



# Worry About Guest Mistreatment and Endorsement of COVID-19 Safety Policies

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## Abstract

Organizations can introduce a variety of policies that mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and encourage vaccinations to promote public health. Previous research suggests employees are hesitant about organizational changes because they may be perceived as threatening. In the current study, we suggest that employees may support the introduction of some policies precisely because these policies help reduce threats to well-being and safety in the work environment, especially those concerns that rise to the level of worry. Using a two-wave sample of frontline theme park workers surveyed at a time when COVID-19 safety policies had not yet been decided, we test the idea that workers are more likely to endorse COVID-19 safety policies when they are worried about COVID-related environmental risk in the form of mistreatment by guests and, subsequently, guest and worker vaccination status. Results suggest that worry about guest mistreatment predicts later endorsement of COVID-19 safety policies, and this effect is partly explained by worry about others' vaccination status. These effects occur independent of workers' dispositional tendencies to worry (trait neuroticism) and general optimism (trait optimism) about the future.

**Keywords** Mistreatment worry · Vaccination worry · Uncertainty management · Endorsement of safety policies

Since the development and roll-out of the COVID-19 vaccine, a much-debated issue in the U.S. pertains to the role of organizations in incentivizing employee vaccination as a strategy to promote COVID-19 safety in the workplace (Forman et al.,

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2021). Organizations can introduce a variety of policies that encourage vaccination to mitigate the spread and consequences of COVID-19 in the workforce, including vaccine mandates and requiring masks and tests for non-vaccinated workers (Mulligan & Harris, 2021; Nagele-Piazza, 2021). Past research in public health suggests that these types of strategies may motivate workers to receive vaccines, promoting public health (Brewer et al., 2017). Given lagging vaccination rates and concerns among organizational leaders about whether to implement policies that directly (i.e., mandates) or indirectly encourage vaccination (i.e., required mask-wearing and testing of the unvaccinated; [CDC], 2021a), there is a need for occupational health psychology research to understand employee endorsement of organizational initiatives that encourage vaccination and enhance workplace safety.

The current study links COVID-19 safety policy endorsement to the worry that frontline workers experience in their work environment. Specifically, we draw from the proposition that people are motivated to address and mitigate threats, specifically those that cause workers to worry (Berenbaum, 2010; Bordia et al., 2004). Based on this, we suggest that workers' worries about the safety of their work environment—in the form of worry about mistreatment from guests—will predict their endorsement of initiatives that promote workplace safety (e.g., vaccine mandate, required weekly testing of non-vaccinated employees). Theoretically, we posit that these policies may provide needed predictability in the face of dynamically uncertain work environments and endorsement of these policies is therefore connected to people's worry about threats and their associated worry about coping resources in the work environment.

Thus, we extend research on organizational change and how people respond to uncertainty in their work environments. We focus on the motivational processes of worry, suggesting that worry serves as a future-focused emotion that motivates people to support initiatives that may mitigate harm. This further strengthens the literature on organizational change by framing frontline employees as proactive agents who consider, endorse, and even advocate for potential changes, as opposed to simply reacting to changes initiated at higher organizational levels.

We test this idea in a sample of frontline theme park workers. It has long been discussed that frontline workers, such as hospitality workers, experience threats in their work environment because they need to interact with members of the public who may behave in uncertain and sometimes antagonistic ways (Gettman & Gelfand, 2007; Yagil, 2008). Such events have received particular exposure recently in the news media, wherein customers engage in common unsafe misbehaviors that violate COVID-19 policies around physical distance and mask wearing (e.g., yelling, spitting, and/or physically assaulting workers; Avdiu & Nayyar, 2020). These unsafe behaviors increase the likelihood of the virus being transmitted to the worker directly or indirectly via infecting their coworkers, especially if customers and/or coworkers are unvaccinated<sup>1</sup>. Our research examines how worry over guest mistreatment may translate to worry about coworker and guest vaccination, and their implications for

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<sup>1</sup> Note that we conducted the study at a time when vaccination was popularly thought to eliminate the spread of the COVID-19 virus, which was later shown to not be the case.

endorsement of COVID-19 safety policies. Notably, we conducted our research during a window in time wherein the employer was contemplating changing mask-wearing and vaccine policies but had not yet made relevant announcements. Thus, our research was well-positioned to examine factors that influence how frontline workers proactively think about and endorse potential safety policies, as opposed to capturing reactions to announced changes.

Our theorizing around worry and policy endorsement can advance both organizational change and safety literatures, which have rarely examined people's proactive opinions about what should happen in an organization. From a practical standpoint, given that organizational policies related to the pandemic are still a subject of much debate, we believe these findings are relevant to the current situation in which many employers find themselves, especially as waves of COVID-19 still arise. To this point, Aguinis et al. (2021) recently expressed surprise that few studies explicitly examine policy, and they urged researchers to examine issues of policy in order to enhance the relevance of our research. We believe that organizational research has a responsibility to understand this period of time not only for the sake of knowledge, but also to help guide organizations as they respond to these types of events in the future (Sinclair et al., 2020). Below, we first describe our theoretical background before turning to the study hypotheses.

## Theoretical Background

We argue that workers' worries about future threats and potential ways to cope with them play a role in predicting their endorsement of COVID-19 safety policies. Worry reflects negative future-oriented repetitive cognitions concerning an undesirable and uncertain future outcome (i.e., a threat; Berenbaum, 2010; Berenbaum et al., 2007; Borkovec et al., 1998; Brosschot et al., 2006; Segerstrom et al., 2003). To better understand workers' endorsement of COVID-19 safety policies, we distinguish between two types of worry, building from Berenbaum's (2010) perspective on worry and Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress. As the appraisal of stressors focuses on both an evaluation of the stressor itself as well as the resources available for coping with the stressor (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), we propose that worry can be distinguished based on the *content* of the cognitions. Specifically, *threat-focused worry* reflects worrying directed toward the potential negative events and *coping-focused worry* reflects worrying directed toward the presence (or absence) of conditions that can prevent potential negative stimuli from occurring or mitigate their consequences.

In the present study, we categorize worry about customer-instigated mistreatment as threat-focused worry. Individuals may worry about mistreatment partly because it is a psychologically aversive experience that has been found to negatively impact employee well-being (Harris & Reynolds, 2003). Past experiences can predict the anticipation of future stressors, evidenced by research on stressor anticipation (Epstein & Roupenian, 1970; Feldman et al., 2004; Spacapan & Cohen, 1983). In the COVID-19 context, individuals may also experience mistreatment worry because customer-instigated mistreatment may increase exposure to COVID-19.

As mentioned, customer mistreatment events often violate physical distancing best practices, putting mistreated employees at higher risk of disease exposure (Avdiu & Nayyar, 2020). As COVID-19 vaccines had become more accessible in the U.S. at the time we conducted this research, we argue that vaccination of others is a particularly salient way to mitigate the negative health-related consequences that could result from customer mistreatment. In addition to reducing transmission of COVID-19, vaccination has been a hot media topic (Pilishvili et al., 2021; Thompson et al., 2021). Thus, from a cognitive perspective, the vaccination of others may have been the most salient strategy that individuals considered for mitigating the COVID-related consequences of mistreatment. Thus, worrying about the vaccination status of others in the workplace (e.g., coworkers, guests) represents coping-focused worry that arises from worrying about threats in the environment.

A dominant theme in organizational change research is that uncertainty is an aversive state that employees are motivated to reduce or manage (e.g., Bordia et al., 2004). From this perspective, organizational change initiatives (e.g., introduction of new policies or technologies, restructuring) have been viewed as introducing uncertainty about the potential consequences of the change (e.g., Bordia et al., 2004; Davy et al., 1988; Fugate et al., 2012; Rafferty & Griffin, 2006). This environmental uncertainty is expected to prompt worry (Brosschot et al., 2006; Cheng & McCarthy, 2018) and make workers reluctant to support policy changes (Bordia et al., 2004). However, organizational change may not be the only uncertainty employees face. We argue that, in some situations, organizational changes in the form of policy introduction may serve to alleviate sources of worry that employees experience in their jobs. The COVID-19 pandemic illustrates this well. When we consider COVID-19 exposure as the focal undesirable stimulus, COVID-19 safety policies can serve as environmental conditions that proactively mitigate this threat. As such, they serve as a coping resource by helping to mitigate a very salient form of uncertainty related to workplace health and safety. Taking this perspective, we argue that people who are most concerned about guest mistreatment may proactively endorse the implementation of safety policies to mitigate one threat associated with mistreatment (e.g., exposure to COVID-19). Moreover, the impact of worry about mistreatment from guests on endorsement of COVID-19 safety policies may be indirectly transmitted through worry about other people in the work environment's vaccination status. In the following sections, we introduce our study context and detail the logic behind these anticipated relationships.

## Study Context and Hypotheses

Our study examines frontline workers in the theme park industry – an industry severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and one that struggled with labor shortages and strategies for a safe return to work. In the context of this industry, the issues and risks surrounding the COVID-19 virus and vaccinations are especially salient. Work is characterized by face-to-face interactions, with a higher risk of virus transmission compared to work arrangements consisting of less face-to-face social interaction (Chang et al., 2021). Enhancing this risk, frontline workers are also faced

with a particularly high risk of potential COVID-19-related guest mistreatment. The norms around the hospitality industry, especially amusement parks, have created a “carnavalesque” environment in which many guests escape the norms of their daily lives and do not necessarily expect the same repercussions of their action as they normally might, fueled further by the hospitality industry’s adherence to the notion that “the guest is always right” (Chapman & Light, 2017). Due to the subversion of norms and responsibilities, guests of hospitality establishments have been found to frequently act recklessly and perform deviance, particularly toward workers to the extent to which inappropriate behaviors by guests is considered the norm. Unfortunately, employees in this industry report routinely experiencing unruly or abusive behavior (Reynolds & Harris, 2006).

Considering the frequent and close interactions workers have with guests and coworkers, there is not only a threat of the guest getting the employee sick, but also guests getting coworkers sick and then coworkers getting the focal employee sick. As an employee in our study reported:

The person who became ill was my coworker and had contact with a guest who removed his mask and then spat at her after being told to properly wear his mask over his nose. The coworker of mine who was spat on became extremely ill a little over a week later and was hospitalized for COVID-19 for over a month. I witnessed the exposure and the situation made me feel extremely upset and afraid. My coworker was evicted after being unable to pay her bills from being out of work with COVID (the company only pays 14 days of sick pay for somebody with covid). Seeing her lose her home and her pets etc because of the situation made me feel horrible and made me lose trust that large companies care about us at all.

For this reason, worries about guest mistreatment, a threat-focused worry, may trigger worry about the extent to which those in the work environment may perpetuate or mitigate ensuing disease threat. We focus on worry about the vaccination status of coworkers and guests as a relevant coping-focused worry. From a disease spread perspective, workplace vaccination programs at the time were hailed by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC, 2021b) as mitigating the risk of COVID-19 exposure because vaccination of any individual that an employee interacts with can reduce the chance of transmission. Thus, similar to how Lazarus and Folkman (1984) posit that threat appraisal triggers coping appraisal, threat-focused worry (i.e., worry about mistreatment enacted by guests) may prompt coping-focused worry (i.e., worry about the possibility that guests and coworkers are not vaccinated).

In turn, and based on the reasoning described above, we anticipate that workers worried about the vaccination status of those they come across in their work environment may support various policies designed to minimize risk of disease spread/exposure in that environment. Strict policies such as vaccination requirements, mask-wearing requirements for the unvaccinated, and COVID-19 testing requirements for the unvaccinated, we argue, are more likely to be supported by workers worried about environmental risks and resources for coping with those risks. In other words, coping-focused worry may prompt employees to endorse organizational changes

that they perceive as increasing their available coping resources. Thus, we anticipate that worries about guest mistreatment (threat-focused worry) are related to worries about vaccinations (coping-focused worry), which in turn, promote greater endorsement of policies intended to promote vaccination and safety.

**Hypothesis 1:** There is an indirect effect of worry about guest mistreatment on endorsement of COVID-19 safety policies through worry about whether others in the working environment are vaccinated.

Recent guidance suggests that control variables be explicitly incorporated into theory and hypotheses (Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016; Wysocki et al., 2022). In the present study, our goal is to examine the indirect effect of worry about guest mistreatment on COVID-19 safety policy endorsement, through worry about guest and coworker vaccination. However, the severity of worry and individual responses to worry both may be impacted by individual differences in the propensity to worry. Specifically, worry has been conceptualized as a maladaptive behavior that is predicted in part by stable traits (Borkovec et al., 1983; de Bruin et al., 2007; Verkuil et al., 2007), especially trait neuroticism (Hettema et al., 2004; Keogh et al., 1998). Thus, while worry about guest mistreatment may be influenced, in part, by past exposure to guest mistreatment or one's observations of the current risks in his/her environment, worry also likely varies systematically across individuals based on certain individual differences.

We therefore measured two individual differences theorized to generally predict worry and safety-relevant behaviors: (a) trait neuroticism, or the tendency toward heightened emotional reactivity, and (b) trait optimism, an orientation for positive outcome expectancies (Carver & Scheier, 2014; Digman, 1990). Research suggests that individuals higher in neuroticism are more likely to take action to avoid potentially threatening situations (Lommen et al., 2010). Optimism has similarly been linked to safety participation, which reflects voluntary extra efforts aimed toward promoting workplace safety (Ye et al., 2020). Thus, past findings suggest that certain individual difference characteristics may impact individuals' reports of worry and their endorsement of workplace safety policies. For that reason, we were interested in examining the robustness of our proposed model in light of stable trait control variables. We anticipated that the indirect effect described in Hypothesis 1 occurs independently of the effects of people's trait-related tendencies to worry about or think positively about the future. Stated otherwise, we hypothesize that endorsement of COVID-19 safety policies will be predicted by worries about threats and coping factors in the workplace, beyond any effect of people's tendencies to view the future in certain ways.

In addition to controlling for trait neuroticism and trait optimism, we also made the decision to test our predictors of policy endorsement while controlling for age. Age can affect individuals' likelihood of COVID-19 infection as well as the severity of symptoms if they are infected (Shahid et al., 2020). This means that it is possible that individuals in high-risk age groups are more likely to endorse COVID-19 safety policies. In addition, there is evidence that younger people are less likely to adhere

to COVID-19 safety policies (Park et al., 2020), suggesting that age could also influence endorsement of those safety policies.

Hypothesis 2: While controlling for trait optimism, trait neuroticism, and age, there is an indirect effect of worry about guest mistreatment on endorsement of COVID-19 safety policies through worry about whether others in the working environment are vaccinated.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

Participants were theme park employees affiliated with a labor union in the South-eastern U.S. The study consisted of two parts, which were collected as part of a larger study on COVID-19-related workplace events. Participants were recruited through flyers sent out via text message by the labor union. Those interested in being part of the study used a link to an online survey, administered by the research team, wherein they answered questions about their eligibility for this research study. To participate, participants needed to be at least 18 years of age and employed in the hospitality industry. Given the purpose of the larger study, we considered people eligible to participate if they had experienced at least one of the following events since the beginning of the pandemic: they had been laid off, furloughed, or received an involuntary reduction in hours; had been mistreated by a guest; or had either themselves or a coworker been exposed to COVID-19 at work. Since these events were common occurrences, all were eligible to participate. 126 employees responded to the first survey and 105 responded to the second survey (83% retention rate). Eight of the participants that completed the second survey indicated that they had left their job between the first survey and the second survey, and they were excluded from analyses. Of the 97 participants included in analyses, 91.89% were White/Caucasian, 60.8% were female, and most reported having some college education (29.9%) or a bachelor's degree (41.2%). Participants ranged in age from 19 to 71 years ( $M=33.56$ ,  $SD=12.09$ ). Participants worked 37.9 h per week on average, and most worked 5 days per week ( $M=4.72$ ). All participants worked in a face-to-face work arrangement. Part 1 of the study was distributed to participants between April 2021 and May 2021, and Part 2 was distributed between June 2021 and August 2021. In the first survey, they reported their levels of worry pertaining to guest mistreatment and the control variables. In the second survey, participants reported their levels of worry pertaining to vaccination and also reported whether they would support the implementation of various COVID-19 safety policies.

### Measures

Measures for this study were selected in partnership with our labor union partner. A list of items used for each measure and details about the internal consistency reliability of each measure is in Appendix Table 3. In addition, we provide information

about the internal consistency reliability and validity evidence collected for each measure below.

### Worry About Guest Mistreatment

This construct was measured using five items: (1) “I worry about guests treating me poorly,” (2) “I am concerned about guests behaving rudely toward me,” (3) “I feel anxious about how badly I will be treated,” (4) “I feel nervous about guests treating me in a condescending way,” and (5) “I feel uneasy about getting mistreated at work.” Coefficient alpha was 0.93.

Two pilot studies were conducted to establish content validity and criterion-related validity of the mistreatment worry measure. To collect evidence of content validity, we followed procedures established by Colquitt et al. (2019). A sample of 105 workers in customer-facing occupations completed the self-report measure of mistreatment worry ( $M=3.25$ ;  $SD=1.84$ ;  $\alpha=0.95$ ). Participants were subsequently given definitions of mistreatment worry and mistreatment anticipation, a measure that reflects how often workers expect to be mistreated on the job, and they sorted items into one of these two categories (DiStaso & Shoss, 2023). Results indicated that items were rated as highly corresponding to the provided definition of mistreatment worry, as indicated by the proportion of substantive agreement (scale  $p_{sa} = 0.80$ ). They were also rated as moderately distinct from mistreatment anticipation as indicated by the substantive validity coefficient, suggesting that worry about mistreatment goes beyond people’s anticipation of whether these experiences will occur (scale  $c_{sv} = 0.59$ ).

A separate sample of 242 workers who were furloughed or laid off due to COVID-19 were asked to report their worry about future mistreatment upon returning to work, as part of a larger study about return-to-work worry. The scale showed strong internal consistency reliability ( $\alpha=0.96$ ). In addition, worry about guest mistreatment correlated negatively with self-reported indicators of intention to return to their original job ( $r=-.18$ ,  $p<.01$ ), mental health ( $r=-.38$ ,  $p<.01$ ) and life satisfaction ( $r=-.19$ ,  $p<.01$ ).

### Worry About Vaccination

This construct was measured using four items that were rated by participants on a 1–7 agreement scale ( $\alpha=0.96$ ). Two items were focused on worry about vaccination status of guests, and two were focused on the vaccination status of coworkers: (1) “I worry about whether my coworkers will be vaccinated,” (2) “I feel anxious about whether my coworkers will be vaccinated,” (3) “I worry about whether guests will be vaccinated,” and (4) “I feel anxious about whether guests will be vaccinated.” These items were based on targeted measures of worry or anxiety across a variety of research areas, which have employed similar structures to ask about worries on a particular topic (e.g., “I worry about...”, “I feel anxious about...”; Alkis et al., 2017; Brunton et al., 2021; Silva et al., 2021; Wells, 1994).

## Endorsement of COVID-19 Safety Policies

Dominant strategies to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 exposure include (a) face mask mandates, (b) vaccination requirements, and (c) COVID-19 testing requirements. The extent to which these policies are enacted varies considerably, as organizations adhere to federal, state, and local governmental policies and, at times, take them further. A number of organizations, primarily in health care and higher education, have mandated vaccination among some or all employees (Mulligan & Harris, 2021). While some organizations in other industries have begun to follow suit with vaccination requirements, many have focused on encouraging vaccination without requiring it (Mulligan & Harris, 2021). These policies may take several approaches, from providing incentives such as funds or paid time off to vaccinated employees to relaxing workplace safety policies for those who are fully vaccinated (Mulligan & Harris, 2021). For example, Walmart offered a one-time \$75 payment to all fully vaccinated field associates and allowed them to stop wearing masks while working (Naidu, 2021). Since then, prompted by the Delta variant, they have implemented a vaccine mandate for certain employees (Nagele-Piazza, 2021). Such organizational policies, then, have typically sought to mandate the behaviors of employees, rather than that of customers or clients.

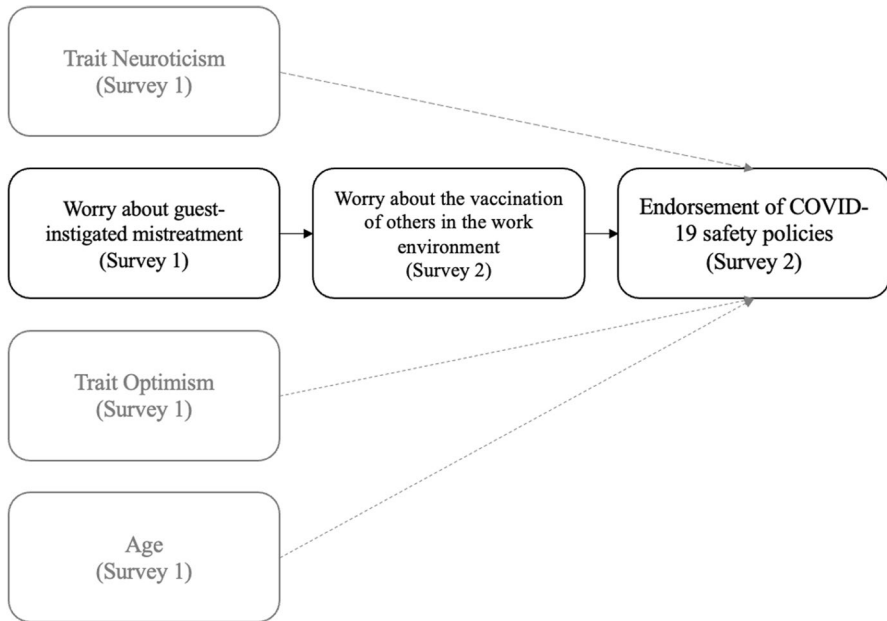
This scale asked participants to think about potential ways their employer might encourage COVID-19 vaccination among employees. Then, participants were instructed to indicate ‘yes’ for any and all policies that they would want their employer to offer. The four items were: (1) “Vaccine Requirement: Employer requires vaccine for all eligible staff,” (2) “COVID-19 Test Requirement: Employer requires those who are not vaccinated to get weekly COVID-19 tests at their own expense,” (3) “Indoor Mask Requirement: Employer requires all non-vaccinated staff to wear masks indoors,” (4) “Mask Requirement: Employer requires all non-vaccinated staff to wear masks indoors and outdoors.” These items were developed in partnership with our union partner to help ascertain the potential acceptance of potential policies. Scale scores were computed using the sum of all policies endorsed, meaning that scores ranged from zero to four.

## Trait Optimism

Optimism was measured using six items used by Scheier et al. (1994) and developed originally by Scheier and Carver (1985). The six items are: (1) “In uncertain times, I usually expect the best,” (2) “If something can go wrong for me, it will,” (3) “I’m usually optimistic about my future,” (4) “I hardly ever expect things to go my way,” (5) “I rarely count on good things happening to me,” and (6) “Overall, I expect more good things to happen to me than bad.” Items 2, 4, and 5 were reverse-coded. Coefficient alpha was 0.90.

## Trait Neuroticism

Neuroticism was measured using four items from the Mini-IPIP (Donnellan et al., 2006). The four items were: (1) “Have frequent mood swings,” (2) “Am relaxed most of the time,” (3) “Get upset easily,” and (4) “Seldom feel blue.” Items 2 and 4 were



**Fig. 1** Proposed path model: predictors of COVID-19 safety policy endorsement. *Note.* The three control variables (depicted in gray) are only included in the model tested by Hypothesis 2

reverse-coded, such that higher scores represented higher levels of Neuroticism. Coefficient alpha was 0.80.

## Analytical Strategy

Mistreatment worry and vaccination worry are similar concepts that tap into separate sources of worry. We therefore decided to factor analyze the measures to verify their discreteness through CFAs before proceeding with hypothesis tests (see Measurement Models below). Then, we tested Hypothesis 1 via a path model using maximum likelihood estimation in R's lavaan package with 1000 bootstrapped samples and 90% bias-corrected confidence intervals. We subsequently repeated this analysis with the inclusion of control variables in order to test Hypothesis 2. See Fig. 1. As noted above, the inclusion of control variables helps address the potential concern that worry-related traits may drive the effect of the worry-related state variables on policy endorsement.

## Results

### Descriptives Statistics and Correlations

Descriptive statistics and correlations among study variables are in Table 1.

**Table 1** Descriptives statistics and correlations among study variables

Measure	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>
1. Trait Neuroticism	3.17	1.05					
2. Trait Optimism	4.51	1.41	−0.52**				
3. Mistreatment Worry	5.41	1.73	0.42**	−0.36**			
4. Vaccination Worry	3.36	1.14	0.46**	−0.24**	0.36**		
5. Policy Endorsement	2.86	1.42	0.25*	−0.23*	0.33**	0.56**	
6. Age	33.56	12.09	−0.37**	0.21	−0.47**	−0.23	−0.09

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

## Measurement Models

Confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) were conducted to confirm the factor structure of the study variables. We were particularly interested in testing the extent to which (a) mistreatment worry and vaccination worry could be treated as distinct from one another, and (b) the extent to which these two constructs are distinct from worry-related traits (i.e., optimism and neuroticism). We compared (a) a four-factor model with mistreatment worry, vaccination worry, optimism, and neuroticism loaded onto four separate factors, and (b) a three-factor model with mistreatment worry and vaccination worry loaded onto a single factor and optimism and neuroticism loaded onto separate factors. A chi-square difference test showed that the four-factor model has significantly better fit than the three factor model  $\Delta\chi^2(3) = 375.93$ ,  $p < .01$  (fit statistics for the four-factor model:  $\chi^2(146, N = 94) = 296.51$ , CFI = 0.89, TLI = 0.87, RMSEA = 0.11, SRMR = 0.07), with the three-factor model showing overall poor fit ( $\chi^2(149, N = 94) = 672.44$ , CFI = 0.61, TLI = 0.55, RMSEA = 0.19, SRMR = 0.18). Although model fit is not ideal based on guidelines proposed by Hu and Bentler (1999), literature suggests that indices for our model could be acceptable given our smaller sample size (Sharma et al., 2005). These results suggest that mistreatment worry and vaccination worry can be considered separate for the purpose of hypothesis testing.

## Hypothesis Tests

The results of the path analyses for each model are displayed in Table 2. Results supported Hypothesis 1. As seen in Table 2, there was a positive effect of mistreatment worry on vaccination worry ( $b = 0.19$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and there was a positive effect of vaccination worry on policy endorsement ( $b = 0.62$ ,  $SE = 0.12$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The indirect effect of mistreatment worry on policy endorsement via worry about guest vaccination was statistically significant ( $b = 0.11$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $p < .05$ ). In support of Hypothesis 2, the same patterns of statistical significance were found even when adding the three control variables into the model. The indirect effect ( $b = 0.11$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $p < .05$ ) remained statistically significant while controlling for the effects of trait neuroticism ( $b = 0.11$ ,  $SE = 0.16$ ,  $p = .48$ ), trait optimism ( $b = -0.16$ ,

**Table 2** Path model results

	Path Model 1		Path Model 2	
	Estimate (SE)	90% CI	Estimate (SE)	90% CI
<b>Direct Effects</b>				
DV: Vaccination Worry				
Mistreatment Worry	0.19 (0.08)	[0.05, 0.34]	0.19 (0.08)	[0.05, 0.34]
DV: Policy Endorsement				
Vaccination Worry	0.60 (0.12)	[0.35, 0.81]	0.62 (0.12)	[0.36, 0.85]
Trait Optimism	N/A		-0.16 (0.10)	[-0.37, 0.05]
Trait Neuroticism	N/A		0.11 (0.16)	[-0.19, 0.43]
Age	N/A		0.00 (0.01)	[-0.02, 0.02]
<b>Indirect Effect</b>				
Indirect effect of mistreatment worry on policy endorsement via vaccination worry	0.11 (0.05)	[0.03, 0.23]	0.11 (0.06)	[0.02, 0.25]

SE=0.10,  $p=.12$ ), and age ( $b=0.00$ , SE=0.01,  $p=.79$ ) on policy endorsement. This finding suggests worrying about guest mistreatment (threat-focused worrying) was associated with increases in worrying about guest and coworker vaccination (coping-focused worrying) which, in turn, was associated with a greater number of COVID-19 safety policies endorsed. Importantly, it also suggests that age and trait-related indicators of worry do not drive these effects.

## Discussion

Workplaces can adopt a variety of COVID-19 safety policies as they attempt to reduce the work-related risks associated with the pandemic. Workers returning to the worksite and the re-openings of businesses and economies have prompted organizational decisions about safety policies in the workplace. Our research with frontline hospitality workers suggests that people's worry about being mistreated by guests is associated with greater endorsement of policies to mitigate COVID-19 workplace risks indirectly through worry about others' vaccination status.

## Theoretical Implications

The results of this study advance our understanding of how worry about threats in the work environment relate to people's endorsement of potential organizational changes, and how these principles can be applied to research on safety policies. Our study suggests that the introduction of COVID-19 safety policies may be welcomed by workers who are worried about existing workplace threats. COVID-19 represents a salient, existing threat that can be minimized by enacting policies

such as mask-wearing and vaccination requirements. Our findings suggest that workers who worry about mistreatment from guests (threat-related worry) are more likely to endorse these policies to reduce environmental risk via their concern about others' vaccination status (coping-related worry).

Our research is among the first to examine workers' endorsement of potential future safety policies. With some exceptions (e.g., Haas, 2018; Rodell & Colquitt 2009), very few studies in the literatures on organizational change and workplace safety have addressed proactive employee support for safety- and health-promoting policies. In general, the safety literature has focused on employees' perceptions of existing policies, procedures, and practices (i.e., safety climate) rather than feelings about policies that *should* be implemented (Hofmann et al., 2017). Our findings suggest that workers may readily endorse safety policies if they are worried about threat and coping risks in their environment. This effect remains regardless of participants' age or propensity to worry. Rather than studying how employees react and respond to safety policies introduced by leadership, this paper presents a proactive model for examining how workers may think about and seek out policy change to address existing, environmental threats. Our research focuses on the threat of COVID-19, but future researchers may fruitfully examine employees' policy endorsements following a workplace accident, act of violence, or other uncertainty-inducing threat. This may help expand research on safety behavior in the workplace, which has been criticized as being "mono-dimensional, being focused only [...] on the enacting of several extra-role behaviors with implications for workplace safety, without any consideration of the influence of workers' cognition, affect and perception" (Curcuruto et al., 2016, p. 145).

The present study also extends the construct space for mistreatment research. The workplace mistreatment literature has focused on assessing workers' mistreatment experiences in the past or present. Instead, we assessed workers' worries about being mistreated in the future. This construct is most comparable to *fear of future violence*, which describes the negative cognitions and emotions that people experience when they feel that violence could happen at work (Barling, 1996; Rogers & Kelloway, 1997; LeBlanc & Kelloway, 2002; Portoghese et al., 2017), but our study shows that workers can worry about less extreme forms of workplace mistreatment as well. Understanding worry is important because worry reflects a perception of and reaction to a threat, and worry has long-term negative psychological, physiological, and occupational outcomes (Brosschot et al., 2005, 2006). Our study complements the current body of research that addresses cognitive and emotional reactions to past mistreatment experiences (Schilpzand et al., 2016), and makes a strong case for further research examining the causes and consequences of worrying about future mistreatment.

While our study focused on a sample of service workers, the findings of the study might be applied more broadly to the way individuals respond to threats in their work environments. Our findings suggest that, when employees worry about potential future threats, they may gravitate toward workplace changes that mitigate those threats. Further research should be done on workers'

proactive endorsement of policies to mitigate environmental threat, especially threats that come from others (coworkers, guest) in the workplace.

### Practical Implications

For managers seeking to understand how workers might react to policies being discussed for enactment during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, our study suggests that gauging workers' existing worries may be one way to predict support for new policies. Workers who worry about existing workplace stressors, such as guest/customer-instigated mistreatment and others' vaccination status during the COVID-19 pandemic, may be looking to their organization for policies that will protect them from contracting COVID-19 during their interactions. These workers may be more likely to support safety policies mandating mask-wearing and vaccinations.

In the hospitality industry, the responsibility to enforce COVID-19 safety policies (e.g., mask-wearing) has been placed on frontline workers. This responsibility frequently has been reported to result in a variety of negative customer reactions, enhancing job stress and raising concern about whether the organization will support them (especially in an industry that operates with a “the customer is always right” mentality; Gettman & Gelfand, 2007; Northington et al., 2021; Yagil, 2008). Additionally, face-to-face frontline workers have reported a lack of training and clarity on the enforcement of COVID-related policies in the face of customer non-compliance, further limiting the efficacy of such policies and increasing employee uncertainty and stress (Northington et al., 2021). Organizational efforts to mitigate this uncertainty (e.g., reducing managerial inconsistency in messaging and enforcement expectations, training on policy enforcement) may alleviate employees' stress.

### Limitations and Future Research

The findings of this study are most directly generalizable to employees who perform face-to-face work with customers. The leisure and hospitality industry employs roughly 13,450,000 U.S. adults, only 8.8% of whom are able to work from home, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' (BLS, 2019) most recent available data. Only a minority of workers in several other industries (e.g., 14.0% in transportation and utilities, 16.5% in wholesale and retail trade, 25.9% in education and health services) have the ability to work from home (BLS, 2019). For the majority of working Americans, face-to-face interactions with customers are unavoidable, increasing the risk of mistreatment as well as disease exposure. Further, this work answers calls for research on frontline employees (Bergman & Jean, 2016) and, specifically, on how frontline employees are coping with the pandemic and how to best support them

(Voorhees et al., 2020). As we described above, the principles of our findings have implications for research on workplace safety and workplace mistreatment. The aforementioned implications for theory and practice could still be generalized to non-face-to-face and non-customer-facing work circumstances, though more research will be needed to verify generalizability.

In the present study, we do not directly measure the causes of mistreatment worry or vaccination worry. It is possible that some of the effects we found were driven by past mistreatment experiences which could have led us to measure a state of rumination or hyperarousal from a stress-related disorder, rather than sub-clinical worry about a future stressor. Mistreatment experiences from customers have been found to cause stress-related disorders (Harris & Reynolds, 2003), increasing the extent to which affected workers ruminate about the mistreatment events they experienced, experiencing persistent and unwanted intrusions of negative thoughts and memories of what occurred (Baranik et al., 2017; Rafaeli et al., 2012). A state of hyperarousal may also occur similar to what is seen in response to workplace bullying in which the worker constantly allocates a significant amount of energy to anticipating and mitigating future threats due to the unpleasantness of a past mistreatment experience (Chenevert et al., 2022). Experiencing heightened states such as rumination or hyperarousal from past guest mistreatment may potentially make it much more likely that these workers will worry about future mistreatment events, and subsequently, influence the extent to which workers worry about the vaccination status of those around them. Future research should examine guest mistreatment through a more clinical lens to determine how stress-related disorders stemming from past guest mistreatment experiences may influence worry about vaccination and the endorsement of COVID safety policies.

Face-to-face hospitality work during the pandemic increases the risk of COVID-19 exposure because workers are exposed to both coworkers and guests, and COVID-19 is primarily transferred through exhaled respiratory droplets (Avdiu & Nayyar, 2020; WHO, 2020). In the present study, per the labor union's request, we examined specifically the endorsement of COVID-19 safety policies for employees (i.e., mask mandates and vaccination requirements for employees), rather than safety policies for guests. These policies offer one way that workers can control their risk of exposure to COVID-19, but workers may also be more likely to endorse stricter safety policies for guests to the extent that the policies are believed to mitigate risk. More research is needed to test this proposition.

Our research is somewhat limited in that we focus on a single industry and, specifically, on frontline workers who had mostly been recently furloughed or laid off. Future research is needed to examine policy endorsement among non-face-to-face workers, whose concerns may differ. Additionally, our research sample was predominantly Caucasian; future research should explore the possibility that a more diverse sample would experience more worry about customer

mistreatment or be differentially impacted by such worry. Our research necessarily focused on self-report data, as individuals are in the best positions to report their own levels of worry and policy support. Future research might seek to examine behavioral indicators of support (e.g., votes for policies, signed petitions for policies) where available. Research might also examine other predictors of policy support, such as the extent to which one's peers support potential policies.

We acknowledge that there is a limit on the inferences we can make about the temporal precedence of effects because vaccination worry was measured at the same time as policy endorsement. It is possible that the order of these effects is reversed, such that endorsement of policies affect levels of vaccination worry. Our theory suggests that worry would precede endorsement of policies, but future research is required to verify the proposed temporal precedence of the findings. On the other hand, the timing of the study is an asset in some ways. This study considered the policy endorsement of frontline employees *before* any such policies had been announced or implemented by upper-level management. Our focus on frontline employees as proactive agents of the organization addresses an important research gap. Existing organizational change research examines employees' reactions during or after change has been announced, but changes do not take place in a vacuum. As the literature on change readiness shows (Rafferty et al., 2013), employees form opinions about what should happen in the future; they do not merely react to change that is happening or has happened. We encourage researchers to examine how employees anticipate and proactively respond to anticipated future threats. Future researchers could extend our work by examining cognitions and attitudes (e.g., policy endorsements) as well as their relation to eventual behaviors (e.g., constructive voice behavior advocating for policy change). Understanding this bottom-up mechanism for change stands to enrich a literature that typically focuses on top-down initiatives.

## Conclusion

In a sample of frontline theme park employees working during the COVID-19 pandemic, this research demonstrated an indirect link between employees' worry about guest mistreatment and their endorsement of COVID-19 safety policies, through worry about the vaccination status of others in the workplace. This research suggests that companies might expect endorsement of a greater number of safety policies to the extent that workers are worried about existing environmental threats.

## Appendix 1

**Table 3** Summary of study measures

Measure	Response scale	Items
Trait Optimism ( $\alpha=0.90$ )	Strongly disagree-Strongly agree (1–7)	<p>Prompt: <i>Please use the rating scale below to describe how accurately each statement describes you.</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. In uncertain times, I usually expect the best.</li> <li>2. If something can go wrong for me, it will.</li> <li>3. I'm usually optimistic about my future.</li> <li>4. I hardly ever expect things to go my way.</li> <li>5. I rarely count on good things happening to me.</li> <li>6. Overall, I expect more good things to happen to me than bad.</li> </ol>
Trait Neuroticism ( $\alpha=0.80$ )	Very inaccurate-Very accurate (1–5)	<p>Prompt: <i>Please use the rating scale below to describe how accurately each statement describes you.</i></p> <p>Describe yourself as you generally are now, not as you wish to be in the future. Please read each statement carefully, and then mark the answer that corresponds to the number on the scale.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Have frequent mood swings.</li> <li>2. Am relaxed most of the time.</li> <li>3. Get upset easily.</li> <li>4. Seldom feel blue.</li> </ol>
Mistreatment Worry ( $\alpha=0.93$ )	Strongly disagree-Strongly agree (1–7)	<p>Prompt: <i>Please think about your future interactions with customers / guests and rate whether you agree with each statement.</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I worry about people treating me poorly.</li> <li>2. I am concerned about people behaving rudely toward me.</li> <li>3. I feel anxious about how badly I will be treated.</li> <li>4. I feel nervous about people treating me in a condescending way.</li> <li>5. I feel uneasy about getting mistreated at work.</li> </ol>

Table 3 (continued)

Measure	Response scale	Items
Vaccination Worry ( $\alpha = 0.96$ )	Strongly disagree–Strongly agree (1–5)	<p><i>Please think about your future interactions with guests/customers/coworkers as you answer the following questions.</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I worry about whether guests will be vaccinated.</li> <li>2. I feel anxious about whether guests will be vaccinated.</li> <li>3. I worry about whether my coworkers will be vaccinated.</li> <li>4. I feel anxious about whether my coworkers will be vaccinated.</li> </ol>
Endorsement of COVID-19 Safety Policies	No; Yes (0–1)	<p><i>Prompt: These questions ask you to think about potential ways an employer might encourage COVID-19 vaccinations. Please select 'yes' for any and all policies that you would want your employer to offer. In your opinion, should your employer offer...?</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Vaccine Requirement: Employer requires vaccine for all eligible staff.</li> <li>2. COVID-19 Test Requirement: Employer requires those who are not vaccinated to get weekly COVID-19 tests at their own expense.</li> <li>3. Indoor Mask Requirement: Employer requires all non-vaccinated staff to wear masks indoors.</li> <li>4. Mask Requirement: Employer requires all non-vaccinated staff to wear masks indoors and outdoors.</li> </ol>

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## Declarations

**Ethics Approval** This study was reviewed by the University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board. The human subjects research study was determined exempt from regulation in December 2020 under protocol ID “STUDY00002348”.

**Conflicts of interest/Competing Interests** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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