

The Role of Customer Orientation as a Moderator of the Job Demand–Burnout–Performance Relationship: A Surface-Level Trait Perspective

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Abstract

This study expands upon previous research on the antecedents (job demands and job resources) and outcomes of frontline employee burnout, and examines the role of customer orientation (CO) in the burnout process. Using data from frontline bank employees in New Zealand, we investigate both the direct relationships of CO to burnout and job outcomes (job performance and turnover intentions) and the buffering role of CO concerning the relationships between job demands, burnout, and job outcomes. The study results show that burnout mediates the effects of job demands and job resources on job performance and turnover intentions. Besides being directly related to burnout and job performance, CO also buffers the dysfunctional effects of job demands on burnout and job outcomes. Implications of the results are discussed and future research avenues are offered.

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Introduction

Because of their boundary-spanning roles, frontline employees play a crucial role in service delivery and building relationships with customers. They are direct participants in implementing the marketing concept (Brown et al. 2002), and their attitudes and behaviors towards customers determine customers' perceived service quality and satisfaction, which in turn impact organizational performance (Menon and Dubé 2004; Rust, Zahorik, and Keiningham 1996). While meeting discerning customers' service excellence demands on one hand, and management's productivity and performance requirements on the other hand, frontline employees are caught in the middle, though. Not surprisingly, experiencing internal and external

interfaces on a daily basis, frontline employees often suffer from burnout (Arndt, Arnold, and Landry 2006; Singh, Goolsby, and Rhoads 1994) which is a form of psychological strain resulting from chronic work stress.

Burnout is characterized by emotional exhaustion, a tendency to depersonalize others and diminished perceptions of ability on the job (Cordes and Dougherty 1993). It undermines frontline employees' performance and hinders effective customer service (Babakus et al. 1999). Furthermore, employees experiencing burnout often consider leaving their organization (Moore 2000). Because of these, and given that frontline employees are among the most critical elements of a firm's marketing strategy, understanding frontline employee burnout and its consequences is a major concern to marketing scholars and managers (Singh 2000).

Our review of the burnout research reveals two gaps. First, two major categories of job characteristics are often linked to job burnout. These heavily studied job characteristics are job demands (e.g., work overload) and job resources (e.g., supervisory support) (Schaufeli and Bakker 2004). The literature

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suggests that burnout mediates the effects of job characteristics on organizationally valued job outcomes such as job performance and turnover intentions (Halbesleben and Buckley 2004). However, there are competing theoretical views and mixed empirical evidence regarding the nature of mediation as well as the role of job characteristics in the burnout process (Podsakoff, LePine, and LePine 2007; Singh 2000).

Second, our review also shows that individual difference variables such as personality traits (e.g., hardiness, neuroticism, and optimism) may play direct and/or moderator roles in the burnout process (Burisch 2002). Despite this recognition, the current prominent view, however, suggests that burnout primarily results from the characteristics of the work environment where environmental factors overpower individual differences (Moore 2000). The weak role personality variables play in explaining burnout may be attributable to the nature of the basic personality traits used in such studies, which are far removed from the context of the frontline service jobs. Noting this deficit, Brown et al. (2002) forcefully argue that, for better insights, there is a need to shift the focus from basic personality traits to surface-level traits. In this context, an important but heretofore underexamined surface-level personality trait is customer orientation (CO), which refers to “an employee’s tendency or predisposition to meet customer needs in an on-the-job context” (Brown et al. 2002, p. 111). While some evidence exists on the direct influence of CO on such job outcomes as job satisfaction and extra-role job performance (Donavan, Brown, and Mowen 2004), CO’s role in the burnout process has yet to be explored.

Grounded in this backdrop, by drawing from role theory, stress and burnout literatures and the literature examining service behavior, we first develop a parsimonious model and test specific hypotheses regarding the mediating role of burnout between job characteristics (job demands and job resources) and job outcomes (job performance and turnover intentions). Second and more importantly, we incorporate CO into this conceptual model

and test its direct relationships as well as its role as a moderator. Fig. 1 presents the conceptual model guiding our study. As shown in that figure, CO also serves as an antidote to the detrimental effects of job demands on burnout, job performance and turnover intentions in addition to having direct relationships with burnout, job performance and turnover intentions.

Conceptual framework and hypotheses

Burnout theory and empirical evidence

Job demands and job resources occupy central roles in the job burnout process and serve as critical building blocks in the conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll 1989, 2001), which prominently guides research in this area (Halbesleben and Buckley 2004). A fundamental assumption underlying the COR theory is that individuals strive to protect and conserve the things they value (Hobfoll 2001). Those valued ‘things’ constitute resources including objects, personal characteristics, conditions, time or physical and psychological energies as well as job resources such as employer/boss support, rewards and recognition. The theory focuses on one’s resources for understanding psychological stress, defined as a reaction to the actual loss of resources or threat of loss of resources, or failing to gain resources following an investment of resources (Hobfoll 2001). It predicts that sustained psychological stress emanating from any of these paths, even at lower levels of intensity, can lead to burnout.

Two primary perspectives emerge from the literature concerning the nature of the interrelationships among job characteristics, burnout, and job outcomes. One view relies on the *level* or *intensity* of job demands (and lack of job resources) and argues that burnout partially mediates the relationship between job characteristics and job outcomes when job demands are at moderate levels. According to this view, moderate levels of job

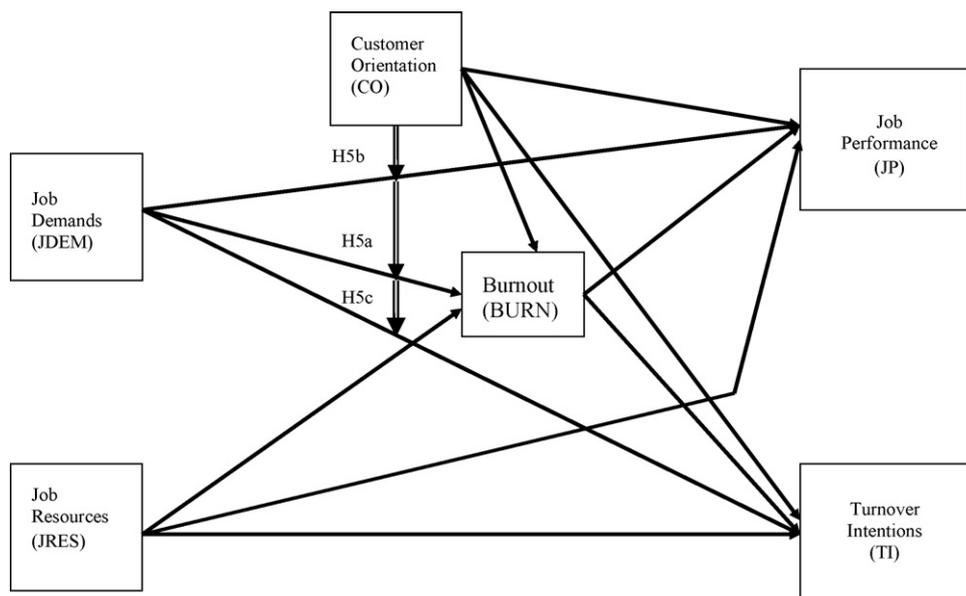


Fig. 1. Research model.

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