

Impact of Job autonomy on Customer orientation: Mediating role of Affective commitment

Hasan Farid & Xiongying Niu

Abstract:

This study aims at exploring the effects of work method autonomy (WMA), decision-making autonomy (DMA), and work scheduling autonomy (WSA) on customer orientation through employees' affective commitment based on self-determination theory. The data was collected from full time front-line service workers in hospitality industry of China by employing cross-sectional design of study. The results show that three types of autonomy (WMA, DMA, WSA) are positively related with affective commitment and affective commitment has a positive effect on employees' customer-oriented behavior. The results also postulate that affective commitment mediates the relationship between types of autonomy (WMA, DMA, WSA) and employees' customer-oriented behavior. The study suggests that hospitality managers should shape such an environment in which they can provide employees with autonomy in choosing methods, schedules and making decisions so that they can experience affective commitment and get motivate to exhibit customer-oriented behaviors.



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Keywords: *Work method autonomy, decision-making autonomy, work scheduling autonomy, affective commitment, customer orientation.*

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1.Introduction

Organizations are facing an advanced level of competitive environment which requires them to operate in an efficient manner to gain competitive environment. Employees have been considered to play an important role for organization success. Given that that employees have been burdened with heavy workloads (Wu & Chen, 2019), requires to develop such environment which motivates them and they can perform their tasks with liberty. In this context, job autonomy has been considered as a crucial motivating aspect. Previously job characteristics model by Hackman and Oldham (1980) highlights the importance of job autonomy as an important motivational factor. Job autonomy is defined as the extent to which employee can exercise discretion in their routine work (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Job autonomy has been playing an important role in promoting employees job related positive outcomes such as thriving at work, job satisfaction (Jiang, Di Milia, Jiang, & Jiang, 2020); Trust in leadership (Anand, Chhajed, & Delfin, 2012); work-family facilitation (Wattoo, Zhao, & Xi, 2020) and work engagement (Malinowska, Tokarz, & Wardzichowska, 2018).

Providing autonomy to employees is a motivational factor which makes them more loyal and they are more attached to the organization (Anand et al., 2012), which suggests that autonomy can play an important role in making employees committed to organization. Previously, autonomy was being treated as an overall construct and its multidimensionality was being ignored, but we postulate here autonomy containing three dimensions as decision-making autonomy, work method autonomy and work scheduling autonomy based on the work of (Breugh, 1985; De Spiegelaere, Van Gyes, & Van Hootegeem, 2016; Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006). Here we postulate that job autonomy can create a positive impact on affective commitment of employees. Affective commitment is defined as the willingness to remain a member of the organization and helping the organizational to attain its goals (Meyer & Allen, 1991).

Affective commitment has been dominant in the literature form its other two co-dimensions normative and continuance commitment in terms of affecting employees attitudes (Garg & Dhar, 2016). When employees experience an enhanced affective commitment, they tend to remain more attached with the organization (Jaiswal & Dhar, 2017). Research postulates that employees' affective commitment with their organization motivates them to be customer oriented (Lombardi, Sasseti, & Cavaliere, 2019) which is defined as the employees' efforts to cater the customer wishes and needs and to make them satisfied (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, & Gremler, 2002). A scarce understanding has been developed on the relationship of autonomy and commitment and mediating role of affective commitment between motivational job characterizes and employee's behavior directed at customer. We aim to fill this gap based on self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), by investigating the effects of job autonomy on employees' customer orientation through their affective commitment. We propose that three dimensions of job autonomy creates a positive impact of employees' affective commitment which in turn promotes their customer orientation behavior. The study at hand contributes to existing body of knowledge in three ways. First, by investigating the impact of dimensions of job autonomy and affective commitment. Second, The effects of affective commitment and customer orientation. Third, by investigating the mediating role of affective commitment between three types of job autonomy and customer orientation.

Literature review

2.Theory and hypotheses

2.1 Autonomy and affective commitment

Self-determination theory (SDT) explicates that human have natural inclination towards growth and development (Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT expounds sheds light on the three basic psychological needs which play a crucial role by which individuals feel motivated: autonomy (sense of volition) , competence (capability of dealing the environment) and relatedness (sense of being connected and being cared about) (Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008). Provision of autonomy by organization makes individuals intrinsically motivated and they perceive that organization cares about them. According to the job characteristics model (Hackman & Oldham, 1976), job autonomy is the extent to which the job allows individuals to exercise freedom in choosing work methods and setting scheduling their job tasks (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006). From componential perspective, autonomy has been related to several work outcomes.

Work method autonomy which is referred as to the extent to which individual can exercise volition over choosing methods and procedures to carry out the tasks (Breugh, 1985). Extant models of job design entail this dimension as an important ingredient to promote motivational aspects in individuals (De Spiegelaere et al., 2016), which can make them affectively committed to the organization. Decision-making autonomy is defined as the liberty in making work related decision to give a prompt response to job queries and to take personal initiatives (Muecke & Iseke, 2019). Scholars have argued that decision-making discretion promotes individuals part in implementing organizational strategies which promotes satisfaction (Ardichvili, Page, & Wentling, 2003) and enhance their commitment and motivation (Irawanto, 2015).

Work scheduling autonomy is defined as the right of setting schedules and prioritizing the tasks according to self-ease (Muecke & Iseke, 2019). When employees perform the tasks with a pre et schedules, they accomplish them with enhanced motivation and in a better way. Moreover, scheduling the work tasks will motivate them to show their commitment by being attached to the organization and to help organization to achieve its goals. Overall, with the evidence from extant literature that provision autonomy to employees, makes them motivated and remain attached with the organization and express their commitment towards organization (Galletta, Portoghese, & Battistelli, 2011) , we propose that ;

H1: (a) *Work method autonomy*, (b) *decision-making autonomy* and (c) *work scheduling* is positively related to *affective commitment*.

2.2. Affective commitment and customer orientation

Affective commitment has been drafted as the individual's attachment to the organization and a giving a helping hand to achieve its goals (Meyer & Alien, 1991) . It develops individuals understanding of their role in the organization and fetch the values which enable them to contribute in achieving organizational customer-oriented goals (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002). Malhotra and Mukherjee (2004) expound that individuals commitment play a crucial role in provision and refinement of quality service. While extant studies delineate a strong association between commitment and employees' customer-oriented behavior (Lombardi et al., 2019). Moreover, scholars have argued that higher level of individuals' commitment towards organization enables a stronger tendency to exhibit their customer-oriented behavior (Kelley, 1992) , which not only helps the organization to foster its performance but also to satisfy its customers' needs and wishes (Noor, Kasim, Scarlat, & Muhamad, 2012). Putting together, we argue that;

H2: *Affective commitment will be positively related to customer orientation.*

2.3 Mediating role of affective commitment

We propose that Job autonomy as a motivational job characteristic will promote employees’ affective commitment which in turn will enable their customer-oriented behavior. Job autonomy has been regarded as the most studied motivational factor as compared to other job characteristics (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) . Job autonomy is considered as a core component self-determination theory. According to widely practiced job design mechanisms, job characteristics model (Oldham & Hackman, 1980) underscores that jobs which are based on motivational job characteristics such as autonomy, shape an enhanced work environment, which can motivate employees to be connected with the organization. Job autonomy is a unique contextual factor and one of the core basic psychological needs, fulfillment of whom leads individuals to be intrinsically motivated (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Moreover, With an enhanced autonomy, individuals feel being connected and being responsible for success or failure of the procedures they adopted and in this course they feel being affectively committed to the organizational (Galletta et al., 2011). Individuals’ being affectively committed, then tend to exhibit such behaviors which actually helps the organization to achieve its goals (Meyer & Alien, 1991). Extant literature also evidenced that when employees experience affective commitment with their organization, their tendency to help the organization by exhibiting customer-oriented behaviors is enhanced and they provide quality service to fulfill their wishes and needs (Lombardi et al., 2019) . Based on these arguments we postulate that;

H3: *Affective commitment mediates the relationship between Job autonomy (a) Work method, (b) decision-making, (c) work scheduling) and customer orientation.*

2.4 Theoretical framework

On the basis of above discussion, we have formulated the theoretical framework for this study. Which shows that three dimensions of autonomy are predicting affective commitment and affective commitment is predicting customer-oriented behavior of employees.

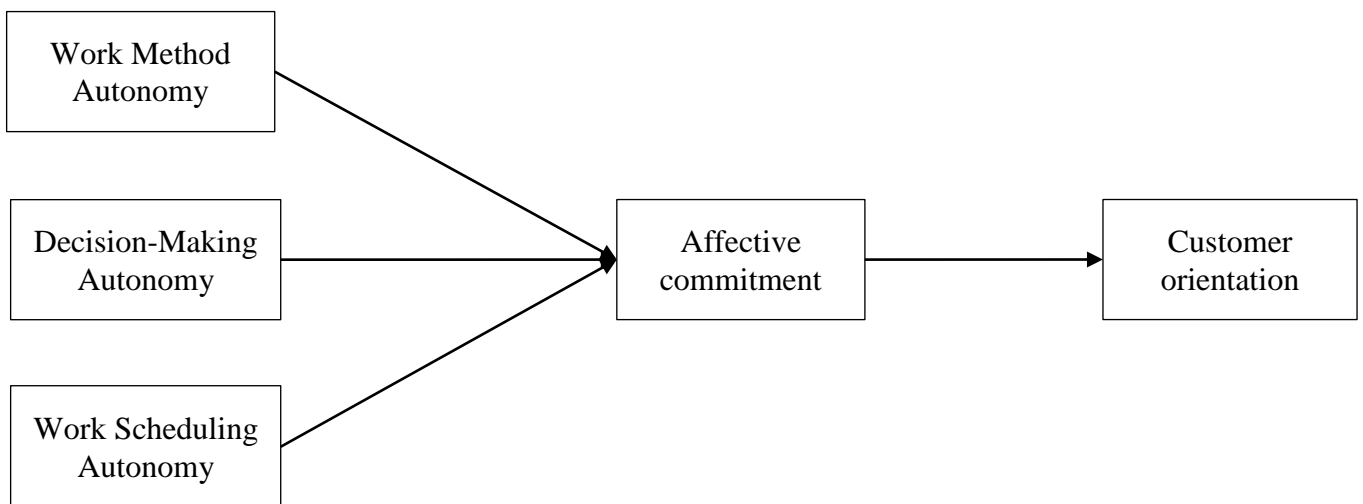


FIGURE 1: Proposed framework

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants and procedure

The sample for study at hand for data collection purpose was front-line service employees working in hotels in China. Their roles were consisted but not limited to provide front desk

service, event management, beverages, catering and waiters etc. The reason for choosing front-line service workers is because of their crucial in challenging the existing practices and bring developmental changes in procedures (Cai, Huo, Lan, Chen, & Lam, 2019). We first contacted Human resources department of hotels in China and then paid a personal visit to guide the employees to fill in the questionnaires. The data was collected through survey questionnaire and on voluntary basis. We distributed 190 questionnaires among employees out of which we received 168.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and evidences of multicollinearity

Variables	Means	SD	VIF	WMA	DMA	WSA	AC	CO
WMA	3.11	.83	1.51	1				
DMA	3.29	.99	1.15	.304**	1			
WSA	3.01	.90	1.25	.440**	.214**	1		
AC	3.21	.88	1.75	.463**	.577**	.313**	1	
CO	3.22	.88	1.30	.450**	.309**	.218**	.457**	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Abbreviations: WMA, work method autonomy; DMA, decision making autonomy; AC, affective commitment; SD, Standard deviation; VIF, variance inflation factor.

We discarded 15 questionnaires and a final set of 153 useful questionnaires was summed up for analysis with a response rate of 80.52%. Among participants 66 (43.1%) were male and 87 (56.9%) were female. Regarding age, 108(70.58%) were from an age group of 18-33, and 17 (11.1%) were having age of 34-39 years and rest 28 (18.3%) were 40 years or above. Related to education 141 (92.15%) were having an education from middle pass certificate to Intermediate. 8 (5.2%) were having Bachelors degree and 4 (2.6%) had Masters degree. Employees were diverse in work experience as 128(83.66%) were having work experience from 1-15 years, 13(8.5%) had 16-20 years' experience and 12 (7.8%) had more than 20 years of work experience.

3.2 Measures

All the questions were rated on 5-point Likert scale and it was translated into Chinese and then back translated into English because of its original language was English by using back translation procedure suggested by (Brislin, 1970). For measuring dimensions of job autonomy ,we used 3-items scale for each dimension (WMA,DMA,WSA) adapted from (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006). The sample items were "The job allows me to make decisions about what methods I use to complete my work", "The job allows me to make a lot of decisions on my own" and "The job allows me to plan how I do my work" for WMA, DMA and WSA with a Cronbach alpha value of 0.743, 0.785 and 0.740 respectively. Affective commitment was measured by using 6-item scale adapted from Meyer, Allen, and Smith (1993) with a Cronbach alpha 0.877. Customer orientation was measured with 4-item scale adapted from Korschun, Bhattacharya, and Swain (2014) with a Cronbach alpha of 0.791. We controlled the demographic variables (gender, age, education and tenure of employment) considering their potential effects on study variables (Ng & Feldman, 2012).

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive statistics

The results for descriptive statistics such as mean, standard deviation and correlational analysis have been discussed in table.1. As per the results WMA, DMA and WSA are positively related with affective commitment ($r = 0.463$, $p < 0.01$), ($r = 0.577$, $p < 0.01$) and (r

= 0.313, $p < 0.01$) respectively. Affective commitment is positively related with customer orientation ($r = 0.457$, $p < 0.01$) (Table 1).

4.2 Common method variance

Because of self-reported nature of measures we employed Harmon's single factor test to see the common method variance. Extant studies postulate that in case of presence of common method variance a single factor accounts for majority of covariance among endogenous and exogenous variables (Lings & Greenley, 2005). The result shows that a single factor accounts for 34.6% variance which is below the cut-off value of 50% suggested by (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003), which shows that common method variance is not a potential issue for this study.

4.3 Hypotheses testing

We tested the our hypotheses by using structural equation modelling (SEM) (Bollen, 1989). We assessed the model fitness through different fitness indicators (Kline & Kline, 1998) by using AMOS and the results show a satisfactory model fitness of 5 factors $\chi^2 = 152.228$, $df = 142$, $\chi^2/df = 1.072$, $SRMR = .058$, $RMSEA = .022$, $TLI = .989$ and $CFI = .990$. The multicollinearity for three independent variables was assessed and results showed a satisfactory range (1.15-1.75) which is less than the threshold of 3 (Table 1). We hypothesized that Job autonomy (WMA, DMA and WSA) creates a positive impact on employees' affective commitment, the results extend support to the said paths H1 a, H1b and H1c ($\beta_{WMA \rightarrow AC} = 0.280$, $p < 0.001$), ($\beta_{DMA \rightarrow AC} = 0.473$, $p < 0.001$) and ($\beta_{WSA \rightarrow AC} = 0.115$, $p < 0.05$) respectively (Table 2). Moreover, results showed that when employees' psychological state turns positive organization and they experience affective commitment then they are more inclined towards exhibiting customer-oriented behavior H2 ($\beta_{AC \rightarrow CO} = 0.457$, $p < 0.001$) (Table 2).

Table 2. Direct paths

Structural paths	Coefficient estimates	t-value	Path results
WMA--->AC	.280***	3.98	supported
DMA--->AC	.473***	7.32	supported
WSA--->AC	.115*	2.30	supported
AC--->CO	.457***	6.33	supported

Note: Level of significant *** $p < 0.001$, * $p < 0.01$

We have also investigated the indirect effects of Types of job autonomy (WMA, DMA, WSA) on customer orientation through affective commitment by using bias corrected with 5000 bootstrap sampling method at 95% confidence interval through SEM (Hayes, 2013). Results showed as significant indirect effects when confidence interval does not include zero between upper and lower boundaries. Results showed support to the said hypotheses as WMA, DMA and WSA have significant indirect effects on customer orientation through affective commitment ($\beta_{WMA \rightarrow AC \rightarrow CO} = 0.128$, [CI:0.048,0.239]). ($\beta_{DMA \rightarrow AC \rightarrow CO} = 0.216$, [CI:0.136,0.320]), and ($\beta_{WSA \rightarrow AC \rightarrow CO} =$, [CI:0.014,0.108]) (Table 3).

Table 3. Indirect paths

Structural paths	Effect	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
WMA--->AC--->CO	.128	.049	.048	.239
DMA--->AC--->CO	.216	.046	.136	.320
WSA--->AC--->CO	.091	.031	.014	.108

5. Discussion

The multidimensionality of job autonomy (Breugh, 1985) was long been ignored and it was interesting to see its direct effects on affective commitment and indirect effects on customer orientation through mediating role of affective commitment. The study at hand postulates that all three dimensions have positive effects on employees' affective commitment. It is consistent with extant literature where decision-making dimension of job autonomy was more strongly associated with the behavioral outcomes of employees as compared to other dimensions (Muecke & Iseke, 2019) and that the work method autonomy is more strongly associated to its outcome as compared to work scheduling autonomy (Schieman, 2013). These findings indicate that employees should be provided more liberty in decision-making so that they feel motivated and turn to have an affective commitment with the organization. Moreover, the mediation results explicate that providing employees with autonomy in methods, decisions and schedules makes them more committed to the organization and they are more motivated to serve organizations' customers.

This study is first to our knowledge in investigating dimensions of job autonomy, affective commitment and customer orientation in hospitality sector of China. Our study contributes the existing body of knowledge in several ways. First, by investigating the direct effects of dimensions of job autonomy (WMA, DMA, WSA) on employees' affective commitment. Second, by exploring the effect of affective commitment on employees' customer-oriented behavior. Third, by investigating the mediating effects of employees' affective commitment between three dimensions of job autonomy and customer orientation. Besides the theoretical contributions, this study also provides suggestions to hospitality managers. Results show that Job autonomy is multidimensional in nature (Breugh, 1985), which shows that manager should be able to understand this difference in order to provide autonomy to employees in different aspects. According to the results, decision-making autonomy is more strongly related with affective commitment which suggests that hospitality managers should allow employees up to an extent to make decisions so that they feel motivate and remain attached with the organization. Moreover, the results of indirect effects suggest that managers should consider the provision of autonomy to employees in different aspects so that they experience affective commitment and can exhibit a customer-oriented behavior.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed at exploring the effects of job autonomy at dimensional level (WMA, DMA, WSA) on employees' customer-oriented behavior with a mediating effect of affective commitment in hospitality industry of China. The results show that provision of autonomy at componential level strengthens employees' affective commitment with their organization and committed employees are motivated to fulfill the wishes and needs of customers by exhibiting customer-oriented behavior. The study presents numerous implications by extending the existing theoretical understanding in the extant literature. Moreover, the study at hand brings valuable suggestions for hospitality managers to bring reforms into employees' job design so that it can provide the autonomy in different perspectives in order to motivate employees to make them committed and they can exhibit customer-oriented behaviors.

6.1 Limitations and future directions

The study at hand employed Structural equation modeling, fitness index measures, and bootstrap samples to make it more significant yet there are few limitations which can be dealt in the future research. First, we conducted this study by adopting a cross-sectional design. Future studies can remove this limitation by conducting longitudinal design of study. Second,

we collected the responses through self-reported questions which can cause common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003), though we calculated the Harmon single factor, yet future studies can fill this gap by collecting data from supervisors. Third, this study was conducted in hospitality sector of China, which questions its generalizability to other sectors. Future studies can test this model in other sectors and other cultures.

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