statistical data is kept on theft. Employees frequently use the blacklist application against guest theft, thus preventing repeat accommodations (Pratt, 2022). In addition, they ensure that the rooms are checked (during the day or after check-out), and the products are fixed or provided to the guests on a limited basis. However, these practices are often carried out on individual initiative, lacking a systematic institutional structure. For example, while housekeeping staff can check rooms when customers check out during the day, they cannot do so at night because there are no staff members on duty.

Hotel employees also made some suggestions. It was concluded that these suggestions generally included placing the company logo on the stolen products, increasing the number of cameras, hiring new personnel, making provisions or informing the guest about the hotel products. Especially considering the different hotel types and procedures, it is thought that the information process will be effective. Because it is understood from guest statements and employee observations that the theft of some products is not a conscious theft, but is often perceived as part of the service or as a "takeaway". Therefore, clear information on the ownership status of products can both prevent misunderstandings and reduce stealing behavior. In addition, in the context of the results obtained in the research, standard procedures should be developed for theft cases (report, recording, intervention flow), employees should be trained to deal with theft, a recording system should be established for stolen products, and camera systems should be increased within the legal limits. A blacklist database should be developed by establishing hotel associations or regional business networks, which can be done at the sectoral level, and the intervention area should be expanded by taking into account the personal data protection law. Additionally, handling customer theft processes in public areas may cause unrest and reactions in the hotel environment, so interventions should not be carried out in front of other guests.

Due to the nature of the research, there are some limitations in this study. The main limitations are that only the perspectives of the front office departments are included and Kuşadası is chosen as the research area. It is thought that the opinions of different department employees (e.g. housekeeping) will also contribute to the results of the research. In addition, it is thought that examining guest theft in different tourist destinations in Turkey will contribute to the generalization of the results according to destination differences. On the other hand, the perception of theft can be examined from the guest perspective, and the theft phenomenon can be compared in different hotel types (city, holiday, boutique). It can be examined whether the all-inclusive system increases guest theft or, more generally, the crime rate in hotels, thus revealing the effects of the type of service. Studies can be carried out to determine the financial burden that guest theft creates for hospitality businesses. This study was conducted in five-star hotels. Broadhurst et al. (2011) found that businesses with 10 or fewer employees in the retail sector were most prone to customer theft. He cited the lack of sufficient resources for surveillance systems as the reason for this situation. In this context, small hotels may be preferred for future research. Furthermore, Babin and Griffin (1995) found that consumers with low self-esteem view theft as a more "fair" or "just" behavior than those with high self-esteem. In this context, it is thought that psychological studies aimed at determining the personality traits of guests who exhibit theft behavior will be useful in preventing guest theft.

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