



# Empowering supervision and service sabotage: A moderated mediation model based on conservation of resources theory



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Empowering supervision negatively related to service sabotage.
- Work engagement mediated the relation of empowering supervision and service sabotage.
- General self-efficacy moderated the relation of empowering supervision and work engagement.
- Conservation of resources theory provided the theoretical foundation.

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## ABSTRACT

In this study, we examine the relationship between empowering supervision and service sabotage by hospitality service employees. Drawing on conservation of resources theory, we explain the mediating role of work engagement. In addition, we further investigate the moderating role of general self-efficacy in strengthening the relationship between empowering supervision and work engagement. Using time-lagged data from eleven hotels in China, we found that, by enhancing work engagement, empowering supervision negatively influenced service employees' service sabotage. Furthermore, our findings suggested that general self-efficacy strengthened both the direct effect of empowering supervision on work engagement and the indirect effect of empowering supervision on service sabotage via work engagement such that the relationships were stronger when general self-efficacy was high rather than low. Based on the study findings, theoretical and managerial implications and future research directions are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Service sabotage is defined as deviant behaviors performed by service employees that are intentionally designed to adversely affect functional service encounters (Harris & Ogbonna, 2002). Examples of service sabotage include altering the speed of service; exhibiting displeasure, frustration, or hostility toward customers; embarrassing or laughing at customers; arguing with customers; and deliberately overcharging for services provided to customers. Service sabotage is far more widespread in the hospitality industry than generally supposed (Harris & Ogbonna, 2002, 2009). According to Harris and Ogbonna's (2002) research on the hospitality industry, more than 85% of customer-contact employees admitted

to engaging in some form of service sabotage within the week before the survey, more than 90% of informants said that service sabotage occurs daily, and 100% of frontline employees in the survey reported having witnessed some form of service sabotage. Service sabotage exerts negative influences on customers' evaluation of that service encounter and undermines customer satisfaction and loyalty, which also damages the profitability and growth of hospitality firms (Anderson & Fornell, 2000; Harris & Ogbonna, 2006) and can even threaten their survival (Analoui & Kakabadse, 1992).

The topic of service sabotage is extremely important in the hospitality industry, as customers' perceptions of service quality are often profoundly influenced by the attitudes and behaviors of service employees (Hartline & Ferrell, 1996; Schneider, Ehrhart, Mayer, Saltz, & Niles-Jolly, 2005; Tang & Tang, 2012). However, research on this topic in the hospitality industry has not received adequate attention from an empirical viewpoint. To date, most of

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this research has been conducted in non-hospitality contexts, such as the beauty industry (Chi, Tsai, & Tseng, 2013), telecommunications industry (Skarlicki, Van Jaarsveld, & Walker, 2008, 2016; Wang, Liao, Zhan, & Shi, 2011), and other service organizations (Chi, Chang, & Huang, 2015). Relatively few studies have been conducted in the context of hospitality (Kao, Cheng, Kuo, & Huang, 2014; Lee & Ok, 2014). In addition, the majority of this research has focused on antecedents of service sabotage: customer mistreatment (Skarlicki et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2011), customer-caused stressors (Kao et al., 2014), and negative emotions and moods among employees (Chi et al., 2015; Lee & Ok, 2014). Hence, leaving the research of impeding service sabotage to be a largely unexplored topic. Consequently, scholars have urged that further research should be conducted to investigate how service sabotage can be prevented (Chi et al., 2015; Harris & Ogbonna, 2012).

In response to these appeals for further research and on the basis of conservation of resources (COR) theory, this study extends the influence factors of service sabotage from customers and employees to positive leadership styles (i.e., empowering supervision). COR theory has been frequently applied to stress (e.g., Lee & Ok, 2014; Shao & Skarlicki, 2014; Wang et al., 2011), and it presents a comprehensive process of how employees respond to stress and provides significant implications for how hospitality employees behave in customer service delivery (Lee & Ok, 2014; Xu, Loi, & Lam, 2015). The hospitality industry exhibits a higher prevalence of depression among employees than many other industries (Pizam, 2008), which may be due in part to the attributes of hospitality work, such as monotonous ways of working (Yen & Teng, 2013), irregular and long working hours, the requirement for achieving customer satisfaction (Kensbock, Bailey, Jennings, & Patiar, 2015), and emphasis on social contact with coworkers (Ineson, Yap, & Whiting, 2013). In this circumstance, employees are more likely to perceive a rapid loss of resources and severe suffering of their physical and psychological health (Hobfoll, 1989; O'Neill & Davis, 2011), which can trigger the occurrence of negative work behavior (Chi et al., 2015; Kao et al., 2014; Lee & Ok, 2014; Yen & Teng, 2013), such as service sabotage, which produces detrimental effects on service quality and hospitality organization effectiveness (Hon, Chan, & Lu, 2013; Jex, Bliese, Buzzell, & Primeau, 2001). Existing research on customer service management has concluded that supervisors' leadership styles can shape subordinates' attitudes, behaviors, and performance (e.g., Borucki & Burke, 1999; Dietz, Pugh, & Wiley, 2004; Lyu, Zhu, Zhong, & Hu, 2016). Empowering leadership, unlike other leadership styles, provides greater decision-making autonomy, expresses confidence in subordinates' capabilities, and provides persuasive and encouraging communication to subordinates (Arnold, Arad, Rhoades, & Drasgow, 2000; Zhang & Bartol, 2010), which can serve as an effective instrument for employees to reduce work stress and replenish their resource pool (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll, Freedy, Lane, & Geller, 1990; Ng & Sorensen, 2008) and enhance their motivation and investment in work (Ahearne, Mathieu, & Rapp, 2005; Kirkman & Rosen, 1999; Zhang & Bartol, 2010). According to COR theory, employees are motivated to obtain, maintain, and invest appropriate resources to accomplish their tasks and accumulate resources to avoid potential future depletion (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). Employees consider the trust, confidence, and decision-making autonomy received from empowering supervisors as important and valuable resources, which help them to cope with unfavorable work conditions (Arnold et al., 2000; Hobfoll, 1989). Hence, they are likely to have positive attitudes, actively participate in the process of service delivery, and avert service sabotage to achieve "positive gain spirals" and avoid "negative loss spirals". Thus, we argue that empowering supervisors might inhibit hospitality employees' motivation to conduct service sabotage. Hence, the first purpose of

this study is to clarify and empirically examine why empowering supervision impedes service sabotage in the hospitality industry.

Second, on the basis of COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), we further examine the mediating effect of work engagement underlying the relationship between empowering supervision and service sabotage. First and foremost, empowering supervisors' trust, respect, and support reduces subordinates' work stress (Carlson & Perrewé, 1999; Ng & Sorensen, 2008), replenishes their resource pool (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 1990; Srivastava, Bartol, & Locke, 2006), and empowers them to be energetic and engaged in their work. As several existing studies have suggested, a high level of resources leads to greater work engagement (e.g., Halbesleben, Neveu, Paustian-Underdahl, & Westman, 2014; Kühnel, Sonnentag, & Bledow, 2012). It is then reasonable to conclude that empowering supervision can enhance employees' work engagement by increasing their resources for coping with unfavorable work conditions. Work engagement, a key factor of organizational service efficiency and performance (Li, Chen, Lyu, & Qiu, 2016; Liao & Chuang, 2004; Lyu et al., 2016), represents "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption" (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002, p. 74). Several studies have concluded that organizational resources (e.g., learning climate and internal service) and supervisor resources (e.g., trust, confidence, and respect) help employees accumulate energy, which contributes to their work engagement (Eldor & Harpaz, 2016; Hsieh & Wang, 2015; Lee & Ok, 2015). According to Harter et al.'s (2002) research, leadership is one of the single greatest factors that contribute to employees' work engagement. Thus, when led by empowering leaders, subordinates' work engagement may be enhanced; they will be more likely to invest extra effort in their work to achieve "positive gain spirals" (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). Furthermore, engaged employees tend to view work as fun and challenging rather than stressful and demanding (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, & Taris, 2008), which serves as a valuable resource to address depressive work environment and achieve self-development (Hobfoll, 1989, 2002, 2011). These employees are also strongly motivated to take the initiative when interacting with customers, obtain superior performance (Salanova & Schaufeli, 2008), and avoid service sabotage behavior. It is thus possible that empowering supervision impedes hospitality employees' service sabotage, at least in part because empowering supervision enhances work engagement. Therefore, this study proposes a research model that provides a theoretical explanation of the relationships among empowering supervision, work engagement, and service sabotage.

Third, we also shed light on the boundary conditions under which the direct relationship between empowering supervision and work engagement and the indirect impact of empowering supervision on service sabotage via work engagement will be effective. The capability and style of employees' self-evaluation deeply influence the impact of empowering supervision on their attitudes and behaviors. According to Judge, Erez, and Bono (1998, p. 170), general self-efficacy is defined as "individuals' perception of their ability to perform across a variety of different situations". Employees with high general self-efficacy are confident in their capabilities (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2009), and their motivation to cope with a depressive work environment and accomplish difficult tasks may be triggered when supported with empowering supervision (Ahearne et al., 2005; Kirkman & Rosen, 1999). Hence, employees are more likely to increase their vigor, dedication, and absorption in work to achieve a higher level of work engagement, which results in superior service performance, and service sabotage can be further avoided as well. Therefore, this study proposes a research model that empirically examines the moderating effect of general self-efficacy on the

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