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JOB INSECURITY AND EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION: EXAMINING THE BUFFERING ROLE OF PERCEIVED EMPLOYABILITY

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Abstract: *The outbreak of COVID-19 has triggered an unprecedented crisis in all industries and has had a considerable impact on individual employment. Research on job insecurity has focused on various antecedents, including personal and organisational level outcomes of job insecurity, and has recognised the detrimental effect of job insecurity on employee well-being. Among the various sub-dimensions of work-related well-being, emotional exhaustion has significantly prompted actions of detaching oneself emotionally and cognitively from work. The present study intends to explore the association between job insecurity and emotional exhaustion at work, among the employees working in the financial service sector (India). Drawing from COR, the study further examines the buffering role of perceived employability on this association. The data were collected from 254 employees working in the financial service sector, using a structured questionnaire. Our results suggest that employees, to a large extent, experience job insecurity, which directly affects the emotional well-being, causing emotional exhaustion. Furthermore, this research explored the role of perceived employability as a personal coping resource that buffers the impact of job insecurity on emotional exhaustion.*

Keywords: *Job Insecurity, Emotional Exhaustion, Perceived Employability, COR Theory*

Introduction

> *'Depression and anxiety cost the global economy $1 trillion per year in lost productivity (WHO). The emotional toll from the coronavirus pandemic will likely increase that cost in 2020 exponentially.' – AmTrust Financial, 2020*

The outbreak of COVID-19 has triggered an unprecedented crisis in all industries and has had a considerable impact on individual employment (Jung, Jung & Yoon, 2021; Qualtrics, 2020). The adverse effects of the pandemic and concerns about employment status have left the employees in a state of anxiety or depression (Wilson et al., 2020). The employees fear losing their jobs because of technological upgradations, downsizing and restructuring, and mergers and acquisitions of organisations (Benach et al., 2014; Randa & Abrar, 2020). Many researchers have considered job insecurity (JI) as chronic work stress and have explored its detrimental effect from both the employee and organisational perspectives (McDonough; Probst, 2008; De Witte, Vander Elst & De Cuyper, 2015; Jiang & Probst, 2015). Drawing from appraisal theory, many researchers suggest that job insecurity is a potential threat that results in increased strain and reduced well-being (Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Further, the assumptions of COR theory supports this view; resource loss triggers further losses (Hobfoll, 1989), considering job security as a threat to existing resources, leading to reduced well-being, which is a further loss (Vander Elst, den Broeck, De Cuyper & De Witte, 2014). Evidence from stress research suggests that even the expectation of a stressful event can signify a source of anxiety that is as equally important as the actual event itself. According to transactional stress theory, the perception of JI could be conceptualised as a work stressor, as insecure employees perceive the threat of losing their jobs (Kinnunen et al., 2014). These pieces of evidence collectively support the view that JI is a work stressor.

There is strong theoretical evidence indicating that JI is commonly associated with increased burnout, withdrawal intentions, reduced job satisfaction, organisational

commitment, worsening work performance, and a variety of other negative consequences (Cheng & Chan, 2008; Cuyper & Witte, 2006; De Cuyper, De Witte, Kinnunen & Nätti, 2010; Ashford, Lee & Bobko, 1989; Furaker & Berglund, 2014; Jacobson & Hartley, 1991; Lam, Fan & Moen, 2014). Evidence also indicates that the perception of job loss reduces work engagement, impairs well-being in terms of burnout, and reduces employee innovation (De Witte, Pienaar & De Cuyper, 2016; Niesen, Van Hootegem, Vander Elst, Battistelli & De Witte, 2018; Shoss, 2017). Nonetheless, although job insecurity is related to employee well-being in general, studies are limited concerning specific aspects of work-related well-being (De Witte, Pienaar & De Cuyper, 2016). Following the conceptualisation of work-related well-being by Warr (2007), the central focus of this study is on emotional exhaustion (EE). Emotional exhaustion, a critical component of burnout, has attracted the attention of researchers in recent years. Studies found that emotional exhaustion is directly associated with different job characteristics, and other elements of burnout are affected via exhaustion (Lee & Ashforth, 1996). Besides, a variety of theoretical models demonstrate that emotional exhaustion at work has a detrimental effect on different organisational outcomes, such as job performance, organisational citizenship behaviour, turnover intention, and organisational commitment (Lam, Liang, Ashford & Lee, 2015; Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998), and have negative consequences on individuals, such as psychosocial problems, depression, and family difficulties (Hoops, 1999; Lee & Ashforth, 1996). Further, the studies validate that emotional exhaustion exhibits a more consistent and robust relationship with outcome variables than do the other two components of burnout, depersonalisation and personal accomplishment (Halbesleben & Bowler, 2007; Demerouti, Bakker, de Jonge, Janssen & Schaufeli, 2001). Therefore, the study aims to explore the effect of JI on emotional exhaustion among the employees working in the financial service sector (India).

Since the results in the literature on the consequences of job insecurity are not convergent, it is essential to identify potential factors, such as personal specific coping resources, which may affect the negative relationship between job insecurity and well-being (De Witte, Pienaar & De Cuyper, Review of 30 Years of Longitudinal Studies on the Association Between Job Insecurity and Health and Well-Being: Is There Causal Evidence?, 2016; Shoss, 2017). Further, research on the negative consequences of job insecurity includes indications of potential moderators that can alleviate the adverse effects. Previous studies have considered perceived employability as a possible buffer in mitigating work stress and its adverse organisational outcomes (Berntson et al., 2010; Hootegem et al., 2018). Prior research has demonstrated that job insecurity has less detrimental consequences when employees perceive many rather than few job opportunities (Berntson et al., 2010; Sora et al., 2009). Therefore, the study explores the buffering role of perceived employability in the association between JI and EE.

Theoretical Foundation and Hypothesis Development

Job Insecurity and Emotional Exhaustion

A rich panoply of research indicates an inverse relationship between job insecurity and employee well-being (Cheng & Chan, 2008). The present study considered work-related well-being, specifically the affective well-being at work suggested by Daniels (2000) and Warr (2007). Among the sub-dimensions of well-being at work, emotional exhaustion has significantly prompted actions of detaching oneself emotionally and cognitively from work (Kerse, Kocak & Ozdemir, 2018). Similarly, as the core dimension of job burnout, emotional exhaustion has been given more attention (Maslach et al., 2001). Therefore, the present study focuses on emotional exhaustion (EE). Emotional exhaustion, a critical constituent of burnout, is described as "feelings of being emotionally overextended and drained by one's contact with other people" and is often characterised by reduced energy and chronic fatigue (Maslach, Jackson & Leiter, 1996; Pines & Aronson, 1988). Studies found that EE diminishes employees' ability to fulfil job obligations (McCarthy et al., 2016) and results in psychological withdrawal (Chi & Liang, 2013), absenteeism (Bronkhorst & Vermeeren, 2016), and turnover intention (Bernerth, Walker, Walter & Hirschfeld, 2011). Empirical evidence shows JI to be a significant predictor of emotional exhaustion, and empirical studies have found a significant positive association between JI and EE (De Cuyper, De Witte, Vander Elst & Handaja, 2010; Vander Elst, den Broeck, De Cuyper & De Witte, 2014; Kinnunen, Mäkikangas, Mauno & De Cuyper, 2014). In the same vein, a longitudinal study predicted that job insecurity affects emotional exhaustion and is negatively related to mental distress (Mäkikangas & Kinnunen, 2003; De Cuyper et al., 2012). Therefore, it is evident that when employees feel insecure about their job, they are most likely to feel emotionally overextended. Based on the discussion, the authors hypothesise that:

H1: Job insecurity is positively related to emotional exhaustion.

Moderating Role of Perceived Employability

In a period of high vulnerability to changes in the world of work, an individual's mere perception of being employable is more critical to the individual, as the perception of a situation can affect an individual's behaviour, reactions, and thoughts, positively or negatively. To feel employable is a sign of optimism, and it enhances the real chance of acquiring employment. Situational and individual factors are equally important in deciding the perception of a situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Interactionist's perspective on employability suggests that situational and personal factors determine an individual's perception of a situation. The majority of authors rely on the interactionist's view for explaining the concept of perceived employability (Bernston, 2008; Kirves, Kinnunen, De Cuyper & Mäkikangas, 2014).

Perceived employability is recognised as a unique resource for an employee, described as an individual's perception on his/her possibilities for obtaining employment (both in the internal and external market) (Berntson & Marklund, 2007). Employability is significant during turbulent economic and market conditions, especially when job security is in question (Hootegem et al., 2018; De Cuyper et al., 2012). The COR theory states that resources like perceived employability bring a feeling of control over and are inherently related to the individual's resilience (Hobfoll et al., 2003). Perceived employability as a resource induces a sense of control (De Cuyper et al., 2008), helps the individual to overcome hurdles, and succeed in life and career. COR theory argues that employees with high resources consider themselves less vulnerable to adverse effects (Hootegem et al., 2018). Applying this to job insecurity, this means that job-insecure individuals with lower perceived employability are even more vulnerable to negative life consequences (Hobfoll, 2001) compared to those with higher resources (PE). In line with the COR theory, perceived employability can be modelled as a personal resource that increases well-being by buffering the adverse effects of job insecurity (Yeves et al., 2019).

Previous studies have consistently indicated the negative association between employability and psychological strain, burnout, or emotional exhaustion (De Cuyper, Bernhard-Oettel, Berntson, De Witte & Alarco, 2008; Kinnunen, Mäkikangas, Mauno & De Cuyper, 2014; Berntson & Marklund, 2007; Kirves, Kinnunen, De Cuyper & Mäkikangas, 2014). Similarly, studies of Lu et al. (2011) and Siu et al. (2007) reported the same findings, that is, employees with more personal resources experience less strain.

In addition, prior research has pointed out that job-insecure individuals with low perceived employability have a stronger sense of stress (Silla et al., 2009). To date, empirical research on employability as a moderator of the relationship between job insecurity and well-being is scarce. Kuhnert and Vance (1993) observed that employment security moderates the relationship between job insecurity and depression. Mohr (2000) found that the relationship between job insecurity and psychosomatic complaints is more substantial for those with few rather than many chances on the labour market. In a study by Silla et al. (2008), employability perceptions moderated the relationship between job insecurity and life satisfaction. This finding was not replicated for emotional exhaustion, which is a negative trigger factor for individual well-being. Following the above discussion, the authors postulate the following hypotheses.

H2*:* Perceived employability is negatively related to emotional exhaustion.

H3*:* Perceived employability moderates the relationship between job insecurity and emotional exhaustion, so that the positive relationship between job insecurity and emotional exhaustion is weaker under the varying condition of perceived employability.

Methodology

Participants

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire employing an online survey from non-managerial employees working in the financial service sector (private sector) in Kerala, India. Demographic profile of sample is presented in Table 1. Convenient sampling methods have been adopted for sampling, considering the pandemic, and 254 responses were considered for analysis. The scales employed to measure the constructs were adopted from previous studies.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	148	58.3
	Female	106	41.7
Qualification	Graduation	70	24.8
	Post-Graduation	120	47.2
	Professional Degree	64	25.2
Age Group	Below 25	63	24.8
	26-35	118	71.3
	36-45	49	19.3
	46-55	19	7.5
	Above 55	5	2

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Religion	Hindu	92	36.22
	Muslim	76	29.92
	Christian	63	24.80
	Others	23	9.06
Type of Family	Nuclear	220	76.9
	Joint	66	23.1

Measures

Job Insecurity: A four-item job insecurity scale developed by De Witte (2000) was used to assess job insecurity. Respondents were asked to rate their agreement on statements like 'Chances are, I will soon lose my job' and 'I am sure I can keep my job'. The reliability check supported a satisfactory coefficient alpha (a = .90).

Emotional Exhaustion: A five-item Utrecht Burnout Scale was used to measure emotional exhaustion. Sample items include 'I feel totally exhausted in my job'. Items are scored on a five-point frequency rating scale ranging from '1' (never) to '5' (always). The reliability check supported a good coefficient alpha (a = .94).

Perceived Employability: We assessed perceived employability with a scale developed by Rothwell et al. (2008). There was a total of 11 items in two dimensions. The first dimension was the perceived value of occupation in the current organisation (internal employability) with four items. A sample item was 'Even if there was downsizing in this organisation, I am confident that I would be retained'. The other dimension was the perceived value of occupation outside the current organisation (external employability) with seven items. A sample item was 'I could easily get a similar job to mine in almost any organisation'. This scale employed a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Cronbach's value for the scale was 0.70.

Control Variables

Several control variables were included in the model to partial out other potential effects on the moderating variable. In this study, age, total years of experience, and educational level were considered as control variables. These variables are controlled in the study as there are reports from previous studies that these variables potentially impact employability (Fugate et al., 2004; Lin, 2015).

Data Analysis and Results

IBM SPSS 23.0 and AMOS 24.0 were used to perform data analysis. The statistical methods employed mainly involved descriptive statistics, bootstrapping analyses, confirmatory factor analysis, and structural equation modeling (SEM). An initial normality check was conducted before going for factor analysis. Most of the statistical analysis using regression is based on the belief that data is collected from a normally distributed sample. The normality of data is a necessary prerequisite to perform structural equation modelling. Mostly, normality is checked with skewness and kurtosis, that is, symmetry and skewness. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Normality-Skewness and Kurtosis

Variable	Kurtosis	Skewness
Job Insecurity	−.625	−.939
Perceived Employability	1.215	−1.149
Employee Exhaustion	−.073	−.700

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and Common Method Bias

To assess the fit of our data to the proposed measurement model, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted. To confirm the best measurement model, CFA was conducted to compare the four-factor structure to several other competing measurement models. From the values given in Table 3, it is clear that the four-factor model has the best goodness of fit ($\chi 2$ (368) = 788.29, p <.01, CFI = 0.949, TLI = 0.944, RMSEA = 0.006, SRMR = 0.07). Convergent validity of the measures was also looked into and the CR values were above the recommended cut-off of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2010) (Job Insecurity = 0.97, Perceived Employability = 0.86, Emotional Exhaustion = 0.92). Results of the single-factor model CFA also supported the absence of common method bias.

Table 3: Fit Indices for Measurement Models

Measurement Model	df	Chi-Square	Chi-Square/df	CFI	RMSEA
Single factor a	376	3990.99	10.61	0.56	0.195
Two factors b	375	2403	6.40	0.75	0.146
Three factors c	368	788.29	2.14	0.949	0.06

N = 254; CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation, 90% confidence interval.
a. All items loaded to a single factor.
b. Perceived employability and job insecurity loaded into one factor; employee exhaustion to another factor.
c. All items loaded to their respective factors.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 4 demonstrates the mean, standard deviation, and correlation among the study's latent variables. Results of

correlation analysis indicate that the association between variables under study is in line with the hypothesised relationships. JI has a statistically significant positive relationship ($r = 0.64$, $p < 0.01$) with EE. Further, perceived employability was negatively correlated to EE ($r = -0.44$, $p < 0.01$).

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics, Correlations, and Reliabilities for Main Variables

	JI	PE	EE	Gender	Age	Highest Qualification	Experience
JI	1						
PE	−.379**	1					
EE	.640**	−.444**	1				
Gender	−0.01	0.01	0.04	1			
Age	0.05	−.162**	0.08	0.10	1		
Highest Qualification	−0.04	0.11	0.02	.127*	0.246**	1	
Experience	0.05	−.212**	0.07	−0.07	0.745**	0.12	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Hypotheses Testing

Analytical Strategy

The hypotheses were tested using OLS regression analysis, and the results are presented in Table 5. Model 1 represents the effect of JI and the control variables on EE. The results support H1 ($\beta = 0.640$**). Further, H2 was tested by regression, whereby a significant negative association was reported ($\beta = -0.460$**). As suggested by mainstream studies, Model 2 is implemented to test the quadratic term of JI, looking for the presence of an inverted U-shaped relationship that was found to be insignificant. Finally, in Model 3, the interaction term is proposed to test the interaction effect concerning the moderator effect of PE. Model 1 has an R^2 of 0.41 (adjusted R^2 is 0.39) and an F-value of 43.80 ($p < 0.05$). Model 2 has an R^2 of 0.41 (adjusted R^2 is 0.406) and an F-value of 35.39 ($p < 0.05$). Model 3 has an R^2 of 0.45 (adjusted R^2 is 0.42) and an F-value of 31.55 ($p < 0.05$).

The results indicate that JI positively affects EE (Model 1). The analysis also puts in evidence that the quadratic term that enters in the regression (Model 2) is insignificant, confirming the existence of a threshold up to a certain point, where JI, when increased, can lead to enhanced EE.

The most exciting and innovative result of this research emerges when the interaction term enters in the regression model. Following the procedures for testing interaction effects suggested by Aiken et al (1991), the independent variable was standardised before creating the multiplicative terms, thereby reducing possible distortion caused by strong correlations between the interaction term and its components. So, Model 3 presents the consequences of the interaction between JI and PE on EE. The results indicate that our hypothesis (H3) is supported by the coefficients, and the interaction terms are significant.

Moreover, Model 3 has higher values of R^2 (for the adjusted R^2 0.42 compared to 0.39 and 0.40), showing a higher explanatory power than the others, reinforcing the results of this study. This means that persons with high JI and high PE lead to less EE. Regarding the control variables, three of the variables used in the different regressions do not significantly contribute to emotional exhaustion.

Table 5: Results of Hierarchical Regression Analysis (Dependent - Emotional Exhaustion)

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Job Insecurity	0.640**	−0.026	0.718
Job Insecurity^2		0.669	−0.013
Job Insecurity * Perceived Employability			−0.16**
Total Work Experience	0.015	0.026	0.014
Age	0.024	0.002	−0.015
Highest Qualification (1 = Grad, 2 = PG, 3 = Prof)	0.04	0.049	0.067
R^2	0.41	0.416	0.435
Adjusted R^2	0.404	0.405	0.42
F-Value	43.801**	35.393**	31.559**

** Significant at 95%.

Discussion

Previous research has been univocal on the impact of job insecurity on well-being, i.e., job insecurity leads to decreased well-being among employees. The purpose of the

study is to understand the means by which this effect can be minimised. Specifically, the authors suggested the buffering role of perceived employability in the association between job insecurity and emotional exhaustion on the backdrop of conservation of resource theory. The study identified that perceived employability could alleviate the negative impact on well-being. Perceived employability moderated the relationship between job insecurity and emotional exhaustion.

Our findings reiterate the importance of developing employability among employees. Enhanced employability is beneficial for employees who feel insecure in their job or perceive insecurity in their current employment. The positive relationship between job insecurity and emotional exhaustion has been inversed by introducing perceived employability as a moderator. This means that employees who have developed their employability feel less threatened by job insecurity and have enhanced well-being. The findings are in line with previous discourses on the prominence of employability in employees' health and well-being (De Cuyper, Mäkikangas, Kinnunen, Mauna, & De Witte, 2012; Berntson, 2008; Forrier & Sels, 2003).

This study makes several significant theoretical and practical contributions. Prior research has investigated the link between job insecurity and employees' well-being, which is often conceptualised by work-related well-being, psychological well-being, or health. The nature of this link was rather equivocal, as researchers hypothesised a positive versus negative relation depending on the tenet that was chosen (Blau et al., 2008; Sanders et al., 2011). Some studies intended to learn from an organisational perspective, like commitment and engagement, while other works looked into individual implications like burnout, stress, and general health. Our study specifically looked into the impact on emotional exhaustion. The study also investigated the possible moderating role of perceived employability, where a significant interaction was reported. In addition, our analysis advances insights on COR theory, by focusing on an outcome by which the accumulation of resources can minimise an adverse effect. The present study provides empirical support for the importance of the development of resources in facing job insecurity. By exploring the novel two-way interactions moderating emotional exhaustion, this contribution to the field of job insecurity will help in coping with the increasing tension between labour instability and emotional distress. Practically, employability enhancement acts as a black swan strategy for both individuals and organisations to sail through the different hurdles that the market puts forward.

Conclusion

Our results suggest that the employees working in the financial service sector perceive high job insecurity, which directly leads to emotional exhaustion. The earlier research results indicate an inverse association, suggesting that the deleterious effect of job insecurity on work-related well-being is not country-specific and industry-specific. Furthermore, this research observed that perceived employability is a personal coping resource buffer against the job insecurity-emotional exhaustion association. The authors considered only one aspect of work-related well-being, i.e., emotional exhaustion. Future research may include other well-being elements, such as, vigour at work, to understand the role of perceived employability in the association between JI and work-related well-being. Further, longitudinal cross-lagged research may be conducted to confirm causality.

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