

The Influence of Job Satisfaction and Job Engagement on Customer Orientation: The Moderating Role of Empowering Leadership – A Conceptual Paper

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to determine empowering leadership as the moderator in job satisfaction and job engagement factors on customer orientation of front-office employees in Hong Kong hotels. The Conservation of Resources (COR) theory is used to understand customer orientation of front-office employees to achieve a competitive advantage. **Design/methodology/approach:** This study suggests a cross-sectional quantitative research method using random sampling from the front-office hotel employees' population in Hong Kong. **Findings:** This finding may contribute to hotel and service industries by providing prominent customer orientation strategies that is aligned with job satisfaction and job engagement to improve business performance and growth in Hong Kong. **Research limitations/implications:** This research is based on the hotel sector of front-office employees in Hong Kong. As a result, it was unable to represent other countries that may have differences in cultures, and policies. **Practical implications:** This paper enhances our understanding of empowering leadership in various hospitality and tourism settings. Moreover, there are growing interest in comprehending how leaders can effectively empower their subordinates leading to the improvement of customer orientation in service industries. **Originality/value:** The conceptual framework serves as a point of reference and offers guidance to scholars and practitioners in Hong Kong's service sectors to optimize job satisfaction and job engagement to achieve higher performance in customer orientation of front-office employees. **Keywords:** Job Satisfaction, Job Engagement, Empowering Leadership, Customer Orientation, Conservation Of Resources (COR) Theory

Introduction

Hong Kong is often referred to as the "Asia's World City" for being the most renowned hub for worldwide commerce and tourism (Wong, 2021). Moreover, tourism industry in Hong

Kong has been a critical pillar given its significant contribution to the local economy through retailing, catering, and hotel industry sectors (Tsui et al., 2021). In 2023, Hong Kong's tourism sector demonstrated a remarkable recovery, with provisional total number of visitors arrival reaching 34 million (AMRO, 2024; Chaturvedi, 2024). This surge in the number of visitors signifies a positive resurgence of the tourism industry in Hong Kong.

Furthermore, the 2024 Operational & Investment Outlook highlights that the evolving preferences of tourists towards authentic experiences and immediate memory sharing present both opportunities and challenges for Hong Kong's hospitality industry (Colliers, 2024). Therefore, the industry's strategic focus on meeting these changing demands underscores the city's crucial role in shaping the future of hospitality. The notable recovery and heightened customer satisfaction can be partly credited to the significance of front-office employees' job satisfaction and job engagement. The dedication and customer service proficiency demonstrated by the front-office employees are substantial and instrumental in achieving this recovery. Their commitment in delivering exceptional service contributed to crafting memorable experiences for tourists, thereby enhancing the overall satisfaction. The positive influence of contented and engaged front-office employees reverberated throughout the industry, ultimately aiding in the successful resurgence of Hong Kong's tourism sector.

Despite the Hong Kong tourism industry's steady recovery after COVID-19 pandemic, many workers who were affected by the pandemic have not returned to Hong Kong which resulted in the shortage of experienced workers in the tourism sector (Choo, 2024). In the aftermath of the pandemic, the hotel sector is also experiencing severe difficulties in hiring and retaining competent employees (Lindberg & Creery, 2023; Peterson & DiPietro, 2021). The major obstacle for the hospitality industry is due to the labour crisis which include changes of perception about hospitality profession, availability of greater opportunity in other industries and redefining personal preferences (Morosan & Bowen, 2022; Sperance, 2021). As a result, this have impacted customer orientation among the front-office employees which is mainly influenced by job satisfaction and job engagement. Therefore, establishing front-office employees' satisfaction and engagement with their work is essential in order to improve the overall employees' welfare.

In light of the burgeoning 'revenge travel' trend, The Hong Kong Holiday and Travel Expo 2024 present a captivating array of global destinations, enticing attendees with diverse travel experiences. Therefore, hotels must place heightened emphasis on front-office employees to deliver friendly service and meeting the evolving demands of modern travellers. Through personalized assistance and the creation of memorable experiences, hotels can elevate guests satisfaction and also foster loyalty in today's fiercely competitive hospitality arena (Enterprise Asia, 2024). Moreover, with the growing number of visa-free travel, emphasis on connected travel bookings with greater integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in travel services underscores the evolving landscape faced by the hotel front-office employees in order to meet the diverse needs and expectations of the travellers (Agoda, 2024).

Marriott Bonvoy's latest study on the preferences of millennial and Gen Z travellers in the Asia-Pacific region indicates that the importance of outstanding loyalty programs is becoming more widely recognized (TTG Asia, 2024b). Moreover, despite global inflation, millennials and Gen Z account for more than 60% of travel expenditures worldwide (TTG Asia, 2024a). It has

become necessary for front-office employees embracing digital tools to assist and make sure that information is accessible in order to become competitive in the industry. As a result, it is more crucial than ever to make sure that front-office employees are engaged and satisfied with their work so that they can skilfully meet the evolving requirement of the visitors.

The inconsistent finding of job satisfaction on the customer orientation by Wagenheim & Rood (2010) and job engagement by Khusanova et al. (2021) which are depending on task independency have called for the introduction of empowering leadership to strengthen the customer orientation among front-office employees in hotel industry in Hong Kong. Additionally, the benefit of empowering leadership is that it delegates authority to the front-office employees by enabling them to respond effectively and quickly to customer demands (Hoang et al., 2021).

To address the research gap, two research questions have been formulated

- RQ1. How job satisfaction and job engagement factors affect customer-orientation of front-office employees?
- RQ2. To what extent does empowering leadership strengthen the relationship between job satisfaction and job engagement on customer-orientation of front-office employees?

In light of a recent conceptual study, there is a critical imperative to enhance the customer orientation of front-office employees in Hong Kong. This study examines the relationship between job satisfaction and job engagement factors which impacted the customer orientation of front-office employees. Given the pivotal role of customer orientation in the tourism sector, bolstering this aspect is crucial for attracting more visitors to Hong Kong. Moreover, it is imperative to acknowledge the substantial contribution of Hong Kong's tourism industries in which with every 1.5 million tourists contributed to 0.1% of the overall gross domestic product (HKTb, 2024; Tu, 2024). Hence, the ability of front-desk employees to provide outstanding customer service and effectively execute customers' requests is what determines the success of the hospitality industry (Wang et al., 2022).

Literature Review

Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory

The Conservation of Resources (COR) theory emphasizes on the role of job involvement in acquiring and maintaining personal resources that contribute to customer orientation. The COR theory posits that individuals strive to acquire, protect, and foster resources that they perceive as valuable (Halbesleben et al., 2014). According to the COR theory, increased engagement empowers employees to effectively manage and expand their resource reservoirs, thereby supporting consistent high levels of customer service (Hobfoll, 1989). The COR theory proposes that individuals are motivated to acquire and protect resources, taking into account factors such as stress, investment, and psychological aspects, which go beyond stress predictions and experiences of strain (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Yoo et al., 2023). However, employees with extensive range of knowledge and skills such as self-efficacy and self-empowerment are more likely to achieve job success (Karatepe et al., 2019a, 2019b). In this study, based on the COR theory which suggests that leadership in Hong Kong's bustling hotel industry serves as a valuable organizational resource that can be preserved and strengthened to foster both employee and organizational resilience. By developing and testing a conceptual

model that is specifically tailored to the tourism industry in Hong Kong, this research aims to provide valuable insights by adopting the COR theory to provide solid theoretical foundation to explain how job satisfaction and job engagement can impact the customer orientation of front-office employees.

Customer Orientation of front-office employees

The concept of customer orientation of front-office employees refers to the degree to which the employees conform their interaction with customers according to a predefined set of standards in order to deliver high-quality services by understanding the needs and wants of their customers (Li et al., 2019). Furthermore, three dimensions of customer orientation are introduced by Hennig-Thurau & Thurau (2003) which comprise of employees' customer-oriented abilities, willingness to serve customers, and perceived autonomy over their own decisions. According to Lee et al. (2022), organizations that prioritize customer orientation will put customer needs as a priority. However, customer perceived service employees as one of the components of service experience or products of the organization and not merely as the providers (Tajeddini, 2011). Within Hong Kong's highly competitive hospitality businesses, there is a significant relationship between customer happiness and the long-term sustainability of a hotel, with customer satisfaction plays a crucial role in differentiating a hotel experience in the market. Hence, customer orientation is an important benchmark for a customer to differentiate similar products (Melissa Liow et al., 2020). The significance of personnel who exemplifies customer service cannot be exaggerated, as they play a crucial role not only in attracting new customers but also in converting potentially negative guest experiences into positive ones through their attentiveness and tailored service (Jha et al., 2019).

Job Satisfaction

Employees who are satisfied with their jobs are more likely to demonstrate positive customer-oriented behaviours (Choi & Joung, 2017; Sadiq et al., 2022). According to Storey et al. (2021), satisfied employees enhance their performance in terms of customer orientation and organizational effectiveness. Achieving the company's goals is closely linked to employee job satisfaction, as the benefits and resources provided by the organization contribute to employees' physical and emotional security (Suhartanto et al., 2018). Moreover, combination of supportive work environment and job attributes has a major impact on job satisfaction where the degree to which hospitality employees are satisfied is greatly influenced by the programs that provide a supportive work environment and opportunities for career advancement (Cheng & Kao, 2022). Furthermore, organizations use job satisfaction as a metric to assess employees performance ((Pang & Lu, 2018). This is because job satisfaction may influence an employee's behaviour, either positively or negatively (Lee et al., 2022). Therefore, promoting job satisfaction among employees should be a priority in a workplace especially in the service industry.

Job Engagement

Job engagement is characterized by emotional investment, a sense of connection, positive perception and a focused approach to work which are essential for providing exceptional customer service (Ghlichlee & Bayat, 2021; Sadiq et al., 2022). Engaged employees exhibit a deeper commitment to their organization as they are more emotionally and mentally connected (Jung et al., 2021; Kossyva et al., 2023), which translates into an enhanced ability

to discern customer needs, tailor services accordingly, and rapidly meet customers' demands during each service interaction (Yin, 2017). Moreover, job engagement is deemed as a morale factor because it depends heavily on employees willingness to expand their discretionary effort to support the organization (Christian et al., 2011; Ivey et al., 2014). According to Aftab et al (2023), luxury hotel employees with high job engagement tend to put more discretionary effort into their job and perform better. In the tourism industry, job engagement of the front-office employees is crucial for promoting customer service, especially during difficult times and the following period of recovery and adjustment of post-pandemic.

Empowering Leadership

The operation of organizations in the service sectors has made empowering leadership a crucial component of organizational dynamics. According to Raub & Robert (2013), empowerment cannot be imposed to subordinates but through influencing, coaching and encouragement for the front-line employees to take initiatives. Empowering leadership has a diverse impact, improving both the well-being of employees and the quality of customer service (Hoang et al., 2021). This leadership style, is characterized by delegating authority, promoting autonomy, and providing robust decision-making support, plays a crucial role in fostering environments where job satisfaction and job engagement is thrived (Aryee et al., 2019; Vecchio et al., 2010). In addition, a leader who is empowered will offer their subordinates a chance to grow and acquire the necessary abilities to fulfil their duties (Tuckey et al., 2013). Furthermore, service-oriented behaviour is benefited by an empowering leadership style that does not include direct monitoring especially in the tourism and hospitality industry (Wen et al., 2023). Kim & Beehr (2020) asserted that empowering leadership is a successful approach for leading both employees and organizations, with several studies demonstrating the advantages of this type of leadership. Its relevance is pronounced in Hong Kong's hotel industry, where consistent, high-quality service is paramount. The research framework underscores empowering leadership as the key driver of customer orientation, offering the potential to maintain a competitive edge in the hospitality market.

Research Hypotheses

Four hypotheses have been established to examine the relationships among all the variables, as depicted in Figure 1. First, this study examines the influences of job satisfaction and job engagement towards customer-orientation of front-office employees. This is followed by the introduction of empowering leadership as a moderator in strengthening the relationship of customer-orientation in hotel industry in Hong Kong.

Job satisfaction and customer orientation of front-office employees

The intricate interplay between job satisfaction and customer orientation is a well-established phenomenon, particularly notable in thriving urban hubs which is renowned for their hospitality services. Prior research provides a strong basis for understanding the influence of job satisfaction on customer orientation. Cho & Choi (2021) underscored the pivotal role of employee satisfaction in cultivating dedication towards customer service within the South Korean luxury hotel segment. Moreover, Choi & Joung (2017) research found that satisfied frontline employees are likely to deliver better service to customer. This is in line with the findings of Sadiq et al. (2022) and Lee et al. (2013) who discovered a significant correlation between satisfied employees and better customer orientation which is resulted by the

improvement of customer satisfaction level. Moreover, study by Lee et al. (2022) during Covid-19 in airline industry using snowball sampling method also corroborated the finding that job satisfaction is significant to customer orientation. Hence, this study presents the subsequent hypothesis:

H1: Job satisfaction has a positive impact on customer orientation of front-office employees.

Job engagement and customer orientation of front-office employees

Job engagement, which includes qualities such as energy, commitment, and focus, is widely acknowledged as a driving force for both personal employee development and the achievement of organizational objectives (Ghlichlee & Bayat, 2021). According to a research by Jung et al. (2021) on hotel staffs in Seoul, Korea. Employees who exhibited high levels of engagement are less likely to leave their organization despite a range of challenging circumstances such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, employees who are highly engaged in their job will perform better in their work (Yin, 2017). This is supported by Sumaneeva et al. (2021) finding that job engagement among frontline hotel employees in Saint-Petersburg, Russia significantly contributes to the proactive customer service performance. In Hong Kong's fiercely competitive hotel industry, front-office employees' ability to provide the best customer-focused service is seen as crucial. Thus, the following theory has been established:

H2: Job engagement has a positive impact on customer orientation of front-office employees.

The moderating role of empowering leadership

According to Srivastava et al. (2006) and Tuckey et al. (2013), empowering leadership style is able to increase employees' internal drive by granting them authority and encouraging independent decision-making. This leadership style has been widely studied in the management literature and is has attracted attention in tourism and hospitality research (Cheong et al., 2019). Furthermore, applied empowered leadership was recommended by Lin et al (2019), for tourism and hospitality research. It improves hotel performance by encouraging creativity and innovation at the individual, group, and organizational levels (Hoang et al., 2021). Additionally, empowering leadership at the team level that builds trust, confidence, and encouragement may help front-office employees to thrive at work (Aryee et al., 2019). Empowering leadership has a diverse impact, improving both the well-being of employees and the quality of customer service. Moreover, Boukis et al (2020), found that empowering leadership could serve as a protective factor against the negative effects of customer incivility, reducing role stress and the likelihood of employee withdrawal. In addition, Quratulain et al. (2020) discovered that when front-office employees perceived that their organization places a strong emphasis on customer orientation, they will feel empowered and driven to attend to customer request. Empowering leadership provides autonomy and flexibility to subordinates in which allowing them to make quick decisions and to come up with creative solutions in response to ever-more complex customer demands and dynamic environments to work better in the hospitality and tourism contexts (Hoang et al., 2021). Given these insights, the proposed hypotheses are as follows:

H3: Empowering leadership strengthens the relationship between job satisfaction and customer orientation of front-office employees.

H4: Empowering leadership strengthens the relationship between job engagement and customer orientation of front-office employees.

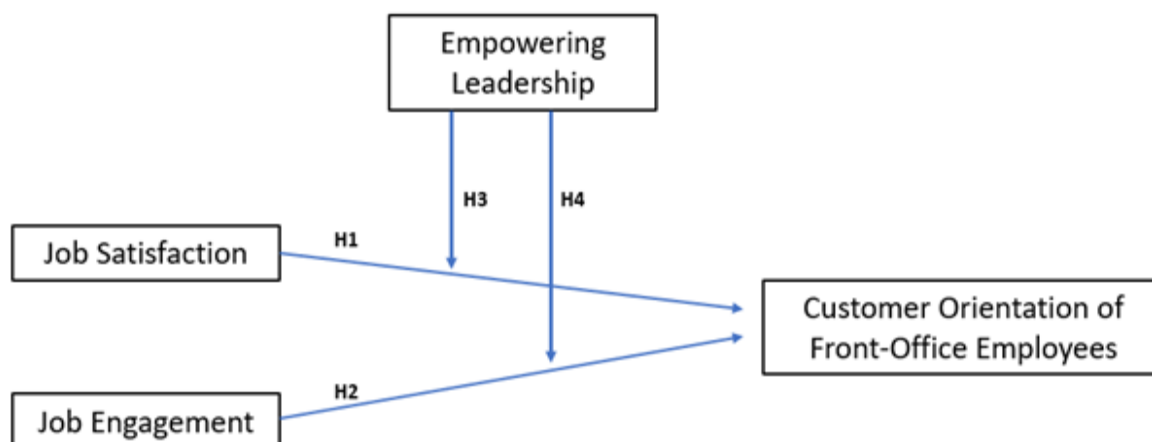


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Method

This study adopted a cross-sectional quantitative research method using random sampling from the front-office hotel employees' population in Hong Kong. A set of online Google Form questionnaires containing English language and Chinese language survey were distributed among the target respondents with the assistance of Human Resource (HR) department from respective hotels in Hong Kong. This self-administered online questionnaire offers several advantages. Firstly, it allows for extensive coverage of hotels in Hong Kong while minimizing costs. Additionally, participants can complete the questionnaire at their convenience, potentially increasing response rates (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). To make sure an adequate sample size for analysis, participants will receive a reminder to complete the questionnaire from their company's HR department after 2 weeks. The research methodology and data collection process aim to provide valuable insights into the correlation between job satisfaction, job engagement, and customer orientation among front-office employees in Hong Kong's hotel industry. The report or any related publication will strictly maintain respondents' anonymity and adhere to the consent form of the proposed research to guarantee confidentiality (Saunders et al., 2019; Sekaran & Bougie, 2016).

Discussion

While Hong Kong's tourism industry continues to recover from COVID-19, additional events are anticipated to be held in an effort to boost the number of travellers (Yau, 2024). Therefore, one of the primary drivers encouraging an increase in international travel is customer orientation of service employees. Furthermore, the "Let's Go the Extra Mile" campaign was initiated to welcome travellers (TTW, 2024). Job satisfaction and job engagement seem to have a significant impact on customer orientation of the front-office employees. Prior studies indicated that customer orientation is prevalent in the service industry (Lee et al., 2022; Wong, 2021). Furthermore, the lack of labour and post-pandemic have changed the public's overall perception of Hong Kong. In addition, it is crucial to comprehend the ways in which digitization is changing the hospitality sector and how this is influencing consumer behaviour.

The introduction of empowering leadership as a moderator in this study emerges as a pivotal determinant in shaping job satisfaction and job engagement within Hong Kong's bustling hotel industry. This issue is particularly evident in the hotel industry in Hong Kong (Choo, 2024), which has been grappling with a scarcity of skilled labour exacerbated by the pandemic. It has become evident that empowering leadership serves as a potent antidote to the adverse effects of poor job satisfaction and job engagement among service employees which impacted customer orientation. By embracing empowering leadership as a moderator, hotel organizations can adeptly navigate these challenges, cultivating a conducive environment to boost job satisfaction and job engagement among employees, thereby catalysing enhanced customer orientation among front-office employees in Hong Kong hotel industries (Hoang et al., 2021; Srivastava et al., 2006). Since this leadership does not come naturally, the tourism industry should cultivate more empowering leadership which will benefit the organization in the long term (Lin et al., 2019).

Conclusion

The conceptual framework of this study is firmly supported by prior empirical research and adopted the COR theory, also seeks to elucidate the moderator role of empowering leadership within Hong Kong's dynamic hotel industry. Through the articulation of four hypotheses, this framework aims to systematically examine the relationships between job satisfaction, job engagement, empowering leadership and customer orientation among front-office employees. Empowering leadership emerges as a fundamental determinant that is shaping the organizational dynamics within the hotel industry (Prayag et al., 2024), aligned with the widely recognized importance of job satisfaction (Choi & Joung, 2017; Lee et al., 2013) and job engagement (Karatepe et al., 2019b; Liu et al., 2021) among customer orientation of front-office employees. Even though job satisfaction and job engagement are acknowledged as critical factors in fostering a positive work environment, empowering leadership serves as a linchpin for fostering employee motivation and cultivating commitment amidst the fast-paced and demanding environment of the hotel sector in Hong Kong (Hassi, 2019; Zhang & Bartol, 2010). This conceptual model explores on how empowering leadership can act as a catalyst for translating leadership behaviours into tangible outcomes such as heightened job satisfaction and job engagement among front-office hotel employees. Despite noted discrepancies in the literature regarding the effects of empowering leadership on employee performance and job engagement, the specific impact of empowering leadership on customer orientation remains a compelling area deserving further investigation. Thus, this study endeavours to rigorously examine the influence of empowering leadership on customer orientation within the unique context of the front-office hotel employees in Hong Kong.

Theoretical Implications

This study represents a significant advancement in comprehending the introduction of empowering leadership as a moderator within the hotel industry, contributing to the enrichment of existing theoretical frameworks. While previous research has predominantly concentrated on the COR theory, this study integrates empowering leadership principles, thereby illuminating its influence on customer orientation of front-office employees in hotel industries. Customer orientation is widely recognized as pivotal for the success of service industries, fostering innovation and resilience within the hospitality sector (Zhao, 2022). However, while the COR theory has been instrumental in understanding resource conservation (Prayag et al., 2024) including the role of empowering leadership in this process,

this study further seeks to extend theoretical boundaries by applying the COR theory to the specific context of hotels in Hong Kong.

By examining the interplay between job engagement, job satisfaction and empowering leadership within the hotel environment, this study endeavours extensively to deepen the theoretical comprehension and offer practical insights for hotel managers and leaders. Such exploration does not only expand scholarly discourse but also provides actionable guidance for enhancing organizational effectiveness and employees' well-being within hotels.

Managerial Implications

This study delves into the intricate dynamics of how job satisfaction and job engagement influence customer orientation of front-office employees through a moderator specifically empowering leadership within the Hong Kong hotel industry. It underscores the imperative for hotels to prioritize the enhancement of job satisfaction and job engagement as key drivers of customer orientation of the front-office employees. The empowering leadership emerges as a moderator for streamlining operations, attaining competitive advantages, and enhancing customer orientation. Notably, empowering leadership fosters customer orientation, motivating front-office employees and facilitating error-resistant interactions that contribute to boost customer satisfaction. Given the dynamic nature of the economy and evolving customer behaviours, the prioritization of job satisfaction and job engagement becomes paramount for hotels that are seeking to foster growth and sustain competitiveness. Consequently, this study bears significant implications for hotels, managers, and leaders, by providing valuable insights to formulate strategies for growth, competitiveness, and innovation within the sector. Ultimately, the study aspires to inspire greater customer orientation practices across the hotel industry worldwide, leading to an overall improvement in customer satisfaction levels.

Limitations and Future Suggestions

While this research makes significant theoretical contributions and offers practical implications, its scope is limited to job satisfaction, job engagement, empowering leadership and customer orientation of front-office employees within the Hong Kong hotel industry. Consequently, the proposed model may not adequately capture the complexities of other industries with distinct organizational cultures and policies. Moreover, this study exclusively investigates job satisfaction, job engagement, and empowering leadership. Future research endeavours should aim to incorporate additional variables to provide a more comprehensive understanding on customer orientation within the hospitality sector. Furthermore, exploring customer orientation across different segments of the hotel industry and conducting comparative analyses with relevant theories, such as the Social Exchange Theory or the Transformational Leadership Theory, could yield valuable insights.

Additionally, investigating the relationship between empowering leadership and employee outcomes through the lens of the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Tuckey et al., 2013) may offer further depth to our understanding. Moreover, there is a need for more extensive research on customer orientation concerning opportunities, policies, and access to resources within the hospitality sector. By pursuing these endeavours, we can gain a deeper understanding of customer orientation within the hospitality sector and also stimulate

theoretical development in the area, ultimately contributing to the advancement of both scholarly knowledge and practical applications within the field.

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