

# Exploring the relationship between employee creativity and job-related motivators in the Hong Kong hotel industry

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## Abstract

The purpose of this research is to determine if there is any relationship between employee creativity and job-related motivators, using a case study of hotel employees in Hong Kong. From a sample of 983 employees, canonical correlation indicated there is a relationship between creativity and job-related motivators. Furthermore, the risk-taking dimension under creativity was found to be more correlated to the intrinsic job-related motivators. Intrinsic job-related motivators which include opportunity for advancement and development, loyalty to employees, appreciation and praise of work done, feelings of being involved, sympathetic help with personal problems and interesting work, are found to encourage the hotel employees' risk-taking behavior. A "See-Saw" model is presented to show the relationship between the two opposing sides: intrinsic motivators and extrinsic motivators versus creativity and risk-taking factors.

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## 1. Introduction

Hong Kong is world-renowned for its first class hotels with high service orientation (Kivela and Go, 1996). With the increased global competition and a focus on quality products and excellence in service, there is a need for hotels to be innovative in their approach to improving service delivery. Based on the assumption that motivated staff will provide higher levels of customer care, developing employee creativity is seen as a possible way forward for motivating employees in the industry. The assumption is that a creative person should be self-motivated to work hard if his/her expected motivators (intrinsic or extrinsic) are satisfied.

Creativity emerged as an area of research in the 1950s with the seminal work of Guilford (1950), with further significant research developments taking place from 1990 onwards. Issues such as investigating the relationship

between motivation, gender, educational background and creative outputs were explored. This placed creativity research firmly in the field of Psychology and the Arts (Sternberg and Lubart, 1999) as quoted in Sternberg (1999). The importance of studying creativity and its relationship to other factors receives attention from many scholars.

One primary reason for the lack of research into creativity in the hospitality industry is that creativity is usually associated with artistic industries such as film making, drama, painting, music composing, fiction writing, poetry, etc. Historically, hospitality was simply concerned with providing accommodation and food for travelers. Emphasis was placed on the operational routine work of how hotels satisfy travelers for accommodation and food needs. However, the research conducted by Wong and Pang (2003a,b) indicates that creative ideas generate business benefits to the hotel industry, and increasingly hospitality is seen as more than fulfilling basic needs and focuses on the wider customer experience.

A further dimension to creativity research relates to culture. Taking Hofstede's (1980) four cross cultural dimensions, the Chinese culture is named as collectivism,

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high power distance, strong uncertainty avoidance and medium masculinity. In the Western context, previous research has been conducted to discover individuals' creativity (Amabile, 1985). However, recently, the study of creativity has been applied within oriental cultures (Lau et al., 2004a). Lau et al. (2004b) summarize the study of creativity in the East and West into areas: (1) culture and its influence in creativity; (2) education and development about creativity; and (3) creativity in practice. Rudowicz (2004) studies creativity among Chinese people and Leung et al. (2004) compare creativity and innovation between east and western societies. Puccio and Gonzalez (2004) investigate how to nurture creative thinking using western approaches with the concerns on eastern issues. Cheng (2004) discusses how to progress from the traditional concept in creativity education within the Chinese society.

To expand further research into creativity, the research objectives for this paper are: to explore the creativity levels of HK hotel employees in terms of the risk taking and creativity dimensions, to ascertain the importance of intrinsic versus extrinsic job motivators, and to test for a relationship between creativity and job-related motivators in broad terms and by different job levels. Finally, the research comments on the relevance of creativity in the Chinese cultural setting.

This study will be useful to the local hotel industry by contributing towards what managers understand regarding the motivations of hotel employees, and hence to consider human resources strategies that help to retain quality staff. In addition, there is presently a research gap regarding the role of motivation in the creative process. Creativity has been widely researched from many different perspectives and angles and the present research aims to advance the understanding of the relationship between the hotel employee creativity level and job-related motivators.

## 2. Creativity and motivation

The subject areas of both creativity and motivation provide a wealth of research in their own right. However, the aspect that is specifically relevant for this research is the *relationship* between creativity and motivation. Much of the previous research focuses on the relationship by exploring both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators (EM).

The componential model of creativity (Amabile, 1983a, 1996a) suggested three separate components of creativity: domain-relevant skills, creativity-relevant processes, and intrinsic task motivation. Collins and Amabile (1999) argued that these components should be interactive with each other instead of considering each one alone. As suggested by Amabile (1983a, 1996a), creativity will be highest in the area where three components share their greatest overlap. In other words, people should be more creative within their "creativity intersection." Identification of this intersection is crucial in enhancing creativity. Yet, individual differences because of personality and cultural differences make this "intersection" subject to variation.

Amabile (1996b) suggested four balance factors to manage creativity in organizations; and these are: (1) goal-setting—loose vs. tight control on overall goal set; (2) evaluation—frequent, work-focused evaluation and feedback; (3) reward—creativity will be fostered when employees know that reward and recognition will follow from creative efforts; (4) pressure—realistic sense of urgency and suitable competitive pressure may be good for creativity. Florida and Goodnight (2005) illustrate the three successful strategies adopted by the Statistical Analysis System (SAS Institute) in America for maximizing creativity. SAS, being the largest privately held software company, developed three strategies: (1) help employees to do their best work—provide mental stimulation while eliminate distraction; (2) make all managers responsible for sparking creativity—ensure all managers to have hands-on work and allow mistakes; and (3) engage customers as creative partners—acts on customer complaints and suggestions. These strategies have resulted in SAS achieving an employee turnover rate between 3% and 5%, and it achieved a 98% subscription renewal rate, plus 28 straight years of revenue growth. Creativity assists economic growth, and Florida (2004) urged the need to keep the creative capital—creative thinkers whose ideas can turn into valuable products and services, and finally benefit and defend the country's economy.

Previous studies exploring the link between motivation and creativity identified the relevance of intrinsic motivation (IM) (Amabile, 1983a), the need for order (Barron, 1988), the need for achievement (McClelland, 1962), and other motives. According to Hennessy and Amabile (1988, p. 13), the definition of intrinsic and EM are: "persons who engage in activities because of their own interest or personal sense of satisfaction and fulfilment are intrinsically motivated, whereas persons who engage in activities to achieve some goal external to task engagement are extrinsically motivated." Intrinsic rewards such as achievement of one's potential have often been viewed as most important to creators (Hennessy and Amabile, 1988; Amabile, 1983a). People who perform a task for an extrinsic reward are found to be less creative than others who receive no reward (Amabile et al., 1986). This echoes an earlier study conducted by Amabile (1985) that extrinsic goals such as money and job advancement, on the contrary, induced writers to produce less creative poems than the control group who were the creative writers.

Contemporary models of intrinsic and EM have been developed over time. For example, Sternberg and Lubart's (1991) developed a concept of the importance of task-focused motivation for creativity (supported by Amabile, 1985 and Amabile et al., 1986). Sternberg (1999) discovered the relationship between high level creativity and the individual's personal involvement, and searched for IM and skills in hiring personnel. Amabile (1988) explored personnel to tasks, discovering that social factors in the work environment can influence intrinsic and EM and as a consequence, this can also influence creativity.

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