



The effects of perceived crowding, emotional dissonance, and emotional exhaustion on critical job outcomes: A study of ground staff in the airline industry



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ABSTRACT

Using Conservation of Resources (COR) theory and Stressor–Strain–Outcome (SSO) model as the theoretical underpinnings, this study proposes and tests a research model that examines emotional exhaustion as a mediator of the impact of emotional dissonance on service recovery performance, turnover intentions, and absenteeism. The model also investigates the mediating role of emotional dissonance in the relationship between perceived crowding and emotional exhaustion. Data obtained from ground staff in the low cost airline industry in Turkey were used to gauge these relationships. The results from structural equation modeling suggest that passenger crowding as perceived by ground staff results in emotional dissonance that in turn heightens emotional exhaustion. The results further suggest that emotional exhaustion fully mediates the effect of emotional dissonance on turnover intentions and absenteeism. Interestingly, the results suggest that the impact of emotional dissonance on service recovery performance, mediated by emotional exhaustion, is positive. Theoretical and management implications based on the aforesaid findings are discussed in the paper.

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1. Introduction

In today's turbulent business environment, airline companies face stiffening competition and are beset with problems arising from economic fluctuations and increases in jet fuel prices (Low and Lee, 2014). Despite such problems, they continuously try to retain a pool of satisfied and loyal passengers through successful in-flight service delivery and complaint-handling processes. This is not surprising, because delivery of service quality and service recovery efforts contribute to customer satisfaction and loyalty in the service industries (e.g., Whiting et al., 2011), and the airline industry is no exception (Chen and Chang, 2005; Hvass and Torfadóttir, 2014).

Due to their interactions with passengers, ground staff members of airline companies are also considered frontline employees and play a salient role in service delivery and complaint-handling processes (Yang and Chang, 2012; Wattanacharoensil and Yoopetch, 2012). Ground staff members are expected to welcome

passengers, deal with reservations, ticket purchases and check-in, carry out transactions associated with boarding and disembarkation procedures, respond to passenger requests and problems, and provide post-flight services (Yang and Chang, 2012). While doing so, they are likely to be confronted with passenger crowding and experience stress. Passengers may display disruptive behaviors when such crowding is not managed well. As a result, crowding is a detrimental factor leading to passenger dissatisfaction if it is not handled successfully.

In addition, ground staff members have to manage their emotions while dealing with a number of passengers. That is, they do emotional labor, which is defined as “the effort, planning, and control needed to express organizationally desired emotion during interpersonal transactions” (Morris and Feldman, 1996, p. 987). When employees often fake their emotions that should be consistent with organizationally desired rules, they experience emotional dissonance. Emotional dissonance captures the surface acting mode of emotional labor (Karatepe and Aleshinloye, 2009). Heightened crowding combined with emotional dissonance leads to emotional exhaustion that refers to the lack of energy and depletion of emotional resources due to excessive psychological demands (Boles et al., 2000). High levels of emotional exhaustion arising from emotional work result in undesirable outcomes such

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as poor performance, turnover intentions, and absenteeism (Chen and Kao, 2011; Karatepe et al., 2009; Karatepe, 2013).

1.1. Purpose and contribution

Grounded in this backdrop, this study develops and tests a research model that examines the effects of perceived crowding, emotional dissonance, and emotional exhaustion on service recovery performance, turnover intentions, and absenteeism. Specifically, this study tests: (1) the mediating role of emotional dissonance in the relationship between perceived crowding and emotional exhaustion and (2) emotional exhaustion as a mediator of the effect of emotional dissonance on service recovery performance, turnover intentions, and absenteeism. Service recovery performance refers to “frontline service employees’ perceptions of their own abilities and actions to resolve a service failure to the satisfaction of the customer” (Babakus et al., 2003, p. 274), while turnover intentions refer to employees’ willingness to leave an organization (Thoresen et al., 2003). In this study, absenteeism is defined as employees’ attitudes toward nonattendance at work. Data obtained from ground staff of a major low cost airline company with a time lag of one week and their supervisors in Turkey are utilized to assess the aforementioned relationships.

There are at least two reasons for selecting these outcomes in this study. First, service recovery performance, turnover intentions, and absenteeism are among the organizationally valued outcomes used in various studies whose samples have included frontline employees, including the ones in the airline industry (Chen and Kao, 2011; Karatepe et al., 2009; Ng et al., 2011). Second, managing passenger complaints successfully is important, because effective service recovery following a service failure remedies disappointment and leads to complainant satisfaction. This can be achieved via management commitment to delivery of service quality and effective complaint management, and talented employees. However, according to the results of the Turkish Civil Aviation sectoral strengths–weaknesses–opportunities–threats analysis, management of airline companies has difficulties finding qualified human resources (Turkish Civil Aviation Assembly Sector Report, 2012).

Employee turnover represents substantial costs to companies. Specifically, employees with turnover intentions can seriously erode service delivery and complaint-handling processes. Disrupted service, additional staffing, and the replacement of an experienced or talented employee with a new inexperienced one as well as remaining staff’s low morale are among the costs of turnover for service companies (Alexandrov et al., 2007). Absenteeism also represents an alarming cost for organizations. For example, employee absence cost \$1 million per day to one of the major airline companies in the United States (Kaleta and Anderson, 2003). In addition, the service industries in the United States were beset with a loss of 2.3% of all scheduled labor hours due to unplanned employee absence (Kocakulah et al., 2009).

The current study contributes to the literature in the following ways. First, ground staff members are expected to spend much time to be capable of dealing with a number of passengers and their requests and problems. These employees are also expected to handle problems stemming from aggressive and unruly passengers’ attitudes and behaviors (Yang and Chang, 2012). Under these circumstances, ground staff members are confronted with emotional dissonance and emotional exhaustion as a result of perceived passenger crowding in challenging service encounters. However, empirical research regarding the relationship between perceived crowding and emotional dissonance with respect to airline services is scarce (cf. Whiting et al., 2011).

Second, although limited, there are empirical studies that focus on flight attendants’ emotional labor/emotional dissonance and its outcomes (Fu, 2013; Heuven and Bakker, 2003). Surprisingly, there is a dearth of empirical research about emotional dissonance among ground staff in the airline industry in existing knowledge. A synthesis of the current literature further suggests that very little is known about the detrimental effect of emotional dissonance on employee outcomes such as job performance and absenteeism (Cheung and Cheung, 2013; Diestel and Schmidt, 2010). Since passengers’ evaluations of ground and in-flight services are important in terms of service quality and service recovery efforts (Chen and Chang, 2005), assessing the outcomes of emotional dissonance with respect to airline services provided by ground staff is relevant and significant. In light of these, the present study links emotional dissonance to service recovery performance, turnover intentions, and absenteeism through emotional exhaustion.

Lastly, the results will yield useful implications for management of airline companies that try to succeed and survive in a market environment of scarce resources, intense competition, and rapid rates of technological change. The following section presents the hypothesized relationships and research model. Then, the article provides discussions of the method and results of the empirical study. The article culminates with implications of the results and avenues for future research.

2. Hypotheses and research model

2.1. Hypotheses

Customer crowding is considered an acute stressor. Such a stressor “occurs quickly and usually lasts for short period” (Whiting et al., 2011, p. 321). However, when employees are often faced with customer crowding, they try to hide their negative emotions to cope with difficulties arising from situations involving a higher number of customers than usual. This is what ground staff members appear to be confronted with. They are expected to manage crowding successfully on a daily basis and deal with a number of passengers who have requests and complaints and display aggressive behaviors. To do this, they have to hide their negative emotions and serve passengers by showing organizationally required emotions. As Morris and Feldman (1996) state, “when mismatches between genuinely felt and organizationally required emotions exist, then, greater control, skill, and attentive action will be needed” (p. 992).

COR theory provides guidance to develop the relationship between perceived crowding and emotional dissonance. According to COR theory, individuals seek to acquire, maintain and preserve valuable resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Stress occurs when individuals are confronted with threatened or actual loss of valuable resources and invest resources and do not harvest what they have predicted in return (Hobfoll, 2001). From COR perspective, ground staff members are often faced with passenger crowding. In response to this stressor, they spend their valuable resources in order to perform emotional dissonance expecting that they establish satisfying relationships with passengers (cf. Brotheridge and Lee, 2002). The amount of resources expended in meeting job demands may also be a source of stress due to loss of current valuable resources (Cheung and Tang, 2007).

The current literature appears to be devoid of empirical research pertaining to the relationship between perceived crowding and emotional dissonance with reference to airline services. To the best of our knowledge, there is only one empirical study that gauges the effect of perceived crowding on surface acting. However, Whiting et al.’s (2011) study does not provide any empirical support for the relationship between perceived crowding and surface acting. In

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