



Assessing the impact of work environment factors on employee creative performance of fine-dining restaurants



Shih-Shuo Yeh ^a, Tzung-Cheng Huan ^{b, *}

^a Department of Tourism Management, National Quemoy University, 1, University RD., Jinning, Kinmen 89250, Taiwan

^b Graduate Institute of Sports and Health Management, National Chung Hsing University, 145 Xingda Rd., South Dist., Taichung 40227, Taiwan

HIGHLIGHTS

- The purpose of this study is to examine factors that influence the creativity of restaurant employees.
- Work environment strongly impact the creativity of employees, specifically their ability to create new dishes.
- Work environment includes social support within an organization, resources availability, freedom, and regulations.
- Resources can greatly improve the quantity, but less so the quality aspect of creative performance.
- For creative performance, freedom is more important than regulations.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the factors that influence the creativity of restaurant employees. Postulates are that work environment, specifically social support within an organization, resources, freedom, and regulations, strongly impact the creativity of employees in terms of their ability to create new dishes. Creative performance is treated as having both quantity and quality dimensions. This allows the study to observe how antecedent factors interact with different types of the performance measures. A model is developed and tested. Using a questionnaire, data were collected from 304 full-time employees working in the kitchens of four-star and five-star hotels in Taiwan. To test the hypotheses, the data were analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM). Resources can greatly improve the quantity, but less so the quality aspect of creative performance. For creative performance, freedom is more important than regulations. The findings provide insights that help organizations facilitate creativity of employees.

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1. Introduction

Employees' creativity in hospitality has recently caught the attention of scholars, but is still understudied (Chang, Gong, & Shum, 2011). Most of the studies (Chang et al., 2011; Coelho, Augusto, & Lages, 2011) focus on frontline employees. With the exception of a few qualitative studies (e.g. Stierand & Dörfler, 2012; Stierand, Dörfler, & MacBryde, 2014), little has been done to investigate the creativity of back-of-the-house hospitality employees who are responsible for new product design. Having new products, as stated previously, can be an integral part of an

organization's success.

Chang et al. (2011) emphasize the importance of innovation for the success of hospitality organizations because it results in replacing obsolete products, and thus provides opportunities for new market venturing (Fuller, 2011), which improves product quality and possibly reduces production cost. An organization's success depends on its ability to introduce new products or services that meet demands from the constantly changing marketplace (Wong & Pang, 2003). For restaurants, culinary creativity is an integral component of offering a fine dining experience. For example, the Michelin Guide uses level of creativity in assigning one to three stars to indicate the culinary excellence of a restaurant. The star rating can help distinguish a restaurant from its competitors (Stierand et al., 2014).

Even if creativity can be assessed, managing creativity can be difficult because of the managerial paradoxes. For example,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: yesso5@yahoo.com.tw (S.-S. Yeh), tchuan@dragon.nchu.edu.tw (T.-C. Huan).

practicality versus freedom has been described as involving a management paradox (Gryskiewicz & Taylor, 2011). Other paradoxes relate to authenticity versus standardization (Zeng, Go, & de Vries, 2012) and collectivity versus individuality (Adler & Chen, 2011).

This study examines the dilemma that can arise in deciding to push for creative quantity while allowing for creative quality. From an organization's perspective, it is important to control and manage employees' creative performance so the organization can justify the resources used. However, control and management can have a negative impact on employees' creativity when freedom and individuality are curtailed (Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, & Herron, 1996). This research focuses on organizations' people management policies and workplace factors associated with encouraging employees' creativity, specifically creativity in new dish development.

2. Conceptual background and hypotheses

2.1. Operational definition of innovation, creativity and creative industry

Innovation refers to the process of developing and implementing a new idea (McLean, 2005). According to Chang et al. (2011), innovation can be categorized into incremental and radical innovation. The former refers to minor improvement of current technology while the later refers to revolutionary changes. This paper essentially deals with incremental innovation.

Creativity refers to the ability to produce work that is novel and appropriate (McLean, 2005). Operational definitions of creativity can range from simply assembling a product to conceptualizing and realizing an entirely new product (Füller, Hutter, & Faullant, 2011).

A narrow definition of creative industry focuses on industries that solely rely on offering intellectual commodities, such as game designing or media industry (Hotho & Champion, 2011). However, for example, large organizations generally have a research and development (R&D) department. That R&D department loses its value if the organization does not respect the creative performance of its employees. Flew (2002) argues that creativity is important to many industries, especially ones in the service sector that incorporate cultural elements. Many service industries incorporate certain cultural elements in their themes. For example, studies exist for restaurants (Chen, Yeh, & Huan, 2014), theme parks (Yeh, Chen, & Liu, 2012) and tourism destinations (Leong, Yeh, Hsiao, & Huan, 2015). So, from a broad perspective, any industry that creates intellectual property, has cultural elements, creates art or creates entertainment value can be characterized as a creative industry.

2.2. Conceptual background

This study is based on the theories of Amabile, Burnside, and Grykiewicz (1995) and McLean (2005). The work environment inventory, later known as KEYS, proposed by Amabile et al. (1995), is one of the most widely adopted scales for assessing the impact of work environment on employee creativity. McLean (2005) asserts that work environment factors have both supportive and impedimentary impacts on creativity (McLean, 2005). Amabile et al. (1996) identified six supportive factors and two impediments. Supports include: (a) organizational encouragement, (b) supervisory encouragement, (c) work group supports, (d) freedom, (e) sufficient resources, and (f) challenge. The impediments include: (a) workload pressure and (b) organizational impediments. There are also the four factors proposed by Anderson and West (1998) that can be used to predict innovativeness of a working team: (a) vision, (b) participative safety, (c) task orientation, and (d) support for innovation.

These factors, however, do not always work symbiotically with one another. On one hand, employees require enough time or leeway to foster their creativity. On the other hand, an organization can face time constraints (Gryskiewicz & Taylor, 2011) or financial burdens (Svejenova, Planellas, & Vives, 2010) that require its employees to “hurry up” with their creative processes.

However, one adage goes “you can't rush art”. Organizations which attempt to control and regulate individuals' creativity may cause adverse effects (Hirst, Van Knippenberg, Chen, & Sacramento, 2011). There are studies that assert that an individual's creativity can only be triggered by intrinsic motivation (Grant, 2008). If that is true, then there is not much organizations can do except hire the right people. This, from an organizational perspective, would be far from ideal. Thus, many studies (e.g. Hon, 2011) examine organization-level variables that potentially contribute to employee creativity. Creating a favorable environment that encourages employee creativity is the main matter addressed in this study.

Hence, while this study builds on the works of Amabile et al. (1995) and McLean (2005), we modified the theory. These modifications are, in fact, what is pursued in the research. For one, a “regulation” dimension is introduced into their theory. An organization tends to have its own way to guide or regulate its employees' efforts to foster a good bottom line performance for the organization. That means what may be seen as dismal paperwork and mundane processes can be an involved application process for employees to secure time and budget for creative endeavors. Paperwork and process can be, but are not necessarily, counterproductive to employees' creativity. Employees getting resources with paper work may more than compensate for not getting material or time as resources.

So no confusion arises, the “pressure” dimension of KEYS is not present in this study. A prevalent view of the Taiwanese restaurant management is that reducing workload is counterproductive. In other words, the accepted view was that heavy workload is something that can be expected for any Taiwanese hospitality practitioner. Without cases where reducing workload introduced variance into a model, “pressure” could not be investigated.

2.3. Hypothesis

2.3.1. Creative performance

Creative performance is defined as an individual's ability to generate novel and useful ideas regarding procedures and processes at work (Adler & Chen, 2011; De Stobbeleir, Ashford, & Buyens, 2011). Assessing creative performance often involves a great deal of subjectivity, which makes measuring creative performance a difficult task. In fact, any performance assessment includes a certain degree of subjectivity (Visser, van Knippenberg, van Kleef, & Wisse, 2013). It does not matter whether performance is rated by a supervisor (e.g., De Stobbeleir et al., 2011; Scott & Bruce, 1994) or an employee rates themselves (e.g., Hon, 2012), each party may be biased. In order to mitigate the bias, this study adopts two considerations. First, the study uses measures that are relatively objective. For example, perceived frequency that a new dish won an award or a competition is used. Second, an employee's creative performance is assessed by both a supervisor and the employee to provide a somewhat balanced perspective. Furthermore, this study measures creative performance in terms of quantity and quality.

As noted earlier, quality and quantity have generally been treated as a single construct (Amabile et al., 1996; Füller et al., 2011). This study; however, examines them separately. The notion is that some factors may affect these two aspects of creative performance differently. For example, the distinction between the two

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