

Front Office Employee Psychological Empowerment and Service Quality in Singapore Luxury Hotel Industry – An Exploratory Study

Psychological
Empowerment and
Service Quality

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to propose a theoretical model by investigating the relationship between the motivational factors (job satisfaction, commitment to organisation, job creativity and job motivation) and quality of service; and the moderating effect of psychological empowerment on the quality of service in Singapore luxury hotels.

Design/methodology/approach – The approach taken to articulate the theoretical model is to review extant literature on service quality and empowerment; and the relationship of the motivational factors with psychological empowerment.

Findings – The findings indicated that i) employees with higher levels of empowerment were able to deliver higher service quality to the organisation. However, these propositions have not been rigorously tested in the hotel industry and ii) Resource literature indicated existence of several exploratory studies on the linkage between employee psychological empowerment as the independent factor and quality of service as the dependent factor. However, the role of psychological empowerment as the moderating factor with individual motivational factors as independent factors; and quality of service as dependent factor remains unexplored.

Research limitations/implications – This study is conducted in the Singapore context and generalisability is not claimed.

Originality/value – This is the first study conducted in Singapore to understand Front Office Psychological Empowerment in luxury hotels. It will provide insights and theoretical knowledge on the role of psychological empowerment in moderating the impact of motivational factors on performance of Front Office employees in luxury hotel industry. It allows hotel management to develop tailored training and business strategies to strengthen employee competence and customer-contact delivery.

Keywords - Psychological Empowerment; Quality of Service; Job Satisfaction; Commitment to Organisation, Job Creativity; Job Motivation

Paper type - Research paper

1. Introduction

The globalisation of the world economy has intensified in recent decades, with the service sector accounting for more than one third of the total global services trade (UNWTO, 2011). The hotel industry has become one of the most popular industries to study service quality due to the dynamic nature of the industry and the constant demanding nature of its customers. With a greater level of uncertainty emanating from increasingly demanding customers, hotels need to empower their employees to go extra miles to meet customer expectations and enhance service quality.

Over the past years, increasing interests have been shown in the management of customer-contact employees in the hotel industry. The reason for such interest lies in three of the commonly defined attributes of service: Intangibility, Simultaneous Production and Delivery, and Customer Participation in the service (Yilmaz, 2009). The quality of the service plays an important role for a hotel to achieve organisational effectiveness and customer satisfaction (Berger and Brownell, 2009). It is imperative that hotel conglomerates measure and monitor service quality and satisfaction with a view to influencing the behavioural intentions of their customers. Furthermore, the employees' attitudes and their behaviour towards customers have been argued to significantly influence customer perceived service quality (Yong, 2004). Therefore, success in the hotel industry depends on managing and retaining these service employees and implementing employee empowerment (Fulford and Enz, 1995).

Several studies have been conducted to explore the linkage between employee psychological empowerment as the independent factor and quality of service as the dependent factor (Goodale, Melissa and Roney, 1977; Snipes, Oswald, LaTour and Armenakis, 2005). However, the moderating influence of psychological empowerment on quality of service remains unexplored. Furthermore, while there has been much study of the empowerment construct in both academic (Spreitzer, 1995) and practitioner (Ford and Fotler, 1995) publications, few researchers have sought to critically examine and address this use by asking Front Office employees to describe their work and ascertain if they view themselves as empowered. Further conceptual and empirical evidence is needed to justify the benefits of empowerment.

With the anticipated increase in growth of Singapore's tourism sector and the corresponding demand on luxury hotel industry in next 5 years (Straits Times, 2011), customer-contact delivery remain a key success factor to sustain business and customer loyalty. As such, it is timely and useful to investigate the role of employee psychological empowerment and the impact on service quality in luxury hotels.

The purpose of this paper is to propose a theoretical model by investigating the relationship between the motivational factors (job satisfaction, commitment to organisation, job creativity and job motivation) and quality of service; and the moderating effect of psychological empowerment on the quality of service in Singapore luxury hotels.

2. Review of Service Quality and Empowerment Literature

2.1 Service Quality

Service has been described as a "deed, act or performance" (Berry, 1980, p. 24). Grönroos (1990) defines service as an activity or series of activities of more or less intangible nature that normally take place in interactions between the customer and service employees. On the other hand, Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988, p. 16) define service quality as "a global judgement, or attitude, relating to the superiority of the service." Grönroos (1984) argues that perceived service quality was dependent on the comparison of expected service with perceived service, and thus, the outcome of a comparative evaluation process. Thus, service quality refers to the concept as an attitude or overall judgement resulting from the comparisons between the customer's expectations and perceptions of actual service that has been performed and delivered (Ladhari and Morales, 2008; Blesic, 2011).

In the service marketing literature, several models of service quality have been introduced to conceptualise service quality (Brogowicz, Delene and Lyth, 1990; Grönroos, 1984). Lin and Tsai (2011) noted that the conceptual models of service quality are still in the developing stage. Broadly, these service quality models aim to detail the factors impacting service quality, to overcome quality challenges and to offer a framework for strengthening quality programmes. Models of service quality suggest that service quality is multidimensional. Acting on this assumption, researchers have investigated the number and nature of service quality dimensions in a variety of service organisations, aimed at assessing customer perceived service quality. They generally adopted two main approaches: the expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm (SERVQUAL) and the perception only paradigm

(SERVPERF). Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985; 1988) developed and refined the SERVQUAL scale based on the gap model as an instrument for measuring customers' perceptions of service quality. To date, SERVQUAL scale has been widely used to measure service quality in general service sector.

Services have unique characteristics (intangibility, inseparability, heterogeneity and perishability) making them different from goods and it requires simultaneous customer participation during the service delivery process (Kolter, Bowen and Makents, 2003). The important aspect of service is its people alongside the service process and the physical surroundings of the service provision. The inseparability and variability of services reflect the importance of employee-customer relationship in shaping customer experience (Lovelock, 2001). It also affects customer-contact employees' behaviour and attitudes. Clearly, it is expected that the hotel encounter is a high contact service. As such, customer-contact employee plays a critical role in determining the customers' perception of service quality delivered.

2.2 Empowerment

Hotels can build competitive advantages by providing exceptional customer service. To achieve this, every hotel must have an empowered workforce (Murrmann and Perdue, 2010). It allows for autonomy and enables the employee to respond to the needs of the heterogeneous customer at the point of service delivery (Guzel, 2008). Czepiel, Solomon and Surprenant (1985) suggested that the interaction between employees and customers has the element of perceived control by both parties. A satisfactory and effective service encounter should balance the needs for control by customer, the hotel and the Front Office employees (Bateson, 1995). Employee empowerment is considered as an effective strategy that helps hotels to strengthen the relationship between employees and customers (Amenume and Lockwood, 2008).

Conger and Kanungo (1988) define employee empowerment as a process of enhancing feelings of self-efficacy among organisational members, through both identification of conditions that foster powerlessness and their subsequent removal by both formal organisational practices and informal techniques of providing efficacy information. Quinn, Spreitzer, Kizilos and Nason (1997) highlight that empowered employees participate in the decision-making and problem-solving process with their managers. Because of the recognised role in theory and practice, empowerment has become a new paradigm among the modern hotel management and organisational applications (Hug, 2010).

Lashley (1999) point out that empowerment is a generic term which covers a range of managerial initiatives, intentions and concerns. There are five dimensions (Culture, Commitment, Power, Task Allocation and Task) which provide a means of describing, analysing and locating the form of empowerment (Lashley and McGoldrick, 1994). Organisational researchers (Forrester, 2000; Linden, Wayne and Sparrowe, 2000; Dewettinck, Singh and Buyens, 2003) have distinguished empowerment into two major perspectives: the structural and the psychological approach.

The structural approach emanates from the concept of power (Kanter, 1988) and focuses on a set of organisational policies and practices, initiated by management, with the goal of cascading decision-making down through the organisational hierarchy (Ahmad and Oranye, 2010; Biron and Bamberger, 2010). Central to the notion of structural empowerment is that it entails the delegation of decision-making prerogatives to employees, along with the discretion to act on one's own initiative (Mills and Ungson, 2003).

Spreitzer (1995) defines psychological empowerment as a motivational construct manifested in four cognitions: meaning, competence, self-determination and impact. Together, these four cognitions reflect an active, rather than a passive, orientation to a work role. Based on Spreitzer's (1995) study, all the four cognitions contributed to

an individual's sense of empowerment. Thomas and Velthouse (1990) argue that the four dimensions combine additively to create an overall construct of psychological empowerment.

Highlighting the challenges of implementing quality in the hotel industry, Keating and Harrington (2002) state that an empowering culture is a key part of the process of institutionalising quality in a hotel in which staff are empowered and in which managers facilitate the consistent delivery of high-quality service. Chiang and Jang (2008) propose a model to outline the relationship between empowerment and service quality. They found that empowerment under the appropriate conditions will enhance customers' perceptions of service quality. Thus, building on this model, this research advocates that empowerment influences customers' perception of service quality through Front Office employees' behavioural and attitudinal responses.

2.3 Service Encounter and Front Office Employee Performance

Surprenant and Solomon (1987) define service encounter as a dyadic interaction between the service providers (employees) and the service acceptors (customers). Reflecting the inseparability of the service characteristics in hotel industry, the service encounter is the actualisation of the service, where customer experiences are formed (Barrows and Powers, 2009). As today's global market becomes more competitive and the taste of customers become more sophisticated and demanding, hotels have greater incentives to focus on managing and improving the quality of employee-customer service encounter as an essential strategy for success and survival.

The Front Office employees play a vital role in providing service quality during the service encounter. Bitner, Booms and Tetreault (1990) found that customer are more satisfied with the service when employees possess the ability, willingness and competence to solve their problems. Price, Arnould and Tierney (1995a; 1995b) propose five dimensions (mutual understanding, extra attention, authenticity, competence and meeting minimum standards of activity) of employee behaviour and performance that influence customers' perceptions. Furthermore, the employee performance was grouped into Role-prescribed and Extra-Role performance by Bettencourt and Brown (1997). Both of these elements are essential for a successful service encounter. In line with the perceived importance of Front Office employee behaviour in the service encounter, Front Office employees must be able to behave in a more customer-oriented way. Several researchers emphasised the importance of customer-oriented behaviour and job related attitudes influencing customer perceptions of service quality (Bettencourt and Brown, 2003; Ackfeldt and Wong, 2006).

3. Literature Gaps

Limited research have been paid to the possible linkages between employee psychological empowerment and service quality. The reviews of the service marketing literature have so far revealed only a handful of studies, with mixed findings (e.g. Goodale et al., 1997; Snipes et al., 2005; Ueno, 2008; Khattab and Aldehayyat, 2011). Most of these prior studies have conceptualised empowerment from structural and organisational perspective and only Goodale's (1997) research has related the psychological empowerment to perceived service quality, but only in the retailing industry. Over and above these, the role of psychological empowerment as the moderating factor with job satisfaction, commitment to organisation, job creativity and job motivation as independent factors; and quality of service as the dependent factor remains unexplored. Separately, in the context of Singapore, there is also possibly no reported study conducted to examine nexus of psychological empowerment and service quality in the luxury hotel industry.

Research indicates that the existence of service-oriented management practices and procedures correlates strongly with customer perceptions of service quality (Hartline, Maxam and Mckee, 2000). Implicit within the customer-focused approach is the underlying assumption that the organisation can design and manage

workplace conditions that create employee satisfaction, commitment to the organisation and the subsequent behaviours that facilitate the creation of customer satisfaction; perceived service quality and loyalty. The logic of these arguments is that if management treat their employees well, the employee will reciprocate by treating the customers well. Schneider and Bowen (1985) noted that employees' work attitudes were positively related to customer perception of service quality. Subsequently, Schlesinger and Zornitsky (1991) conducted an empirical study and found that employees with higher levels of satisfaction were able to value add to the organisation by delivering higher service quality. That said, these propositions have not been rigorously tested in the hospitality industry. As such, further conceptual and empirical evidence are needed to justify benefits of empowerment in hospitality industry.

Although the term "empowerment" has been central to management thought and practiced for some time, limited research had been conducted in the customer service management domains. While researchers such as Hartline and Ferrell (1996) and Lashley (2000) were able to transfer the concept of empowerment to the hospitality industry, these studies posit that further research on empowerment in the hospitality industry can be beneficial for service organisations. The relationship of psychological empowerment and employee job motivation and job creativity also warrant further exploratory testing.

4. The Theoretical Model

The theoretical model (Figure 1) presented in this paper aims to explain the relationship between Front Office employee psychological empowerment and service quality in Singapore luxury hotels. The intention is to comprehend the extent of influence of psychological empowerment on quality of service, and therefore enabling hotel managers to construct effective training and business strategies to strengthen customer-contact services, satisfaction and loyalty.

The theoretical model suggests that psychological empowerment will have a moderating effect on quality of service. It comprises the motivational dimensions (independent factors) and quality of service (dependent factor), as well as psychological empowerment (moderating factor). The research patches the gaps by investigating the relationship between the independent factors and the dependent factor, as well as the moderating effect of psychological empowerment on the quality of service.

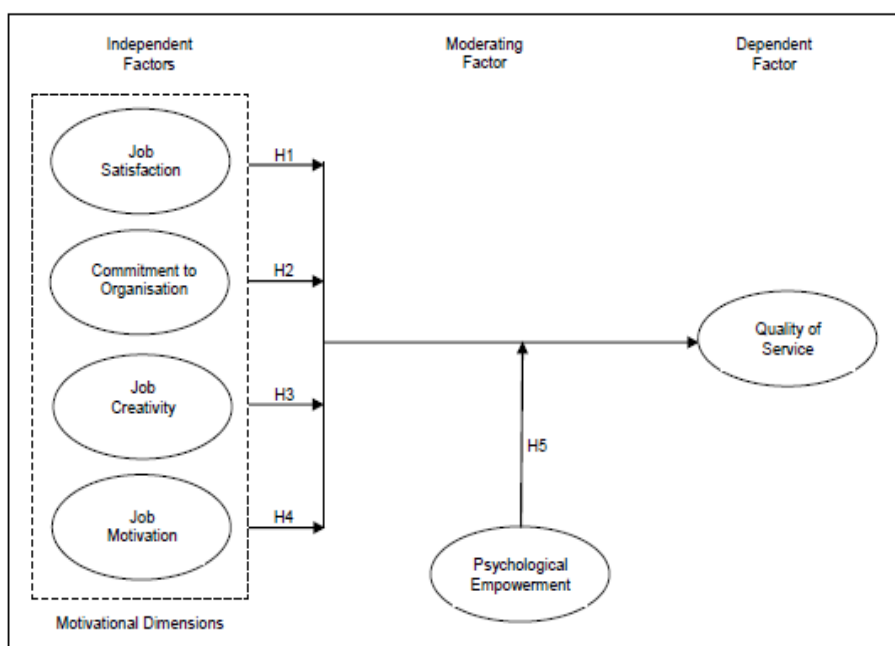


Figure 1. A model on the moderating effect of Psychological Empowerment on Quality of Service (developed for this research)

4.1 Empowerment and Job Satisfaction

Operationally, job satisfaction consists of several facts. It includes satisfaction with the supervisor, work, pay, advancement opportunities, co-workers and customers (Locke, 1969). Employee job satisfaction alone is insufficient to effectuate the changes for significant service quality improvements within the hotel (Corsun and Enz, 1999). Maintaining high service quality is also a function of providing employees with the discretion and authority to better serve customers.

Several studies have noted significant correlations between empowerment and job satisfaction (Hartline and Ferrell, 1996; Spreitzer et al., 1997; Lasching, Spence, Finegan and Shamian, 2001). In their study of 279 hotel units, Hartline and Ferrell (1996) observed that empowerment under the appropriate conditions will increase job satisfaction. It makes intuitive sense that allowing customer-contact employees to use their discretion in serving customers could have positive influences on their responses and the service encounter. From an employee's perspective, empowerment provides a sense of control which contributes to job satisfaction. It has a positive influence on the employee's behavioural and attitudinal responses.

4.2 Empowerment and Commitment to Organisation

The overall concept of commitment to organisation refers to people's affective reactions to their employing organisation (Stride, Wall and Catley, 2007, p. 39). Mowday, Richard and Lyman (1974) characterised organisational commitment, as follows: (1) strong belief in the organisation's values and goals; (2) willingness to exert considerable effort on the organisation's behalf, and (3) a strong desire to maintain membership and be engaged with the organisation. Thomas and Velthouse (1990) noted that employees will be committed to their organisation when their job fit matches with their values and purpose.

Front Office employees who feel empowered in their workplace are likely to remain committed to the organisation. However, past studies indicated differing outcomes on the nexus between commitment to organisation and behaviourally related variables. Ackfeldt and Wong (2006), in their research, observed no relationship while Hartline and Ferel (1996) noted negative correlation. Separately, research conducted by Mahaltro and Mukherjee (2004) indicated that employee commitment has a direct influence on service quality.

4.3 Empowerment and Job Creativity

Creativity in organisation has been discussed, analysed and debated widely by researchers. Peter and Olson (2005) posit that creativity is essential for the organisation in order to manage the speed of change in today's business environment. Organisational creativity can be viewed from the notion of newness, novelty and originality in the areas of process, product, technology and management. Leadership is a key enabler to integrate the workforce to achieve creativity. Several researchers have offered "process"-oriented definitions of creativity, focusing on the stages of individual creative production and role of managers in promoting creativity (Amabile, 1996).

Individual's perception of the instrumental and socio-emotional support of their team leaders will affect their level of creativity (Scott and Bruce, 1994). On a similar note, Zhou (2003) noted that informational feedback to employees led to higher creativity than when feedback was delivered in a controlling or punitive manner. The effective role of leaders and providing the space for employees to exercise ground-up initiatives will spur creativity in an organisation. In the same vein, creating a spirit of teamwork and empowering employees will create greater synergy in the organisation.

4.4 Empowerment and Job Motivation

In the management domain, employee motivation means to entice employees to move in a direction that fulfils the objectives of the organisation (Atkinson 1964; Campbell and Pritchard, 1976). These researchers identified three common features of motivation: (1) what energises human behaviour, (2) what channels such behaviour and (3) how this behaviour is sustained. Maslow (1968) advocated a

“hierarchy of need”, which articulated the way individual’s needs guide behaviour. The key thrust of this theory is that only dissatisfied needs will influence behaviour while those that are appeased do not motivate. Separately, Herzberg (1968) “content theory” of motivation, argued that the presence of “motivators” and “hygiene” factors within an organisation are key determinants influencing the employee’s level of motivation.

The work of the Atkinson, Maslow and Herzberg suggest that individuals in an organisation will be motivated and willing to make additional contributions when basic conditions are met. To this end, insufficient salary, insipid working conditions and work schedules that conflict with family needs or an onerous supervisor will inhibit employee motivation, leading to ineffective service standards and reduced customer satisfaction (Raleigh, 1998). In essence, empowerment implies the need to create the environment necessary for motivation to work successfully.

4.5 Research Propositions

With the theoretical framework articulated above, the following research propositions are generated:

- Hypothesis 1: *There is a positive relationship between Front Office employee job satisfaction and quality of service.*
- Hypothesis 2: *There is a positive relationship between Front Office employee commitment to organisation and quality of service.*
- Hypothesis 3: *There is a positive relationship between Front Office employee job creativity and quality of service.*
- Hypothesis 4: *There is a positive relationship between Front Office employee job motivation and quality of service.*
- Hypothesis 5: *The moderating factor, psychological empowerment, enhances the impact of the independent factors (job satisfaction, commitment to organisation, job creativity and job motivation) on the dependent factor, quality of service.*

5. Conclusion

There have been several studies conducted to explore the linkage between employee psychological empowerment as the independent factor and quality of service as the dependent factor. In the same vein, there have been also studies conducted to prove that motivational factors such as job satisfaction, commitment to organisation, job creativity, job motivation, attribute to organisational performance. However, the role of psychological empowerment as the moderating factor with job satisfaction, commitment to organisation, job creativity and job motivation as independent factors; and quality of service as the dependent factor remains unexplored. Until now, there is also possibly no recorded research study in Singapore that specifically explores the relationship psychological empowerment on the quality of service in Singapore luxury hotels.

This study aims to contribute to bridging the knowledge gap which will provide clarity on the role of psychological empowerment in moderating the impact of motivational factors on the performance of Front Office employees in the luxury hotels. A theoretical model is suggested to patch the knowledge gaps.

The findings from the study will assist hotel managers to construct effective training and business strategies to strengthen Front Office employees’ services and increase consumers satisfaction and loyalty. A deeper understanding of the nexus between psychological empowerment and service quality will provide hospitality managers with insights and ideas in enhancing employee customer-contact service delivery. With a high quality employee and excellent service delivery, luxury hotels will continue to sustain positional business advantage in the long term.

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