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Hospitality service climate, employee service orientation, career aspiration and performance: A moderated mediation model

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ABSTRACT

This study tested a moderated mediation model involving hospitality employees' service climate perception, service orientation, career aspiration and service performance. Using a sample of 500 front-line service employees in ten restaurants of a hospitality chain company in China, the study found that employees' service orientation partially mediated the relationship between service climate and self-reported/supervisor-reported service performance. Furthermore, career aspiration moderated the mediation effect of service orientation between service climate and self-reported service performance. However, such a moderating effect was not confirmed when service performance was measured by supervisors' ratings. The study highlights the importance of employees' service orientation and career aspiration in hospitality human resource management practices.

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1. Introduction

For hospitality service businesses, sustaining satisfactory service performance of frontline service employees is key to customer satisfaction and repeat patronage (Liao and Chuang, 2004). Frontline service employees are those who “deal with customers across the service delivery process” (Coelho and Augusto, 2010: p429) and have “direct contact with customers” (Yoo et al., 2006: p497). A wealth of studies have examined the determinants of frontline employee service performance (for example, Liao and Chuang, 2004; Chen et al., 2014; Tsai et al., 2015; Wang, 2016; Wu and Chen, 2015). Service climate is identified as one of the most important antecedents of service performance in service management research (see two most recent reviews by Bowen and Schneider, 2014; Hong et al., 2013). Service climate can be defined as employees' perceptions of an organization's focused policies, practices and procedures concerning service quality as well as employees' perceptions of the types of service behaviors that will be expected, supported and rewarded (Schneider et al., 1998).

In many service contexts, service climate was found to affect employee outcomes such as employee service performance (Liao and Chuang, 2004, 2007; Salanova et al., 2005; Schneider et al.,

1998) and organizational citizenship behaviors (Chuang and Liao, 2010; Schneider et al., 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2010); customer outcomes like customer reported service quality, customer satisfaction, loyalty (Ehrhart et al., 2011; Salanova et al., 2005); as well as corporate financial and market outcomes such as corporate market value (Schneider et al., 2009) and financial performance (Borucki and Burke, 1999). In particular, in the hospitality management context, researchers have found that service climate plays a significant role in affecting employee satisfaction, service quality and customer satisfaction (Chathoth et al., 2007; He et al., 2011; Kralj and Solnet, 2010; Solnet and Paulsen, 2005).

Given the abundant evidence of the direct causal link between service climate and employees' service performance (e.g., Liao and Chuang, 2004; Salanova et al., 2005), a further question is, how does this relationship occur? However, there is little research to examine how hospitality employees' service climate perceptions influence their behavioral outcomes (i.e., performance). Specifically, we need a deeper understanding of the psychological or attitudinal dynamics underlying the relationship between service climate and employee performance. As a matter of fact, Kralj and Solnet (2010) found that in a casino hotel, service climate dimensions that best predicted customer satisfaction differed significantly between casino employees and non-casino employees. In a hospitality service context, Michel et al. (2013) found that self-efficacy as an individual level psychological construct, played a full mediation role between service climate and employee service performance. These studies suggest that the relationship between

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service climate and service employees' performance is worth further examination in the hospitality management literature.

As service climate reflects employees' perceptions of how service quality is valued and prioritized by the management, it is reasonable to stipulate that service climate perceptions affect how employees value service quality, which can be conceptualized as service orientation. Service orientation is an individual "disposition to be helpful, thoughtful, considerate, and cooperative" to customers (Hogan et al., 1984, p.167), featured by a genuine desire to provide high-quality customer service. According to the social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), an individual learns to form his/her own personal dispositions through the observation of rewards and punishments in a social context. Based on this theory, a service employee's service orientation as an individual disposition can be reinforced through observing, perceiving and modeling the organizationally expected and rewarded service behaviors. Service orientation has been found to affect employee outcomes such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, as well as both self- and supervisor-rated service performance (Brown et al., 2002; Kim et al., 2005).

In the hospitality management context, service orientation was regarded to be "crucial to the success of the hospitality industry" (Pizam, 2012, p.1). However, according to Pizam (2012), it is also an illusive construct which needs clearer conceptualization and operationalization. Existing studies in the field have made some attempts to identify some determinants of hospitality employees' service orientation such as job involvement (Dienhart et al., 1992) and length of service (Kim et al., 2003), and also examined the effects of service orientation on customer perceived outcomes like service quality, satisfaction and loyalty from a marketing perspective (e.g., Kim, 2011; Kim et al., 2005). As pointed out by Chiang and Birtch (2011), existing studies on service orientation focused on its consequences; however, to date the literature has offered very little empirical examination on how service orientation is developed.

The hospitality industry has been characterized with high turnover rates. Despite being a significant service industry, the hospitality sector is constantly confronted with a workforce lacking of intention to pursue a lifelong career in this sector (Jenkins, 2001). From a human resource management (HRM) perspective, career studies that offer an understanding of human motivation to pursue a hospitality career seem to be important to the hospitality sector. However, in the hospitality literature there is a very limited number of career studies (e.g., Barron, 2008; Jauhari, 2006; Jenkins, 2001; Maxwell et al., 2010; Ng and Pine, 2003) and these studies tend to focus on the job-seeker's or job incumbent's perspective. Little research has been conducted to juxtapose career aspiration with management concerns such as improving service performance in the workplace. Career aspiration, defined as the value a person attributes to having a career in a specific sector (Gray and O'Brien, 2007), is an important personal motivation factor that may well interact with perceptual and attitudinal constructs like service climate and service orientation to influence performance. According to Lent et al. (1994), career aspiration functions as an essential goal-oriented mechanism and thus can be self-motivating to regulate an individual's workplace behaviors. If an individual is not seeing a career prospect and is not aspired for a career in the hospitality sector, the effect of service climate on his or her service orientation and the effect of service orientation on his or her service performance may be greatly discounted. Therefore, it is important to see how career aspiration can possibly moderate the relationship between service climate and employee performance.

In light of the research gaps addressed above, the current study aims to bring together four closely related concepts, namely, service climate, service orientation, career aspiration and service performance and test the structural relations among these constructs. Based on literature review, a moderated mediation model was

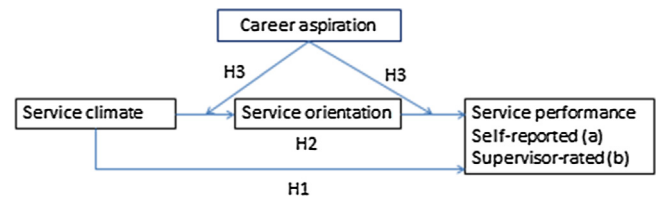


Fig. 1. Theoretical framework.

proposed and tested (see Fig. 1). It was postulated that service orientation mediates the relationship between service climate and service performance; furthermore, this mediation effect will be moderated by the levels of career aspiration in that high level of career aspiration will magnify the mediation effect of service orientation on the relationship between service climate and service performance.

Our study contributes to the hospitality and service management literature in three ways. First, we follow recent calls for studies on antecedents of service orientation (e.g., Chiang and Birtch, 2011; Grizzle et al., 2009; Popli and Rizvi, 2015), with the aim of providing empirical support to uncover factors that shape employees' service orientation. Second, we investigate the attitudinal mechanism that explains how employees' perceptions of service climate in their organizations enhance employees' service performance by exploring the mediation effect of service orientation. In doing this, we clearly distinguish service-oriented organizations and service-oriented employees and explore the link between the two, as suggested by Pizam (2012). Lastly, we bring career research into the hospitality and service management context by providing a better understanding of how career aspiration functions in leveraging service performance in the hospitality sector.

2. Literature review and hypotheses development

2.1. Service climate

As the world economy has seen the services sectors continuously increasing their share in different countries, studies on service provision and consumers' service consumption behavior also proliferate (Hong et al., 2013). Service climate is a widely applied concept in the service management literature (Bowen and Schneider, 2014; Hong et al., 2013). An organization's climate can be understood as employees' perceptions about what is valued in the organization, acquired through their personal experiences within the organization (Schneider and Bowen, 1995). Service climate is believed to play a pivotal role in the service management process. The characteristics of intangibility, inseparability, and customer co-creation in services consumption make it almost impossible for service companies to assess, monitor and control the service delivery process (Schneider et al., 2000). Compared to firms that manage on selling tangible products, service companies need to foster a strong service climate which guides employees' attitudes and behaviors in the service delivery process. Therefore, service climate serves to create a link between the company's internal resources and capabilities and its external clientele and customer base (Schneider et al., 1998).

A variety of antecedents have been identified to influence service climate such as leadership, HRM practices, organizational support in operations, marketing and IT (Bowen and Schneider, 2014). On the other hand, consequences and outcomes of service climate include employee attitude, job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behavior, service performance, customer satisfaction and firm performance (Hong et al., 2013). The literature also shows that there are moderators of the effects of service climate on its

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