



The managed heart: The structural analysis of the stressor–strain relationship and customer orientation among emotional labor workers in Korean hotels

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the structural relationships among three different dimensions of workplace stressors (customer-related stressor, CRS; work environment-related stressor, WERS; job-related stressor, JRS), negative affectivity (NA), emotional exhaustion (EE), and the negative effect of that strain on customer orientation (CO) in the context of the emotional labor (EL) of frontline employees in the hotel industry. Data were collected from self-administrated questionnaires distributed among frontline employees in room and F&B divisions in Korean deluxe tourist hotels, where EL is intense. The results of the structural equation analysis indicated a positive association between all three workplace stressors and NA and between NA and EE. There was also a relationship in the opposite direction with EE and CO, as hypothesized. The moderating effect of organizational level on the workplace stressors–NA relationships was also confirmed. In addition, in an alternative model, we found that NA partially mediates the relationship between JRS and EE; whereas, NA fully mediates the relationships between CRS/WERS and EE. Practical implications are discussed in detail and limitations of the study and future research directions are also suggested.

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1. Introduction

The biggest issue for human resource management (HRM) of organizations is to socialize their frontline employees by shaping and directing their behavior. Most training programs in the hotel industry are geared toward achieving this goal. Pugh's (2001) research revealed that frontline employees can transmit their emotions to customers in a service encounter. Thus, positive emotional displays by frontline employees lead to positive emotive experiences, resulting in higher customer evaluations of service quality. In the hotel industry, service providers' emotional displays are pivotal to successfully creating and delivering a delightful service experience. This is directly linked to a service organization's bottom-line, as suggested by the service-profit chain that links employee attitudes, customer satisfaction, and organizational profits (Babakus et al., 2009). Given that the "performance" of frontline employees is a managerial object, are their emotions also objects of

management? If so, how are frontline employees' emotions managed? This is a particularly critical concern for the hospitality industry due to the inseparability of the end product from those who produce it.

Hochschild (1983) coined the term "emotional labor (EL)," referring to the expression of emotions and creation of feelings as an expected part of work roles. EL requires "face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact with the public, and the workers are required to produce an emotional state in another person and allow the employer to exercise a degree of control over the emotional activities of frontline employees" (Hochschild, 1983, p. 147). In the fiercely competitive industry of full service luxury hotels, the EL expected of frontline employees is intense due to the high expectations of customers and diminishing differences in facilities and amenities among numerous competitors. Therefore, the quality of service transactions in such hotels is often determined by the frontline employees' personal service (Pugh, 2001). This requires a higher standard of emotional display rules for frontline employees.

Hotel management should take a serious look at EL issues from two perspectives that are traditionally distinguished: HRM and marketing. This integrated perspective provides hotel managers with critical insight into how to create customer equity through effective management of their human capital. Given that frontline employees are the most critical element of a hotel marketing strategy, examining the workplace stressor–strain relationship and

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its consequence for hotel employees should be a major concern for scholarly researchers and marketing practitioners alike (Singh, 2000). Frontline employees are direct participants in implementing the marketing concept (Brown et al., 2002), and their attitudes and behaviors toward customers determine customers' perceptions of service quality and satisfaction, which in turn affects organizational performance (Rust et al., 1996). A vast array of empirical evidence exists on the direct influence of emotional exhaustion (EE) on outcomes such as lower job performance (e.g., Cropanzano et al., 2003; Karatepe and Aleshinloye, 2009), lower job satisfaction (e.g., Karatepe, 2006; Karatepe et al., 2009; Mulki et al., 2006), and higher turnover intentions (e.g., Babakus et al., 2008; Cropanzano et al., 2003; Karatepe and Aleshinloye, 2009; Karatepe et al., 2009) in various fields. However, the dysfunctional influence of EE on customer orientation (CO) has been left largely untouched. The paucity of research is due to the fact that EL issues have been treated mainly within the areas of HRM and organizational behavior (OB), but not critically from a marketing perspective. A recent exception to this is a study by Julian (2008) that explored critical managerial/marketing issues related to EL using case studies. It was concluded that CO is a key outcome variable and deserves more attention from both marketing researchers and practitioners alike. Therefore, this study attempts to close the research gap by expanding a stressor–strain model postulating CO as a direct outcome variable. Integrating HRM and marketing in this study allows us to go beyond the negative effects of EL on personal level and examine the structural relationship among workplace stressors, strain outcome, and the effectiveness of hotels in terms of their marketing performance.

Another meaningful contribution of this study is the examination of the effects of an entire array of workplace stressor factors on employees' strain which can take various progressive forms, including emotional, psychological, physical, social, and behavioral outcomes (for the entire facets of strain, see Beehr and Newman, 1978). In numerous studies, diverse stressors have been identified. However, most of these deal with the stress factors sporadically. A multi-disciplinary literature review in such areas as organizational studies, marketing, psychology, and sociology converged into three main domains of workplace stressors that evoke NA in employees and lead to EE in a customer encounter: customer-related stressor (CRS) (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Cordes and Dougherty, 1993; Dormann and Zapf, 2004; Fullerton and Punj, 2004; Grandey et al., 2007; Karatepe et al., 2010), work environment-related stressor (WERS) (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Pugh, 2001; Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987; Sutton and Rafaeli, 1988), and job-related stressor (JRS) (Chen and Spector, 1991; Jamal, 2004; Morris and Feldman, 1996; Ross, 1993). These studies, however, tested their effects separately. We simultaneously tested the entire array of workplace stressor factors in a single model. Accurate information regarding the comparative effects of such factors will allow hotel managers to effectively cope with workplace stressors.

Another important research question we explored is the moderating effect of organizational level (OL) on the workplace stressors–NA relationship. The main purpose of our model specification regarding the moderating role of OL is to provide theoretical and practical implications. The stressor–NA relationship and its outcome must be different across rank and file level (RFL) employees and over supervisory level (OSL) employees. Coping mechanisms and resources used by RFL employees and OSL employees of hotels may not be the same. There seems to be a justification for different treatment and programs designed to alleviate the EL and its negative consequence for the RFL employees and OSL employees separately. This approach is of particular use for managers of the hotel industry. They need to understand how and why a certain stressor intensifies the EL of their employees in order to develop coping strategies and training

programs tailored to employees' needs at different organizational ranks.

The principal objective of this study is to test a theoretical model purported to analyze the structural relationships among key constructs related to EL, including NA and its antecedents (i.e., workplace stressors: CRS, WERS, and JRS), EE, and its dysfunctional effect on CO. The specific objectives of this study are four-fold: (1) to identify and categorize workplace stressors that precede the NA of hotel frontline employees and examine the relative effect of each factor directly related to NA; (2) to examine the structural relationships among NA, EE, and CO; (3) to investigate the moderating role of OL, RFL vs. OSL, on the relationship between workplace stressors and employees' NA; and (4) to examine the mediating role of employees' NA between workplace stressors and EE in an alternative model.

The findings of this study can serve as a theoretical basis for EL research in hotels with respect to the workplace stressor–strain relationship and its consequence from both an HRM and marketing perspectives.

2. Conceptual model and hypotheses

The research model of this study postulated a structural analysis among EL workers' workplace stressors, NA, EE, and CO in hotels, as depicted in Fig. 1. In the marketing literature, stress factors have been sporadically suggested but empirical tests that examine those factors concomitantly have been rare. As mentioned previously, a multi-disciplinary literature review in such areas as organizational studies, marketing, psychology, and sociology, converged into three main domains of workplace stressors that may affect NA in a customer encounter, namely CRS, WERS and JRS. The three workplace stressors were thus incorporated in our research model.

Studies on factors that cause NA are mainly in the fields of psychology and OB. A review of the literature found that these studies converge into two main domains of stressor precursors, overall organizational factors and personal traits. Given that employees' EE is believed to occur most frequently in service encounters (Babakus et al., 2008; Cropanzano et al., 2003; Karatepe and Aleshinloye, 2009; Phillips et al., 2007), identifying factors that influence employees' EE and, ultimately, CO is a potentially fruitful venue for HRM and marketing research integration. This study adopted CO as a direct outcome variable of EE. As suggested by Narver and Slater (1990), in this study CO was measured as how willing hotel frontline employees are to meet customers' needs instead of their own. This exerts a direct effect on service quality.

This study tests hypotheses regarding the moderating effect of OL on the relationship between workplace stressors and NA. Most previous empirical studies did not take individual characteristics, such as an employee's OL, responsibilities, years of employment, or functional areas of work into consideration. However, as an individual's career develops he or she tends to accumulate more formal and informal resources to cope with workplace stressors and reduce consequential strains, such as burnout (Beehr et al., 1990). Thus, OL appears to be a critical factor to examine the moderating effect on the workplace stressor–NA relationship.

2.1. Workplace stressors and negative affectivity

Affectivity refers to a general tendency to experience a particular mood or react to objects in a particular way or with certain emotions (Lazarus, 1993). Although there are similar terms like emotions and moods, affectivity is considered a general category of mental feeling processes, including emotions, moods, and attitudes (Bagozzi et al., 1999). The two theoretically and empirically distinctive dispositional personality variables are positive

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