



# How trait curiosity influences psychological well-being and emotional exhaustion: The mediating role of personal initiative



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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates how trait curiosity influences employees' psychological well-being and emotional exhaustion. Specifically, it proposes the mediating role of personal initiative in the abovementioned relationships. A total of 380 employees in China completed questionnaires that assessed their trait curiosity, personal initiative, psychological well-being, and emotional exhaustion states. Results indicate that personal initiative partially mediates the relationship between curiosity and psychological well-being, and fully mediates the relationship between curiosity and emotional exhaustion. Implications for future research of the current study are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Curiosity is a state in which people recognize and investigate novel information and experiences that demand their attention (Kashdan & Steger, 2007). Individuals usually differ in the inclination to investigate new knowledge. Naylor (1981) delineated trait curiosity as individual differences in the capacity to experience curiosity in general. By intentionally seeking challenging and novel events, people with greater curiosity stretch or expand their knowledge and skills (Ainley, Hidi, & Berndorff, 2002), develop their emotional intelligence (Leonard & Harvey, 2007), and feel happier. Researchers have found that curiosity influences various aspects of people's lives—for example, it may drive children's development, promote educational attainment, facilitate personal growth, and even spur scientific discovery (Day, 1982; Görlitz & Wohlwill, 1987; Kashdan, Rose, & Fincham, 2004).

Accordingly, research has begun to examine the role curiosity plays in the workplace. Prior studies suggested that curiosity can promote job performance (Mussel, 2013; Reio & Callahan, 2004; Woo, Chernyshenko, Stark, & Conz, 2014) and help newcomers to adapt to their work environments (Harrison, Sluss, & Ashforth, 2011). Yet the possible influence of curiosity on employees' quality of work life is still relatively underexplored.

The aim of the present study is to investigate the effect of trait curiosity on employees' quality of work life. Here, we chose employees' psychological well-being and emotional exhaustion to assess their quality of work life because they reflect the psychological and physical aspects of employees' quality of work life. Moreover, psychological well-being is an important positive indicator whereas emotional exhaustion is a main negative indicator of employees' quality of work life. In this article, the underlying mechanism will also be discussed. Specifically, we argue that employees' personal initiative, one critical form of proactive behavior, mediates the effect of trait curiosity on quality of work life. The remainder of this article is structured as follows. We first review the existing literature on curiosity, personal initiative, psychological well-being, and emotional exhaustion. Then we propose a theoretical framework that examines how curiosity improves employees' work life quality. After that, we conduct an empirical study to examine our hypotheses. Finally, we discuss the implications and applications of our study.

### 1.1. Curiosity and psychological well-being

Psychological well-being, defined as employees' levels of satisfaction with processes and practices in the workplace, has received significant attention from scholars (Grant, Christianson, & Price, 2007). It differs from job satisfaction because it encapsulates more than employees' overall job satisfaction. It also captures their satisfaction with both tangible and intangible aspects of the workplace (Brunetto, Farr-Wharton, & Shacklock, 2011). Although far

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less is known about how curiosity impacts well-being of employees, previous studies have provided some evidence. Recent research has shown that curiosity could improve people's well-being (Jovanovic & Dragana, 2012; Kashdan & Steger, 2007; Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). That is, curiosity influences their daily lives, including the development and persistence of well-being and overall life satisfaction (Kashdan & Steger, 2007; Park et al., 2004). Moreover, curiosity plays an active role in the workplace. For example, it can enhance employees' performance (Reio & Callahan, 2004) and help newcomers to adapt better to work environments (Harrison et al., 2011). Employees with a high level of curiosity are more likely to be interested in workplace issues, which in turn increases their knowledge and skills. Therefore, they may feel competent in the organization. Thus, we propose that curiosity is positively related to psychological well-being.

### 1.2. Curiosity and emotional exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion, or the draining of emotional resources, is one of the most dysfunctional attitudes in the contemporary high-stress work environment (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2007). It may result in negative outcomes at both individual and organizational levels. First, emotional exhaustion leads to many health problems, such as colds, headaches, and sleep disturbance (Belcastro & Hays, 1984). In addition, it influences employees' work attitudes (Wolpin, Burke, & Greenglass, 1991), job performance (Cropanzano, Rupp, & Byrne, 2003), and rates of absence (Deery, Iverson, & Walsh, 2002). Curiosity is one essential dimension of adaptability, which assists employees in preparing for and participating in their work roles. In addition, curiosity facilitates a good fit between employees and the workplace (Savickas, 1997). Therefore, employees with a high level of curiosity are more likely to experience positive emotions or subjective feelings, which are the opposite of emotional exhaustion (Kashdan & Steger, 2007; Leonard & Harvey, 2007). Taken together, we propose that trait curiosity is negatively related to employees' emotional exhaustion.

### 1.3. Curiosity, personal initiative, emotional exhaustion, and psychological well-being

In this article, we propose that curiosity contributes to the enhancement of personal initiative, which in turn improves their psychological well-being and alleviates their states of emotional exhaustion. Personal initiative refers to proactive, self-starting, and persisting behaviors that employees enact to achieve their work goals (Fay & Michael, 2001). It is an important proactive behavior.

Curiosity fosters employees' proactive behaviors because it leads employees to identify novel information and explore opportunities (Wu & Parker, 2012). It may influence employees to exert more proactive goal-directed efforts (Kashdan & Steger, 2007). That is, those with a high level of curiosity are motivated to reframe their external environments and behave innovatively (Harrison et al., 2011). Therefore, we propose that curiosity is positively related to personal initiative, which reflects employees' proactivity at work (Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007).

Because personal initiative influences the intrinsic, extrinsic, and social aspects of job satisfaction, employees with a high level of personal initiative are more satisfied with their jobs (Gamboa, Gracia, Ripoll, & Peiro, 2009; Stroppa & Erika, 2011). And they may feel more competent and in control of workplace issues. Therefore, we conjecture that personal initiative may improve employees' psychological well-being. Furthermore, it is suggested that proactivity not only facilitates day-to-day work engagement and recovery (Sonnentag, 2003) but also influences employees' emotions and stress (Greenglass, 2002, 2005; Sohl & Moyer,

2009). Personal initiative triggers employees to proactively strive for improvement rather than react to the workplace events. Thus, personal initiative negatively predicts employees' emotional exhaustion (Taris & Wielenga-Meijer, 2010).

To sum up, we expect that curiosity improves employees' psychological well-being and alleviates their emotional exhaustion through the enhancement of their personal initiative.

### 1.4. Current study and hypotheses

The goal of this study is to investigate the role of personal initiative in the underlying mechanism of how trait curiosity influences employees' quality of work life. Given the facts we elaborated in the preceding paragraphs, we hypothesize that (1) curiosity is positively related to personal initiative; (2) personal initiative is positively related to psychological well-being; (3) personal initiative is negatively related to emotional exhaustion; and (4) personal initiative mediates the relationships between both (a) curiosity and psychological well-being and (b) curiosity and emotional exhaustion.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

We recruited a group of respondents from an online forum in China, and 380 employees completed the online survey. Participants ranged in age from 18 years to 65 years ( $M = 30.67$ ,  $SD = 7.39$  years). Of these, 126 (33.16%) were female and 254 (66.84%) were male. With respect to the level of education, 90.8% had a bachelor's degree or higher, and 67.8% had been employed by their company for at least two years.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Curiosity

We adapted seven positively worded items from the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP) version of the curiosity scale (Goldberg et al., 2006) to assess participants' curiosity trait. IPIP consists of a set of reliable personality scales that were developed and examined conjointly worldwide. Sample items include "I am excited by many different activities" and "I can find something of interest in any situation." The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of this scale was .87.

#### 2.2.2. Personal initiative

We measured participants' personal initiative by adapting Frese, Fay, Leng, Hilburger, and Tag's (1997) scale. The scale consists of seven positively worded items, such as "I use opportunities quickly in order to attain my goals" and "I am particularly good at realizing ideas." The Cronbach's alpha reliability was .91.

#### 2.2.3. Psychological well-being

We used Brunetto et al. (2011) well-being scale to assess participants' psychological well-being. The scale includes four items that gauge participants' level of satisfaction with processes and practices in the workplace (Brunetto et al., 2011). Sample items were "Most days I feel a sense of accomplishment in what I do at work" and "Overall I think I am reasonably satisfied with my work life." The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .88.

#### 2.2.4. Emotional exhaustion

We adapted Schaufeli, Leiter, Maslach, and Jackson (1996) exhaustion scale to measure employees' emotional exhaustion. The scale, which consists of five items, was designed to measure

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