Engage or quit? The moderating role of abusive supervision between resilience, intention to leave and work engagement

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This study explores the impact of travel agency employees' resilience on their intention to leave and work engagement, and simultaneously examines whether abusive supervision moderates the aforementioned relationships. There is a clear research gap on this subject in the tourism and hospitality literature regarding the moderating affects of abusive supervision on the relationships between resilience, intention to leave and work engagement. The survey was conducted in 18 travel agencies in Taiwan. Of the returned samples, 459 questionnaires were complete. Multiple regression analyses are used to test the four hypotheses of this study. The results indicate that travel agency employees' resilience can reduce their intention to leave and enhance their work engagement. Also, abusive supervision has a moderating affect on the relationship between resilience and intention to leave. Implications for managers of travel agency, theoretical contribution of the paper and suggestions for future research regarding travel agency employees are discussed.

1. Introduction

Service industries form a large share of world trade (Davies & Downward, 2001; Seo, Lee, & Kim, 2011). In the travel industry, travel agents represent a key influence in the tourism marketing system (Hudson, Snaith, Miller, & Hudson, 2001; Mossaz & Coghlan, 2016). Notably, the high employee turnover rate is generally thought both by researchers and practitioners to be a serious problem in the tourism and hospitality industry (Karatepe & Shahriari, 2014). Particularly, the turnover rate is relatively high as compared to other industries (Kaya, Bezirgan, & Alamur, 2015). Also, high turnover rate is considered to be the most difficult management issue in the industry (Cho, Woods, Jang, & Erdem, 2006). As is indicated by Pang, Kucukusta, and Chan (2015), the industry of tourism and hospitality is especially confronted with the challenge of human resource shortage. Although travel agencies are an important sector of the industry, few research explorations concentrate on examining these challenges with travel agency employees (Kim, 2014).

To satisfy the various needs of customers is rather challenging, and can only be achieved with the assistance of highly motivated employees (Dai, Chen, & Zhuang, 2016; Dai, Hou, Chen, & Zhuang, 2018; Li, Sanders, & Frenkel, 2012). As frontline employees constantly interact with customers, they are required to have a sensitive and proactive attitude towards the needs of clients. Thus, engaged employees become the crucial element in

maintaining service excellence (Li et al., 2012). Yet, no related research exploring the work engagement of travel agency employees has been found. Hence, the way to reduce employees' turnover rate and enhance their work engagement is a crucial topic for travel agencies.

The word "resilience" can be traced back to the Latin verb resilire, or, "to leap back". Resilience is defined by Oxford English Dictionary as "being able to withstand or recover quickly from difficult conditions" (Hu, Zhang, & Wang, 2015). In the field of psychology, resilience describes the capacity for an individual to feel oneself again after experiencing negative emotions, and flexibly adapting to the changing demands of stressful experiences (Lazarus, 1993; Niitsu et al., 2017).

For travel agency managers, hiring employees with strong resilience could possibly reduce turnover rate and enhance work engagement. However, previous studies on the antecedents of intention to leave (including those in tourism and hospitality industry) (e.g., Karatepe, Beirami, Bouzari, & Safavi, 2014; Kim, 2014; Pang et al., 2015) did not consider the influence brought by employees' resilience. In fact, there seems to be no related research that explores the impact of travel agency employees' resilience on their work engagement.

Even if travel agency employees' resilience has an impact on their intention to leave and work engagement, will such influence be affected by situational factors? In recent years, the issue of abusive supervision has been drawing more and more attention (Zhang, Kwan, Zhang, & Wu,

2014). Specifically, abusive supervision may increase employees' coping behaviors (Tepper, Moss, & Duffy, 2011). This study assumes that abusive supervision might serve as an important situational variable that influences the relationship among travel agency employees' resilience, their intention to leave and work engagement. Therefore, there is a clear research gap on this subject in the tourism and hospitality literature regarding the moderating affects of abusive supervision on the relationships between resilience, intention to leave and work engagement.

According to the interactionism perspective, behavior is a result of the interaction between personality and situational factors. This viewpoint has a long history in the personality and social psychology field (Palmer, Komarraju, Carter, & Karau, 2017). Based on the interactionism perspective, this study explores whether abusive supervision (situation factor) has moderating effect on the relationship between travel agency employees' resilience (personality factor) and their intention to leave/work engagement (behaviors).

2. Literature review and hypotheses

2.1. Resilience

Scholars (Hu et al., 2015; Niitsu et al., 2017) believe that resilience refers to the capacity of recovering from negative emotions and adjusting oneself to the constantly changing environment. Resilience could also be explained as "a phenomena that describes the display of positive adaptation even in the context of adversity or risk" (Masten, 2001). Ryff and Singer (1996) asserted that resilience is an important fact to consider in relation to the roles that prevent disease and negative behaviors. Hence, Ryff, Singer, Dienberg Love, and Essex (1998) defined resilience as the ability to maintain or regain a high sense of well-being in the face of hardship. Previous study has indicated that resilient individuals would maintain their physical and psychological health by buffering negative consequences from difficult times (Connor & Davidson, 2003). Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, and Finkel (2008) noted that resilient individuals tend to proactively prepare for hardships and minimize the effects of stressful events on themselves through using their psychological resources effectively.

2.2. Intention to leave

Intention to leave is defined as an employee's subjective assessment of the possibility of leaving the organization in the short-term (Theron, Barkhuizen, & Du Plessis, 2014). Takawira, Coetzee, and Schreuder (2014) noted that intention to leave is the idea of leaving the organization and seeking employment elsewhere. Scholars (Li, Kim, & Zhao, 2017) had used turnover intention model attempted to explain employees' turnover behavior and first adopted intention to leave as the measure of turnover behavior. Previous studies proved that intention to leave is one of the strongest predictors and an immediate precursor of employee turnover (Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000). In the research associated with intention to leave in the field of tourism and hospitality, the findings of Kim (2014) regarding the investigation of hotel employees suggest that, for veterans, supervisor support is an antecedent variable of their intention to leave. As for the intention to leave of neophytes, personnel management, job prospects and work-related factors are important antecedent variables. External factors are important antecedent variables to the intention to leave of both groups, while coworker support isn't. As investigating the frontline employees of travel agencies, Pang et al. (2015) discovered that job satisfaction, job-hopping, job security, training opportunity and promotion opportunity are significantly correlated with intention to leave.

2.3. Work engagement

Previous studies defined work engagement as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind, and it could be characterized by vigor,

dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006). Work engagement is associated with the activation and optimal functioning of the well-being perceived in workplace (Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011). Recently, more and more hospitality management studies examined employees' work engagement (Karatepe et al., 2014; Li et al., 2012). For example, in exploring the frontline employees of five-star hotels in Northern Cyprus, Karatepe et al. (2014) reported the mediating effect of work engagement among the relationships of challenge stressors, affective organizational commitment and job performance. The results indicate that work engagement fully mediates the effects of challenge stressors on affective organizational commitment and job performance. Li et al. (2012) found that leader member exchange (LMX) was positively related to employees' job performance by an investigation of employees of a large luxury hotel in Southern China. They also observed that work engagement mediated the relationship between LMX and employees' job performance, and that human resource management consistency can strengthen LMX's influence on work engagement.

2.4. Abusive supervision

Abusive supervision refers to subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which their supervisors exhibit hostile verbal and nonverbal expressions (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Tepper, 2000). By definition, abusive supervision is a perception of unremitting mistreatment on the part of the supervisor (Frieder, Hochwarter, & DeOrtentiis, 2015). Therefore, it should require individuals' sustained efforts to properly cope (Frieder et al., 2015).

Mitchell and Ambrose (2007) found that the relationship between abusive supervision and supervisor-directed deviance would be stronger when individuals hold higher negative reciprocity beliefs. Previous study noted that in reaction to abusive supervision, employees tend to engage in deviant behaviors such as theft, fraud, or working slower than usual (Tepper, Duffy, & Shaw, 2001). Xu, Loi, and Lam (2015) found that abused subordinates resort to remain silent in the workplace due to their feelings of emotional exhaustion. Lyu, Zhu, Zhong, and Hu (2016) used time-lagged data from hotels and found that abusive supervision negatively affected service employees' customer-oriented OCB by undermining work engagement. Lyu et al. (2016) indicated that hostile attribution bias strengthened the direct effect of abusive supervision on work engagement and the indirect effect of abusive supervision on customer-oriented OCB via work engagement such that the relationships were stronger when hostile attribution bias was high rather than low.

The relationship between abusive supervision and work turnover is also an important topic. Haar, de Fluiter, and Brougham (2016) found abusive supervision has a significant influence on employee turnover intentions, where abusive supervision increases turnover intentions and reduces perceived organizational support. Pradhan and Jena (2017) confirm that abusive supervision can strongly increase subordinates' intention to quit. Also, their study finds meaningful work can significantly moderate the relationship between abusive supervision and intention to quit.

2.5. The effect of resilience on intention to leave and work engagement

In the self-determination theory proposed by Deci and Ryan (2000), self-determination is an important driver of motivation, and the different levels of which are classified as intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation and amotivation. Intrinsic motivation is when an individual participates in the activity out of personal interest in the activity itself, and the sense of satisfaction that comes from the exploring, learning and understanding of the activity, and the excitement experienced as taking part in the activity (Vallerand, Blais, Brière, & Pelletier, 1989). Extrinsic motivation describes how an individual is motivated by the enthusiasm in order to attain a desired outcome to participate in certain activity, and amotivation is a state lacking any intention or an absence of motivation (Vallerand et al., 1989).

Self-determination theory also assumes that people's behaviors are