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Frontline employees' passion and emotional exhaustion: The mediating role of emotional labor strategies

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ABSTRACT

The study aims to apply a dualistic model of passion to explore how frontline employees with different types of passion for work use emotional labor strategies, and how this affects emotional exhaustion. The research surveyed samples of 260 in the restaurant industry and employed Structural Equation Model for analysis and testing. The results show that harmoniously passionate frontline employees tend to adopt a deep acting strategy when confronted with emotional labor, and then protect themselves from emotional exhaustion, whereas frontline employees with obsessive passion tend to employ a surface acting strategy, and are in turn more likely to exhausting their emotional energy. Further, finding of mediation analysis confirms the partially mediating role of emotional labor strategies in the relationship between dualistic passion for work and emotional exhaustion. Finally, this study proposes managerial implications and suggestions for future research.

1. Introduction

Frontline employees in service industries, especially the tourism and hospitality sector, act as the contact point between customers and the organization, and are frequently viewed as the source of service differentiation or competitive advantage for companies (Tsaor and Tang, 2013). Frontline employees need to perform not only intellectual and physical labor, but also emotional labor (EL). In the context of EL, Grandey (2000) points out emotional labor as “the process of regulating both feelings and expressions for organizational goals”. The employees have to make sincere efforts to experience and display the appropriate emotions (i.e., deep acting) (Hwa, 2012) and adhered to the organization's emotional display rules (Johnson and Spector, 2007; Zapf and Holz, 2006). Frontline employees are expected to be polite, warm and friendly to internal and external stakeholders, and not express anger and frustration (Smollan, 2006). In this process, EL becomes a source of job stress (Hochschild, 1983). Frontline employees need to constantly regulate their emotions and interact with customers, and therefore experience a higher level of emotional exhaustion (EE) than other employees (Kim et al., 2012). EE is a state of physical or mental depletion, which is often accompanied by a high turnover rate, poor employee performance and low organizational effectiveness. Therefore, hospitality researchers are paying increasing attention to the potential antecedents of EE (Li et al., 2017).

In an EL context, employees are expected to display “appropriate”

emotions and suppress “inappropriate” ones to attain specific goals of the organization, and therefore adopt EL strategies (Brotheridge and Lee, 2002). Previous research has identified two distinct acting strategies that frontline employees typically use to meet the requirements for emotional expressions. These strategies are surface acting (SA) (i.e. faking the expected emotions) and deep acting (DA) (i.e. actually experiencing the desired emotions) (Hochschild, 1983). Researchers have found that SA is more likely than DA to associate with EE (Li et al., 2017), while DA may bring numerous positive effects (Pugh et al., 2011). However, the factors determining whether employees respond by faking emotions, or with deeper-level regulation, need further investigation. Allen et al. (2010) recommend considering individual differences in motivational tendencies among frontline employees when examining antecedents of the use of EL strategies.

Among theories about motivation, the self-determination theory (SDT) developed by Deci and Ryan (2000) may offer a potentially useful framework for studying the antecedents of EL strategies (Sisley and Smollan, 2012). In SDT, Deci and Ryan (2000) identified two categories of motivations, namely, autonomous and controlled. Sisley and Smollan (2012) found that SA is driven more by controlled than by autonomous motivations. Conversely, DA is driven by more autonomous, identified and integrated motivations. Passion is also related to motivations (Vallerand et al., 2003). Previous research found that employees with passion for work may increase positive emotions, well-being and job performance through greater involvement in their work (Baum and

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Locke, 2004; Baum et al., 2001). However, Vallerand (2010) found that passionate employees may also experience EE. Lavigne et al. (2012) suggests that previous studies that only considered passion as a one-dimensional construct could not elucidate why two employees can love their work equally but have different psychological outcomes.

Scholars have proposed a dualistic model of passion for work based on SDT. This model distinguishes between harmonious passion (HP) and obsessive passion (OP) for work (Philippe et al., 2010; Vallerand and Houlfort, 2003). HP for work refers to an autonomous internalization that leads individuals to internalize work that they like into one's identity, and thus perceive it as important and enjoyable (Forest et al., 2011; Ho et al., 2011; Vallerand et al., 2003). In contrast, OP for work represents a disproportionate significance given to work in the context of one's identity and uncontrollable drive to partake in work (Caudroit et al., 2011; Forest et al., 2011; Lavigne et al., 2012). Obsessive passion for work develops when employees love work because of contingencies that come to control them (Vallerand et al., 2003).

Given the necessity in tourism and hospitality sector to have certain emotional display rules in place to ensure service excellence and the differential impacts of different emotional labor strategies, it is important to understand how a frontline employee can foster the use of more effective EL strategies (Liu et al., 2008). Previous empirical studies have examined situational factors (Goldberg and Grandey, 2007; Grandey et al., 2004), as well as individual difference factors (Pugh, 2002; Liu et al., 2008) as predictive of employees' reactions to emotional demands on the job. However, there has been no investigation of antecedents of EL strategies from the view of motivational factors. To bridge the gap in the EL literature, the current study focuses on individual motivational tendencies as an antecedent of EL strategies. We argue that the dualistic model of passion for work developed with SDT as a foundation can probably more effectively explain the antecedents of use of EL strategies among frontline employees and also offer an insight into how EE occurs. Therefore, the main purpose of this study was to offer an integrated approach for understanding the antecedent of EL strategies and to examine the theoretical and empirical evidence on the causal relationships among passion for work, EL strategies, and EE.

This study has many contributions to the academic field. First, SDT and the dualistic model of passion for work are employed to validate the proposition that passion for work may be the antecedent of the use of EL strategies when confronted with EL. Despite strong interest in exploring the antecedents of EL strategies adopted, previous research has not applied an integrated theory to guide the exploration. This investigation utilizes the dualistic model of passion for work to provide a novel direction of thinking. Additionally, the concept of passion for work helps determine how EL leads to EE among frontline employees, by considering the whether all employees with passion for work are likely to experience EE, or whether any other passion is more likely to trigger the feeling of EE in frontline employees. Finally and most importantly, this work re-examines the relationship between EL strategies and EE, and also explores the mediating role of EL strategies in the relationship between passion for work and EE.

2. Literature review and hypotheses

2.1. Frontline employees

In both academia and practice, service employees who come into direct contact with customers either face-to-face or voice-to-voice as part of a job, and fulfill the needs of customers, are referred to as frontline employees (Hochschild, 1983). The restaurant industry is now a very important and challenging sector of the service industry throughout the world. Therefore, since customer retention increases profitability, restaurant managers must focus on creating customer satisfaction and retaining a pool of profitable loyal customers (Karatepe and Aleshinloye, 2009), and accordingly must ensure that the attitudes and behaviors of frontline employees are consistent with the

expectations of management and customers (Hartline and Ferrell, 1996). Indeed, frontline employees form the most important link in the service process (Karatepe and Aleshinloye, 2009). However, since frontline employees dealing directly with customers are tasked with satisfying and retaining customers, their work is more likely to cause particularly high levels of EE (Li et al., 2017).

2.2. Emotional exhaustion

Freudenberger (1974) refers to the excessive energy, strength or resource requirements on individuals, which cause individuals to fail, wear out or become exhausted as burnout. Maslach and Jackson (1984) observed that burnout is a state of physical and psychological exhaustion. Maslach's theory divides burnout into three dimensions. The first dimension is "emotional exhaustion", which refers to the organization's excessive emotional demands on the individual during interpersonal interaction, which the individual is unable to manage, leading to exhaustion of emotional resources. The second is "depersonalization" dimension, where individuals lose feelings toward customers. That is, the employees either pay no heed to the customers, or view them as objects, producing indifference or emotional distance. The final dimension is the "reduced personal accomplishment" dimension, where individuals lose their motivation for their jobs, significantly reducing feelings of competence or a sense of professional accomplishment (Maslach and Jackson, 1981; Schaufeli and Buunk, 2003; Wu and Cheng, 2003). Scholars frequently discuss EE from a psychological point of view. When workers show signs of EE, their psychological resources have been exhausted, and they can no longer make their own contributions (Ambrose et al., 2014).

Existing literature divides EE into psychological and physical stress (Cox et al., 1984). EE can reflect a wide range of issues. Since EE is the core feature of burnout (Schaufeli and Taris, 2005), people describing themselves or others as experiencing burnout most frequently mention the experience of EE (Schaufeli et al., 2009). Compared to the other two dimensions of burnout, EE has a stronger relationship with job related outcomes (Lee and Ashforth, 1996) and has been shown to be the best indicator of burnout (Piko, 2006; Donahue et al., 2012). In addition, With respect to the psychological and behavioral outcomes of EL strategies, EE is one of the most frequently cited negative consequences of EL strategies (Bono and Vey, 2005; Brotheridge and Grandey, 2002; Maslach, 1982). Therefore, when exploring the work-related outcomes of passion and EL strategies, only EE will be used in the present research.

EE is a state of physical and psychological depletion (Li et al., 2017), and is one of the most dysfunctional attitudes in the contemporary high-stress work environment (Schaufeli and Salanova, 2007). It may result in negative outcomes at both individual and organizational levels. Many studies on hospitality sector have considered the problems of EE (Kim, 2008; Lee and Ok, 2012), with its accompanying high rates of absence (Deery et al., 2002) and poor job performance (Cropanzano et al., 2003).

2.3. Relationship between passion for work and emotional exhaustion

Passion is a strong inclination toward an individual's preferred self-defining activity, which the individual regards as important (or high value), and is willing to invest a lot of time and effort into (Vallerand et al., 2003). Vallerand (2010) argued that if an individual believes that a job has value, enjoys the job, and is willing to make a continued investment in the job, then the job has become a part of the individual's own identity, producing a passion for the job, namely passion for work. Although passion ensures willing participation, it may underpin both positive and negative outcomes depending on the type of passion exhibited (Curran et al., 2011). In line with this perspective, this has led scholars to present a dualistic model of passion for work (Philippe et al., 2010; Vallerand and Houlfort, 2003).

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