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## Testing the stressor–strain–outcome model of customer-related social stressors in predicting emotional exhaustion, customer orientation and service recovery performance

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### ABSTRACT

The integrated perspective of human resource management (HRM) and service marketing (SM) on the emotional labor issue provides company managers with critical insight into how to create customer equity through effective management of their human capital. The objective of this study is to investigate the structural relationships among customer-related social stressors (CSSs) as job stressors, emotional exhaustion (EE) as a job strain, and both customer orientation (CO) and service recovery performance (SRP) as job outcomes using data from 1014 frontline service providers (tour guides, frontline tourist hotel employees and frontline tourist restaurant employees) employed in the three major sectors (travel agency, tourist hotel and tourist restaurant) of the Korean tourism industry. Specifically, this study incorporates HRM issues (CSSs and EE) and SM concerns (CO and SRP) into a single model using Koeske and Koeske's (1993) stressor–strain–outcome framework, which is useful for understanding the work–stress process. This study uses a structural equation modeling to investigate the research model and hypotheses. Results showed that CSSs (ambiguous customer expectations, disliked customers, and customer verbal aggression, with the exception of disproportionate customer expectations) significantly and positively influence EE. EE then significantly and negatively influences CO and SRP. In particular, the effect of customer verbal aggression on EE is stronger than the effects of ambiguous customer expectations and disliked customers. The results also showed that CO has a highly influential positive effect on SRP. The study concludes with a discussion of the empirical findings, theoretical contributions, managerial implications, and suggestions for future research.

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### 1. Introduction

Human resource management (HRM) and service marketing (SM) are the two traditionally dominant perspectives used to explore emotional labor issues in hospitality and tourism management. Integrating these two perspectives can provide critical managerial insights into customer equity creation and effective human capital management (Lee et al., 2012). Because of their role flexibility, frontline service providers play a crucial role in service delivery and customer-relationship building. They directly participate in implementing the marketing concept (Brown et al., 2002), and their attitudes and behaviors toward customers determine

customers' perceived service quality and satisfaction, which in turn impacts organizational performance (Rust et al., 1996). However, frontline employees' emotional exhaustion (EE), which refers to the lack of energy and emotional fatigue caused by excessive psychological demands (Van Dierendonck and Mevissen, 2002) weakens their job performance (Halbesleben and Bowler, 2007; Wright and Bonett, 1997; Wright and Cropanzano, 1998) and hinders effective customer service (Babakus et al., 1999; Karatepe et al., 2009). Therefore, effectively managing EE is a critical issue to both academics and practitioners. Given that frontline employees are vital for successful functioning of hospitality and tourism firms, understanding frontline employees' EE as well as its antecedents and consequences is a crucial research and managerial agenda in HRM and SM fields (Singh, 2000).

Frontline service employees' frequent intense face-to-face or voice-to-voice interactions with customers are a salient characteristic of the service process. However, the service process does not require customers to be courteous or respectful. Consequently, frontline service providers are expected to serve customers who are rude, arrogant, and hostile (Zapf, 2002). For example, Harris and

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Reynolds (2004) found that 70% of hospitality customers admitted to have intentionally and verbally abused frontline employees for financial gains. “The customer is king” or “the customer is always right” philosophy results in an unequal power mechanism between service employees and customers, requiring employees “to serve customers with a smile” even in the event of verbal aggression from the customer (Chu and Murrmann, 2006). This implicit imbalance in the exchange forces employees to suppress their true emotion and allows customers more freedom to express anger (Rafaeli et al., 2006). Dysfunctional customer behaviors are largely outside the realm of the service firm’s control and are likely to have a substantial impact on service providers’ EE (Dormann and Zapf, 2004).

EE plays a critical role in SM as frontline service employees are required to display positive emotions toward customers during performance delivery (Mattila and Enz, 2002). As such, employees’ EE as well as its antecedents and consequences have received considerable attention in the service and hospitality management literature. However, a number of the studies have focused on task-related antecedents and consequences rather than customer-related factors. For example, as antecedents of EE, experts from various fields have studied situational and task-related factors including dissatisfied physical and social environments and job demands (role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload) (e.g., Babakus et al., 2009; Grandey et al., 2004; Karatepe, 2010), while task-related outcomes such as decreased job performance, lower job satisfaction, lower work engagement, and increased turnover and turnover intention have been studied as consequences of EE (e.g., Karatepe et al., 2009; Karatepe, 2010, 2011a,b; Koeske and Koeske, 1993). However, customer-related factors should be emphasized. In a service firm, not only employees but also customers are key participants in creating service performance and further enhancing or detracting from customers’ own satisfaction on the service value they attain (Bitner et al., 1997). Since frontline service employees have intense direct interactions with customers during the service process and customers themselves greatly affect and participate in the service delivery and determine service quality (Song and Liu, 2010), how customers play in the service process determines job performance and assessment as well. Therefore, customer-related antecedents and consequences of frontline service employees’ EE should be highlighted in the service and hospitality management literature.

This study focuses on customer-related rather than task-related factors, for examining the antecedents and consequences of frontline service providers’ EE. Here, the antecedents consist of customer-related social stressors (CSSs), while consequences comprise customer orientation (CO; individual level) and service recovery performance (SRP). The premise that frontline employees’ EE is caused by customers offers an important research perspective to investigate how EE affects CO and SRP, which are integral to high-quality service, customer satisfaction management, and enhanced competitive advantages of hospitality and tourism firms (Boshoff and Allen, 2000; Brown et al., 2002). Service failures, which are inevitable because of the high “people factor” in the service and hospitality business (Susskind, 2002), result in customer dissatisfaction with the service provider and, possibly, customer complaints. However, complaints resolved effectively can restore customer satisfaction, reinforce positive word-of-mouth advertising, improve customer trust and commitment, forge customer relationships, increase purchasing from the customer, decrease acquisition expenses, and eventually ensure customer patronage (Blodgett et al., 1997; Kim et al., 2009; Tax et al., 1998; Wirtz and Mattila, 2004). In particular, frontline service providers’ customer-oriented tendency or predisposition to meet customer needs is important for effective SRP especially in the event of a service

failure. Despite this recognition, however, the dysfunctional influences of EE on CO and SRP, and the intensifying effect of individual-level CO on SRP have been largely unexplored. The paucity of research is due to the fact that emotional labor issues have been studied mainly within the context of HRM and organizational behavior, but not critically from a SM perspective. A recent exception to this is a study by Julian (2008) that explored critical managerial and marketing issues related to emotional labor. Also, Karatepe et al. (2009) demonstrated that EE is a significant negative predictor of SRP among frontline hotel employees in Northern Cyprus. In addition, Lee et al. (2012) revealed that EE has a significant negative impact on CO among frontline hotel employees in Korea. Thus, CO and SRP have been identified as key outcome variables that deserve more attention from SM researchers and practitioners alike.

Against this backdrop, the purpose of the current study is to test a theoretical model purported to analyze the structural relationships among CSSs, EE, CO, and SRP of frontline service providers in tourism companies using Koeske and Koeske’s (1993) stressor–strain–outcome (SSO) framework, which is a useful tool for understanding the work–stress process. Based on a survey of 1014 frontline service employees (tour guides, frontline tourist hotel employees and frontline tourist restaurant employees) across three major sectors (travel agency, tourist hotel and tourist restaurant) of the Korean tourism industry, this study uses a structural equation modeling (SEM) to investigate the research model and hypotheses. Very recently, in Korea, many reports have highlighted the emotional labor problems of service workers having to deal with unreasonable customer demands. Customers’ expectation of a service seems to be excessively biased in Korea, under the strong influence of rapid changes in economic structure and the shift toward service-related industries from manufacturing-related industries in all major business sectors (Hankook-ilbo, 2011a). Integrating HRM and SM perspectives, this study attempts to go beyond the negative effects of emotional labor at a personal level and examine the structural relationships among job stressors, strain, and outcomes as well as the effectiveness of tourism companies in terms of their SM performance.

## 2. Conceptual model and hypotheses

### 2.1. Conceptual model

The relationships to be tested in the present study are depicted in Fig. 1. Koeske and Koeske (1993) designed the SSO paradigm to illustrate the work–stress process. The current study hypothesized an SSO framework (Koeske and Koeske, 1993) with CSSs as job stressors, EE as a job strain, and CO and SRP as job outcome variables. On the basis of the extant literature, when applying this model, we posit that frontline service providers’ job stressors—as represented by CSSs—heighten their job strain (EE), which in turn, reduces their job outcomes such as CO and SRP. We also suggest that frontline service providers’ CO at the individual level triggers their SRP. We incorporate HRM issues (CSSs and EE) and SM concerns (CO and SRP), prevalent in hospitality and tourism companies, into a single model. Given that EE has been suggested to occur most frequently among frontline service employees engaging in service encounters (Babakus et al., 2009; Dormann and Zapf, 2004), the identification of the factors having a significant impact on EE, CO, and SRP would serve as a stepping stone for integrating HRM and SM disciplines. This study considers CO and SRP as direct outcome variables of EE as they exert a direct influence on customers’ perceived service quality. In the next section, we derive specific hypotheses with respect to the linkages among the study variables.

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