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Social Supports from Organization and Customer: An Integrated Model

Jaewon Yoo*

This study applies the job-demands resource (JD-R) model to investigate the interactive effect of job demands and job resources in predicting the development of service employee work engagement and customer-oriented attitude. This paper proposed a theoretical model that suggests that the service employee's work engagement is the consequence of the employee's perceived support from the organization and its customers (customer participation) and leads to a customer-oriented attitude. However, the effect of organizational support is somewhat hindered by job insecurity, demonstrating the inability of an organizationally provided job resource to overcome the job demand of job insecurity. As a type of job demand from customer's perspective, customer crowding is suggested as a negative moderator in the link between customer participation and work engagement.

As such, this article proposes how different elements of a service employee's work environment interact to ultimately influence the service employee's customer-oriented attitude. Specifically, the current research focuses on how the negative contextual elements of job insecurity and job crowding (i.e., job demands) interact with the potentially positive elements of organizational support and customer participation (i.e., job resources), as well as with an employee's customer orientation, to ultimately develop a customer-oriented attitude.

This study concludes with some propositions for potential causal relationships among key constructs that can be empirically tested in future research, as well as implications of the current study for both managers and researchers.

Key words: Customer-Oriented Attitude, Customer Participation, Work Engagement, Emotional Labor

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I. Introduction

Increased competition among service providers, heightened expectations from customers and employers, along with overall growth in the service economy have interacted to create working conditions that can be exceptionally stressful for frontline service personnel. Crowded, busy work environments; job insecurities; both positive and negative customer contact; and varying levels of support from one's organization create challenging and unique conditions for the employee. Such conditions have prompted many organizations and researchers to focus attention on job stress and the potentially damaging strain created within employees (e.g., Groth, Henning-Thurau and Walsh 2009) as well as potentially positive outcomes that may accrue from stress in relation to service employee performance (Chan and Wan 2012).

As such, the purpose of this article is to investigate how different elements of a service employee's work environment interact to ultimately influence the service employee's customer-oriented attitude. Specifically, the current research proposes how the negative contextual elements of job insecurity and job crowding (i.e., job demands) interact with the potentially positive elements of organizational support and customer participation (i.e., job resources), as well as with an employee's customer orientation, to ultimately develop a cus-

tomor-oriented attitude.

In the past, two variables were identified as being likely to capture the essence of social support: perceived organizational support (POS) and perceived supervisor support (PSS). However, considering the importance of the interactions between customers and employees in sales contexts, interaction with customers is one of the important job characteristics unique to frontline employees. Although organization support or supervisor support has been found to be related to a number of favorable employee outcomes (Rhoades and Eisenberger 2002), no previous study has attempted to examine the effect of customer participation as a specific type of job resource on the frontline employee work engagement. Thus, customer participation can be a unique job resource, which suggests that customers are one of the important interactional sources from the service employees' perspective.

The model proposed here (see Figure 1) helps to illuminate the path to both the negative and positive interactive effects of stressors (i.e., job demands), which may ultimately help to develop positive (i.e., deep acting) attitudinal outcomes in service employees. A contribution is made to the service literature by examining the chain effect of work environment → employee engagement → customer-oriented behaviors, which demonstrates the importance of taking a holistic approach when investigating the development of an influential service customer-oriented attitude that results from serv-

ice employee work environments.

II. Theoretical Background

2.1 Job Demands-Resource Model

The job demands-resources (JD-R) model is a heuristic-based and parsimonious model that examines the interplay between job demands and job resources. Job demands are those physical, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical or psychological (i.e., cognitive or emotional) effort on the part of the employee. Therefore, job demands are associated with certain physiological or psychological costs (e.g., exhaustion or stress – Hockey 1997). Job resources are physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that (a) reduce job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs, (b) are functional in achieving work goals, and/or (c) stimulate personal growth, learning, and development (Demerouti et al. 2001).

In general, job demands and resources are negatively related because job demands, such as high work pressure and emotionally demanding workloads, may preclude the mobilization of job resources (Bakker et al. 2003b; Demerouti et al. 2001). In a similar vein, high job resources, such as social support and feedback, might help to buffer job demands (Chan

and Wan 2012).

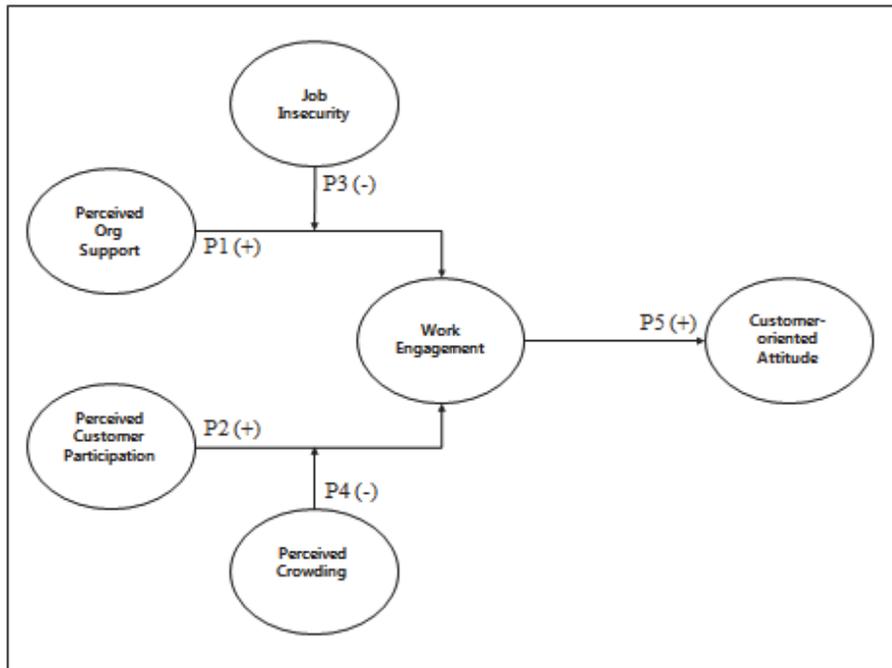
The important assumption in the JD-R model is that working characteristics may evoke two psychologically different processes: In the first process (strain), the demanding aspects of work, such as work overload, lead to constant over-taxing and, in the long run, exhaustion (e.g., Wright and Cropanzano 1998; Yoo 2013). Exhaustion, in turn, might lead to negative consequences for the organization, including absenteeism and impaired in-role performance (Bakker et al. 2004). In the second process (motivational) proposed by the JD-R model, job resources lead to engagement and positive outcomes (Schaufeli and Bakker 2004). For instance, Bakker et al. (2004)'s study of human service professionals demonstrates that job resources lead to dedication and extra-role performance.

However, most research on the JD-R model has been developed in studies that were not focused upon customer service personnel, which provides us with limited insight to increase our understanding of frontline employees.

III. Theoretical Model and Propositions

Figure 1 depicts the chain of relationships in which customer participation and organizational support begin a process that will ultimately in-

<Figure 1> Research Model and Propositions



fluence the development of service employee's positive-oriented attitude based on JD-R model. Especially, the current work will allow for a deeper understanding of how/when environmental job demands (stressors) might interact with other contextual variables.

Perceived Organizational Support. In relation to the development of customer-oriented attitude, work engagement is a potentially critical antecedent (Bates 2004). In recent years, there has been a great deal of interest in frontline employee engagement in the context of sales or service (Verbeke et al. 2011), because these employees' main tasks involve interaction with customers, and, to a large degree, service quality depends on the quality of this interaction.

In developing work engagement, the JD-R model suggests that social support (i.e., organizational support and customer participation) can enhance a service employee's work engagement, increase customer-oriented attitude, and ultimately enhance employee deep acting and reduce surface acting. That is, in relation to the motivational processes of JD-R, it has been consistently demonstrated that job resources are positively related to work engagement (Hakanen et al. 2006; Schaufeli and Bakker 2004).

According to McIntosh (1991) as well as Chan and Wan (2012), organizational support would meet the definition of a form of social support that may be viewed as a coping resource available from one or more others within an organ-

ization to assist a focal employee in the management of stressful experiences while increasing the perception of well-being. Thoits (1986) complements such a view, noting that organizational support can help an employee exert situational control through the provision of instrumental aid or advice about how to modify a situation to make it less stressful. Support can also divert an employee's attention away from potential stressors and help employees re-interpret a stressful situation so that it seems less threatening, thereby positively motivating work behaviors. Lastly, by providing feedback that connotes caring, understanding, or affirmation, supporters may decrease the distress that employees suffer when faced with difficult situations.

Thus, employee appraisals of the adequacy of their organizational support are likely to impact work motivation, dedication, and absorption. As a job resource, perceived organizational support would be expected to increase service employees' work engagement based on the JD-R model. The following proposition is suggested.

P1: Perceived organizational support is positively related to work engagement.

Perceived customer participation. Considering the boundary-spanning role of service employees, customers are important interaction sources for frontline employees, and they may certainly aid or hinder job performance. The focus of the

current research is upon the beneficial elements of customer participation (e.g., aiding in co-production).

As a result, in much the same way that an employee can view organizational support as a resource, customers may also take the form of an environmental resource when they perform behaviors that are helpful to the employee, and the employee is then in a better position to provide value for the customer (Chan et al. 2010). For example, when customers provide participatory behavior, they emulate the behavior of employees by contributing effort, time, or other resources to meet the employees' expectations (Kelley et al. 1990; Lengnick-Hall 1996).

The JD-R model assumes a motivational process in which job resources foster engagement, dedication, and motivation. Previous studies (Hakanen et al. 2006; Saks 2006; Xanthopoulou et al. 2007), indeed, show that job resources, such as social support, relate positively to work engagement. Thus, from the employee's perspective, customer participation can be a signal of the customer's support. As a result, perceived customer participation would be a unique type of social support and, thus, can be one of the major influential resources for determining a service employee's work engagement.

P2: Perceived customer participation is positively related to work engagement

Moderating Effect of Job Insecurity. Job insecurity, or the subjectively perceived likelihood of involuntary job loss, has important consequences for employees (Schreurs et al. 2010). Job insecurity has been recognized as one of the major stressors in the work environment (De Witte 1999), one that can be theoretically understood in various ways. First, there is the harmful impact of uncertainty—a central defining characteristic of job insecurity. Uncertainty involves an employee's perceived inability to accurately predict the consequence of choice or decision. Uncertainty elicits feelings of powerlessness and a lack of control, and these perceptions of uncontrollability, in turn, have been shown to be important antecedents of impaired health (Bordia et al. 2004). Jahoda (1982) documented that job insecurity implies the frustration of personal needs, posing a considerable threat to employee's future prospects.

Thus, from the employee's perspective, the perceived threat of job loss might have harmful effects on psychological well-being and health outcomes (Ashford et al. 1989) and, therefore, can be regarded as a job demand. Such a job demand will reduce the positive relationship between the job resource of organizational support and work engagement. That is, the organization is supportive in day-to-day activities, but the overarching nature of job insecurity in the industry partly negates this support. Thus, we can expect that the effect of perceived organizational support on work en-

agement will be diminished as employees perceive higher levels of job insecurity.

P3: Job insecurity will negatively moderate the relationship between perceived organizational support and work engagement.

Moderating Effect of Perceived Crowding. The ability of the physical environment (i.e., servicescape) to influence both employee and customer behaviors is particularly apparent in service businesses (Bitner 1992). That is, in service organizations, the same physical setting that communicates with and influences customers might also affect employees of the firm (Baker et al. 1988). One environmental factor that has received considerable research interest, particularly in service and retail settings, is perceived crowding (Hui and Bateson 1991; Machleit et al. 2000). According to the Hui and Bateson (1991), perceived crowding, or the perception of excessive individuals within a given space, causes feelings of unpleasantness and stress.

The social interference perspective (Oldhem et al. 1995) suggests that individuals often react negatively to densely populated environments because they are unable to control their interactions with others, and they have more difficulty achieving their immediate goals. The JD-R model posits that problems in the physical work environment may lead to resource loss, such as health problems and reduction of

employee energy resources in the form of burn-out (Bakker and Demerouti 2007; Demerouti et al. 2001). Thus, the current study portrays an employee's perception of customer crowding as a job demand.

In addition to the main effects of job demands and resources, the JD-R model proposes that interactions between job demands and job resources are important for the development of job strain and/or motivation. More specifically, it is proposed that the effect of job resources is modified when job demands are high.

In the instance of participation in combination with crowding, it is proposed that the overwhelming nature of the employee/customer interaction in a crowded environment would hinder the potentially positive effect of customer participation (Chan et al. 2010). As Chan et al. (2010) suggest, although the participation of customers has the potential to lead to beneficial outcomes, the presence of an overload of customers has a tendency to create a stressful environment, where relational value is no longer being created but where work overload and stress become the prominent phenomena. Thus, this study proposes that an employee's perceived crowding as a customer-related job demand will reduce the positive effect of perceived customer participation on work engagement.

P4: Perceived crowding will negatively moderate the relationship between perceived customer participation and work

engagement.

Customer-Oriented Attitude. According to Stock and Hoyer (2005), customer-oriented attitude is more important than customer-oriented behavior because behaviors are less stable than attitudes and can be easily influenced by the actions of the firm (Williams and Wiener 1996), the customers (Chonko et al. 1986; Lee and Ji 2013), and the environment (Teas et al. 1979). Further, as Zablah et al. (2012) demonstrate, it is the psychological element of an employee's customer orientation that demonstrates a more highly significant effect upon important service employee outcomes, above and beyond the behavioral elements. Thus, while short-term change is possible, attitudes tend to be more stable than behaviors (Williams and Wiener 1996). Thus, if companies truly want to implement a long-term customer orientation strategy, it is important to focus on the development of the customer-oriented attitude.

Work engagement is a concept relevant for employee well-being and positive work attitudes for several reasons: First, work engagement is a positive experience in itself (Schaufeli et al. 2002). Second, it is related to good health and positive work affect (Demerouti et al. 2001). Third, work engagement helps employees derive benefits from stressful work (Britt et al. 2001). Fourth, work engagement is positively related to commitment to organizational ideals (Demerouti et al. 2001) and is expected to

positively affect employees' attitudes toward work (Kahn 1990).

As a result, engaged employees have high levels of energy, are enthusiastic about their work, and perceive their time at work as passing very quickly (Macy and Schneider 2008). Research has also shown that work engagement relates positively to customer satisfaction (Salanova et al. 2005), in-role performance (Schaufeli et al. 2006), and extra-role performance (Bakker et al. 2004).

Taken in total, although work engagement has not been previously linked to a positive orientation toward customers, it is proposed that the work-engaged service employees will embody a positive service concept and be motivated to view customers in a positive manner. In short, engaged service employees who demonstrate more positive emotions/attitudes toward work will be involved in their boundary-spanning role, which will help to shape a customer-oriented attitude.

P5: Work engagement is positively related to a customer-oriented attitude.

IV. Implication

Further, in the current study, I use the JD-R model (Bakker et al. 2003a; Demerouti et al. 2001) to increase our understanding of the

psychological processes that relate to service employees' engagement at work as well as to demonstrate the significance of a customer-oriented attitude, especially in the face of significant environmental stressors. In addition, it is demonstrated that job demands-perceived crowding and job insecurity-lesser the effects of organizational support and customer participation on work engagement (as suggested in the JD-R model).

4.1 Theoretical Implication

The theoretical research model shows that the JD-R model effectively proposes the inter-relationship between job demands and job resources, while it also complement recent research that suggests a possible positive effect of contextual supports (Chan and Wan 2012; Zablah et al. 2012). That is, when service employees perceive the availability of organizational and customer support, they feel more engaged in work, which, in turn, is related to a positive, customer-oriented attitude. Furthermore, when service employees perceive job insecurity, the influence of organizational support on work engagement is reduced. This study also suggests the negative moderating effect of perceived crowding as a job demand that dampens the positive effect of customer participation on work engagement.

A primary contribution of the research is that it complements and helps to bridge recent

work by Zablah et al. (2012) and Chan and Wan (2012). Zablah et al. (2012) find that stressors, such as customer crowding, may interact with a high level of customer orientation to create positive work outcomes, while Chan and Wan (2012) find that stressors, such as job insecurity, influence the initiation of self-regulatory (i.e., resource depleting) behaviors, which may ultimately affect work behaviors in either a positive or negative manner, dependent upon the context.

Additionally, a second contribution of the research is a focused investigation of the influence of job demands and job resources upon the development of a service employee's level of work engagement. In recent years, there has been a great deal of interest in employee work engagement, with many researchers highlighting the importance of the construct and its ability to predict employee outcomes, organizational success, and financial performance (e.g., total shareholder return) (Zablah et al. 2012). At the same time, it is reported that employee engagement is on the decline and that there is a deepening disengagement among employees, spurring a need to better understand the path to developing work engagement (Bates 2004). As a result, researchers have sought to identify factors enhancing the positive creation of work engagement in the organizational setting, ultimately linking the development of engagement to positive employee outcomes. Thus, in combination, the current study proposes the inter-

active effect among both positive and negative service environment conditions and the related effects upon work engagement. This begins the "chain," which ultimately influences employee behaviors and emotional labor.

4.2 Managerial Implications

The results of this study also have practical implications. First, perceived organizational support is a significant predictor of work engagement. Interestingly, this is the one antecedent variable in the study where social exchange theory has previously been used to explain employees' attitudes and behavior. In the context of this study, it would appear that the caring and concern associated with organizational support creates a sense of obligation on the part of employees, who reciprocate with greater levels of work engagement. Thus, organizations that wish to improve employee engagement should focus on employees' perceptions of the support that they receive from their organization. Organizational programs that address employees' needs and concerns (e.g., surveys, focus groups, and suggestion programs) and demonstrate caring and support (e.g., by offering flexible work arrangements) might prompt employees to reciprocate with higher levels of engagement.

Second, a negative moderating effect of job insecurity in the relationship between perceived organizational support and work engagement is suggested. As most industries have become in-

creasingly competitive, the pressure on sales or service organizations to satisfy investors through superior performance has intensified. Worries over job insecurity are a natural offshoot of this dynamic. In particular, field managers might be subjected to especially intense job pressure, as they balance performance pressure from upper management with the challenges of leading frontline employees and satisfying customers. Such pressures are prone to eventual manifestations of heightened demands at the frontline employee level (Arnold, Palmatier, Grewal and Sharma 2009). Such demands can lead to reduced levels of employee motivation and satisfaction while promoting insecurities of job loss (Davy et al. 1997). Thus, especially within competitive environments, managers should consider the many potentially positive benefits of promoting a greater sense of job security by focusing on enhancing employees' perceived organizational support while minimizing the climate of job insecurity.

Third, an important practical implication for managers is the need to understand the importance of customer participation for employee engagement. From a practitioner standpoint, examining the relationship between customer participation and work engagement is of great importance given the benefits and costs associated with managing customer participation. This study proposes that service employees' perceived customer participation will enhance the economic benefits of productivity gains by

using customers as substitutes for parts of the employees' labor. Thus, managers should increase the positive effect of perceived customer participation on work engagement by increasing frontline employees' understanding of customer participation. As explained previously, customer participation is a voluntary, valuable behavior, and it can be a signal of customer involvement. Thus, if managers can improve their employees' attitudes regarding customer involvement, it may expand the positive effect of employees' perceived customer participation as a job resource, thereby increasing service employees' work engagement.

For further empirical testing, all constructs that have been shown in this paper can be adapted from prior research. For example, customer-oriented attitude will be measured with a 6-item scale adapted from Stock and Hoyer (2005). To measure perceived customer participation, Claycomb et al. (2001)'s 9-item measure can be used. Groth et al. (2009)'s scale is appropriate for measuring service employees' emotional labor.

According to Chan, Yim and Lam (2010), professional financial services (e.g., financial institutions) are more appropriate contexts to assess the desirability of customer participation. Other researchers suggest that customer participation is also more salient and offers greater value creation opportunities for service providers and customers in professional (e.g., financial, legal, medical) services (Auh et al.

2007; Sharma and Patterson 2000). Therefore, the target population for the survey of this study can be composed of financial service employees.

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