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Extending the challenge–hindrance stressor framework: The role of psychological capital

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ABSTRACT

Although the challenge–hindrance stressor model has received considerable attention in recent years, individual differences have seldom been incorporated. With data collected from 232 hotel employees in South Korea, this study conducted hierarchical regression analyses to detect the critical role of employees' psychological capital as a moderator in the challenge–hindrance stressor model. We found that employees' psychological capital buffers the negative impacts of both challenge and hindrance stressors on job burnout. Additionally, we found that for employees high in psychological capital, work engagement increases or remains the same throughout the progression of challenge stressors while for employees low in psychological capital, work engagement decreases. No moderating effect of psychological capital was found in the relationship between hindrance stressors and work engagement. Theoretical and practical implications are provided based on the findings of this study.

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1. Introduction

Human resources are undoubtedly one of the most important assets for the hospitality industry (Tracey and Nathan, 2002). The success of a hospitality organization is heavily dependent on employees who have close contact with customers around the clock and deal with customer complaints in a professional manner (Chan and Wan, 2012). However, long working hours, low pay, and stress from difficult customers are domineering causes of occupational stress even for those who are trained for customer service, leading to a high turnover rate in the hospitality industry (Pavesic and Brymer, 1990). Hospitality researchers have thus increased their efforts to investigate employee burnout and its consequences (Kim et al., 2007; Lee and Ok, 2012; Karatepe and Uludag, 2008; Pienaar and Willemse, 2008).

The association between employee burnout and job characteristics has been an enduring central topic among occupational stress scholars. The classical stress frameworks, including the job demands–control model (e.g., Karasek, 1979; Van der Doef and Maes, 1999; Demerouti et al., 2001a) and the job demands–resources model (e.g., Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004; Demerouti et al., 2001b; Schaufeli et al., 2009; Blau, 1981; Sargent and Terry, 1998), fundamentally postulate that job demands increase employee job strain and decrease employee work engagement (Crawford et al., 2010). However, inconsistent results regarding the relationship between job demands and engagement prompted the latest challenge–hindrance stressor model (Crawford et al., 2010). The model presents that although all demands are stressful, certain job demands—classified challenge stressors—lead to an increase in employee work engagement while the remaining job demands—titled hindrance stressors—lead to a decrease in work engagement (LePine et al., 2005). Cavanaugh et al. (2000) contend that what boosts engagement is not the extent of demands but the types of demands, emphasizing the importance of job characteristics themselves. However, this raises an important, unaddressed question: What if employees fail to perceive challenge stressors as challenging?

It is individuals that judge the environment either challenging or threatening (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Podsakoff et al., 2007). When stressors are perceived as challenging by individual workers, the stressors can create positive outcomes; if the same stressors are perceived as threatening, negative outcomes may occur. In general, there is a paucity of knowledge about the role of an appraisal that different individuals may give the situation in the challenge–hindrance stressor model. This is surprising given that the theoretical scheme of the challenge–hindrance stressor model aligns with transactional theory in which appraisal of the situation is essential (Webster et al., 2011).

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Individual characteristics have appeared in the hospitality stress or wellbeing related literature in the past few years: neuroticism (Young and Corsun, 2009), Big Five (Kim et al., 2009), HEXACO personality (Sohn and Lee, 2012), and emotional intelligence (Kim and Agrusa, 2011; Langhorn, 2004), to name a few. These traits are well documented as influential variables for job outcomes such as burnout, engagement, and coping styles, indicating that stable personality traits can make a difference in responding to a demanding work environment. More recently, unlike long-lasting trait personality, state personality that is more open to development has gained much attention as a means of understanding individual stress variation. Psychological capital, first introduced by Luthans et al. (2004), is a good example. Psychological capital refers to a positive psychological state of development and has shown relationships with individuals' work behavior and wellbeing (e.g., Avey et al., 2009). Similar to the challenge–hindrance stressor model, psychological capital is a very young concept that requires more rigorous research to appreciate its value in the workplace.

To fill the gap in the challenge–hindrance stressor model, we introduced psychological capital as a feasible individual characteristic that may influence the dynamics of the relationship between challenge–hindrance stressors and job outcome variables. Specifically, this study aims to test the moderating role of psychological capital in the relationship between challenge–hindrance stressors and two fundamental work outcomes, burnout and engagement, with a sample of hotel employees in South Korea.

As argued by previous researchers (e.g., Johns, 2006), theoretical models should be tested not only across different industries but also across different contexts within the same industry. For instance, hospitality employees in popular tourism destinations may have more opportunities for career advancement than those in non-tourism cities. In such a situation, challenge stressors such as job responsibilities could motivate hospitality employees to work harder with a potential promotion in mind. In this study, data were collected from South Korea, where tourism is not a major industry with relatively limited work opportunities for hospitality employees. This unique contextual factor could increase the complexity of the interactive link between two categories of stressors and the individual characteristic of psychological capital, and perhaps provide a more stringent setting to clearly demonstrate how individuals high in psychological capital react to job stressors in the workplace (despite the fact that opportunities are scarce). The data of this study are therefore effective to deepen our understanding of the role of psychological capital in employee burnout or engagement and help extend the body of knowledge in the hospitality burnout literature. Likewise, the findings of this study benefit hospitality practitioners who strive to combat employee burnout. The following section presents detailed literature and study hypotheses.

2. Literature review

2.1. Burnout, engagement, and job demands/resources

Job burnout, defined as psychological and physical responses to occupational stressors, includes three sub-dimensions: (1) exhaustion (reduced energy), (2) cynicism (indifference or a distant attitude toward work), and (3) diminished professional efficacy (decrease in occupational accomplishment). Burnout negatively influences job performance, job satisfaction, and individual well-being, including physical and mental health (Kim et al., 2009; Lee and Ok, 2012). *Work engagement* is referred to as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind, characterized by three sub-dimensions: (1) vigor (high energy), (2) dedication (inspiration and pride in one's work), and (3) absorption (full concentration on one's work) (Langelaan et al., 2006). The first two of three burnout components (exhaustion and cynicism) are considered as core dimensions of burnout (González-Romá et al., 2006); likewise, the first two of three engagement elements (vigor and dedication), which are direct antitheses of the two core dimensions of burnout, are regarded as key facets of engagement (González-Romá et al., 2006). Although burnout and engagement are conceptual opposites, they are two independent states of mind requiring different scales to assess (González-Romá et al., 2006; Langelaan et al., 2006).

The *job demands–resources* model suggests that every occupation has characteristics that may fall into either job demands or job resources (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). Job demands pertain to the aspects that require continuous mental or physical efforts (e.g., physical demands, workload, and time pressure). Job resources relate to the aspects that facilitate work goals and personal growth (e.g., participation in decision making, job control, and social support at work). According to the job demands–resources model, two distinct psychological processes (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004) best explain causal paths from demands/resources to burnout/engagement. First, job demands harm employees through an energy depletion process. Employees increase efforts to meet demands and, in turn, the efforts induce mental and physical costs, eventually draining employees' energy; they feel exhausted—burned out. Second, through the motivational process whereby resources are perceived as means of achieving work goals and personal growth, employees are more vigorously engaged in their work. In addition, although the theoretical foundation is not clear-cut, ample empirical evidence suggests a significant negative link between resources and burnout (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). In general, weak or no relationships have been reported between demands and work engagement (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). This traditional finding on demands and work engagement has been disputed with a rise of the challenge–hindrance stressor model (Crawford et al., 2010).

2.2. Challenge–hindrance stressor model and beyond

In recent years, a new perspective on job demands has developed. Drawing upon the transactional theory that people appraise stressful situations as either challenging or threatening, Cavanaugh et al. (2000) introduced two dimensional job demands: challenge stressors and hindrance-stressors. The main assertion is straightforward. There exist positive demands (i.e., challenge stressors) and negative demands (i.e., hindrance-stressors). Challenge stressors include time pressure, workload, and job responsibility. People appraise these demands as potentially beneficial for personal growth and future gains, thus these demands create desirable outcomes. Hindrance stressors include workplace politics, hassles, and role conflict and are typically appraised as demands that discourage individuals from achieving goals, thus these demands produce undesirable outcomes.

Empirical findings on the associations between the two types of stressors and outcome variables have generally supported the challenge–hindrance stressor model. Challenge stressors are found to be negatively related to turnover intention and job withdrawal and positively related to performance, motivation, loyalty, and job satisfaction while hindrance stressors show the contrasting directional relationships with the aforesaid dependent variables (Crawford et al., 2010; LePine et al., 2004). A similar pattern between the two dimensional stressors and engagement and burnout may be conjectured. Given the notion that challenge stressors are constructive, they are likely to have positive associations with engagement and negative associations with burnout; for the destructive hindrance stressors, the opposite directional links are expected. By and large, challenge and hindrance stressors have shown relationships with work engagement as expected (Crawford et al., 2010).