Role of Workplace Friendship in Mental Health of Hospitality Employees

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Abstract

The major objective of the present study was to explore the role of workplace friendship in mental health of Indian hospitality employees. Data were collected from 279 managers and employees of different star hotels of Varanasi located in UP India. The data of the present study were analyzed using Pearson's correlation and Hierarchical regression analysis. The results of hierarchical regression analyses indicated that workplace friendship significantly positively predicted mental health of employees, after controlling the effects of socio-demographic variables. The demographic variables of the study included age, marital status, salary, type of employment, size of the team, education qualification and total work experience. The findings of the present study add the importance of workplace friendship in the improvement of mental health of employees in hospitality organizations.

Keywords: Workplace friendship; Mental health

Introduction

Today's hospitality employees spend a large portion of their lives at work. Accordingly, friendships among employees are often formed at work. The importance of workplace friendship is more apparent in the hospitality industry than in other non-service-oriented industries because of its service-oriented nature [1]. Because of less reliance on machinery and other forms of technology that reduces the need for human labor, successful performance of an employee's service work frequently depends upon harmony with co-workers [2]. Findings of prior studies have suggested that workplace friendship has a variety of positive functions for both individuals and organizations. Workplace friendship facilitates increased communication, respect, securities, and trust among employees [3]. In addition, friendships developed within the workplace also represent a key element of the organizational informal social system, and may offer significant rewarding benefits to individuals [4]. This is because friendships emphasize discretionary attitudes and behaviors that not are pre-specified for an expected role within interpersonal relationships [5]. Thus, it can be concluded from the above mentioned discussion that working in the hospitality industry means, working in a team, which is the platform for the development of friendship and interpersonal relationships.

Further, friendship positively affects employees' work-related attitudes and behaviors which in turn, enhance confidence, trust, respect, mental health and organizational outcomes. In the present study we have tried to examine the link between workplace friendship and mental health in a sample of Indian hospitality employees.

Conceptual Framework

Workplace friendship

Inherent friendship networks in the organizations are an increasingly important architectural dimension of local, national and international business organizations. Having friends within the work context can provide support and sociability and a friendly workplace is generally linked with positive organizational outcomes [6,7]. Behind the notion of workplace friendship there is a fundamental uncertainty as to what constitutes a 'friend' [6,8]. According to The Oxford Concise Dictionary (2001), a friend is defined as "A person with whom one has a bond of mutual affection" (p. 566). Thus, in friendship, there is co-operative and supportive behaviour between two or more human beings. Further, workplace friendship can be defined as non-exclusive workplace relations that involve mutual trust, commitment reciprocal liking

and shared interests or values [9-11]. Workplace friendship is a phenomenon in which there should be "trust, liking, and shared interests or values" rather than being only mutual acquaintances [12, p. 218].

Morrison (2006) has presented a valuable approach to friendship as a multi-dimensional construct by emphasising relevant historical conceptualisations whereby it has been identified as a source of affection, pleasure, companionship, and support. The true values of friendship encompass the tendency to desire what is the best for the other, sympathy and empathy, honesty, pointing out the perceived mistakes of one's counterpart, and mutual understanding [6], friendship literature suggests friendship development is influenced by both individual and contextual factors, Fehr (1996). Individual factors include similarity with respect to attitudes, values, and interests that facilitate friendship formation. Contextual factors include influences exerted by the context in which the friendship develops. Today's organizations in many ways create an appropriate atmosphere in which to make friends. Friendships at work are not only a likely condition but practically unavoidable, Morrison & Nolan (2007). It promotes organizational and employee outcomes and helps achieve goals. Employees may need work-related knowledge, information, and skills to accomplish their missions and goals or emotional support to relieve work stress, and workplace friendship can provide both instrumental support [12] and emotional support [12,13].

Mental health

Psychological health (mental health) recognizes as the notion of happiness, healthy thinking, emotions, moods, values, reflections, quality of life, and the ability to cope with adversities [14-16]. It includes people's ability to fulfill a range of tasks in the context of 'normal daily living' and the degree of competency with which individuals can deal with positive and negative feelings. Mental health can be defined in a number of ways; it describes a level of psychological well-being, or an absence of a mental disorder. WHO has recently proposed that mental health is a "state of well-being in which individuals realizes his or her own capabilities can cope with the normal stressful life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community" [17]. Further, the concept of mental health also includes subjective well-being, perceived self-efficacy, autonomy, competence, intergenerational dependence and recognition of the ability to realize one's intellectual and emotional potential. It had also been defined as a state of wellbeing where by individuals recognize their abilities, are able to cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and fruitfully, and contribute to their communities. One way to think about mental health is by looking at how effectively and successfully a person functions. Feeling capable and competent; being able to handle normal levels of stress, maintain satisfying relationships, and lead an independent life and being able to "bounce back," or recover from difficult

situations, are all signs of mental health (Srivastava & Srivastava, 2010). A combination of physical, emotional, social and most importantly mental well-being is necessary to achieve overall health. In the present study mental health has been assessed in terms of only positive aspects of mental health and it includes both hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives: positive affect (feelings of optimism, cheerfulness, & relaxation), satisfying interpersonal relationships and positive functioning (energy, clear thinking, self acceptance, personal development, mastery, & autonomy). Mental health problems in the workplace have serious effects not only for the individual but also for the productivity and competitiveness of businesses and thus the economy and society as whole.

Literature Review and Development of Hypothesis

Workplace friendship and mental health

Friendship at the workplace refers to individuals' friendship with their peers, subordinates, and superiors [18-20]. Workplace friendship increases support and information that helps individuals do their job, in turn, reducing stress (for instance, by eliminating barriers to success) and improving the quality of work. While these outcomes are not unique to friendship, workplace friendship does further them. Employees who have meaningful friendship are happier than those who are alone [21]. Consistently, Wright [22] asserts that lonely people are less happy. People who have significant friendships may be happy because good friends are willing to behave positively to each other [23] and that happy employees are mostly sociable people who have more friends [24,25].

As information-sharing, resource-distributing, decision-making, and support systems, relationships are essential for both organizational and individual well-being [13,26]. Concerning the relationship between workplace friendship and mental health, we have found very limited studies [27]. A handful of studies have shown that workplace friendship is related to lower emotional exhaustion and higher emotional attachment and more effective coping strategies [28]. In a very recent study on working and married adults, Powell, Greenhaus, Allen and Johnson [29] has been found potentially important role of friendship for well-being. The authors have further suggested that supportive friendships influence general well-being via self-esteem, a key personal resource. In one study Anthony [30] has asserted that good friends encourage their friends to lead more healthy lifestyles that good friends encourage their friends to seek help and access services when needed; that good friends enhance their friends' coping skills in dealing with illness and other health problems; and that good friends actually affect physiological pathways that are protective of health [27]. Hsu, Liu and Tsaur [31] found that workplace friendship had significant positive effects on hotel employees well-being. Further, conventional wisdom suggests that good friendships enhance an individual's sense of happiness and overall well-being. Two researchers have even termed friendship

networks a "behavioral vaccine" that boosts both physical and psychological health (https://github.com/hocchudong/hocchudong.github.io.bka/blob/master/_posts/2016-08-12 health.md).

Thus, it can be concluded from the above-mentioned discussion that good friendships actually improve health. good friends encourage their friends to lead more healthy lifestyles; that good friends encourage their friends to seek help and access services when needed; that good friends enhance their friends' coping skills in dealing with illness and other health problems; and that good friends actually affect physiological pathways that are protective of health [30].

In view of the above-mentioned discussion, it was hypothesized that:

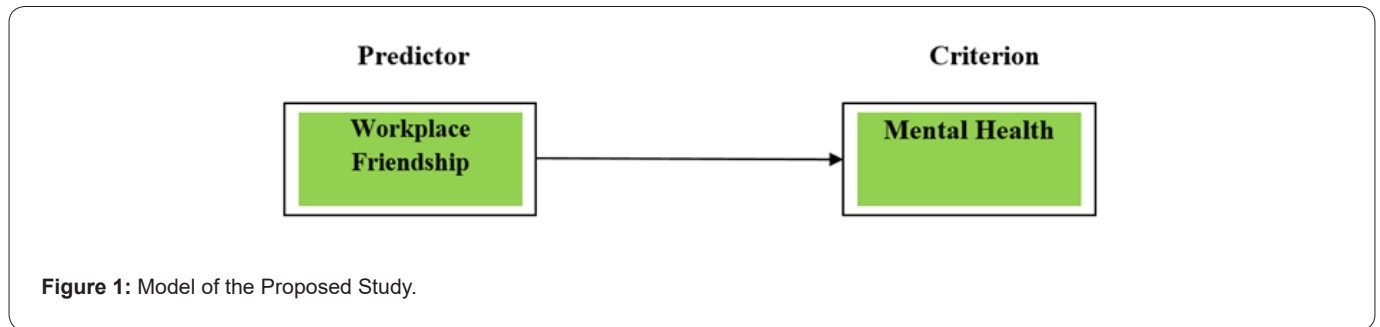**H1:** Workplace Friendship will be positively associated with mental health of employees (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Model of the Proposed Study.

Method

Participants characteristics

Respondents in this study were 279 hospitality professionals working in different hotels generally higher-class hotels, star hotels located in Varanasi (India). Participants were selected mainly from management and operational departments, such as, front office, food and beverage, conference and banqueting manager, chef, housekeeping, human resources, accounting, sales and marketing, and security. The selection of the participants was consistent with the ethical requirements for conducting research on human subjects. The information on selected demographic variables such as, age marital status, salary, type of employment, size of the team, education and length of service in the hotel obtained from the respondents (Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N=279).

Variables	Number	Percentage
Age(in years) Mean=29.83 S.D.=8.40		
18-29 years	165	59.13
30-40 years	81	29.03
41-51 years	28	10.03
52-60 years	5	1.79
Marital status		
Single	102	36.6
Married	177	63.4
Salary in Rs. (per month)		
5000-10,000	256	91.8
10,000-20,000	21	7.5
>20,000	2	0.7
Type of Employment		
Operational Employees	253	90.7
All Managers	26	9.3
Size of the team		
10-May	92	32.97
20-Oct	104	37.27
20-30	58	20.78
>30	25	8.96
Education		
PG	17	6.1
Graduate	72	25.8
Intermediate	77	27.6
High School /Diploma	113	40.5
Length of service in years		
2-12 years	234	83.87
13-22 years	35	12.54
>23 years	10	3.58

Procedure

Prior to the administration of the questionnaires to participants, the researcher obtained permission from management of the different tourist hotels that participated in the study. The purpose of the study was explained to participants as they were also given assurance of confidentiality and anonymity of their identities and responses. They were also informed that the data will be used for academic purpose only.

Measurement tools

Workplace friendship scale: Workplace friendship was assessed by 12- item Workplace Friendship Scale developed by Neilsen, Jex, and Adams (2000). Primarily the scale is built on two aspects of friendship in the workplace; 1) the opportunity for friendship (e.g., I have the opportunity to get to know my co-workers), and 2) the presence of friendship (e.g., I have formed strong friendships at work). Neilsen et al. (2000) have reported Cronbach's alpha results of .84 and .89 for the friendship 'opportunities' and 'prevalence' subscales respectively. Further, their analysis supported the two-dimensional concept of the scale and provided adequate evidence of construct validity. Thus, the workplace friendship does appear to identify reliable scores and to measure the two dimensions of friendship in the workplace.

Mental Health Scale: Mental health was measured by Warwick- Edinburgh Mental Well- Being Scale (WEMWBS) which is developed by Tennant, Fishwick, Platt, Joseph, and Stewart-Brown (2006). It contained 14 items and covered only positive aspects of psychological health and it includes both hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives: positive affect (feelings of optimism, cheerfulness, & relaxation), satisfying interpersonal relationships and positive functioning (energy, clear thinking, self acceptance, personal development, mastery, and autonomy). The items were scored on five point scale with response alternatives- 1 (none of the time) to 5 (all of the time) and were summed to give an overall score. It has a time frame for assessment of the previous two weeks. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for student sample and population sample were .89 and .91 respectively.

Control Variables: In the present study, we controlled for (age, marital status, salary, type of employment, size of the team, education qualification, and prior working experience (length of service).

Results

The data of the study were analyzed using, descriptive statistics, correlation and hierarchical regression analyses. In the present study workplace friendship was treated as predictor variable and mental health of employees was treated as the criterion variable. The control variables were the demographic characteristics of the study participants (a) age, (b) marital status, (c) salary (d) type of employment (f) size of the team (g) education and (h) length of service. In the present study, all the demographic variables that were assessed have been used. Rather than using none or some combination, they were all included in the analysis for simplicity.

Correlation coefficients between workplace friendship and mental health

It is evident from the findings of Table 2 that workplace friendship was found to be significantly positively correlated with mental health. The direction of this relationship in general indicated that good friendships actually improve health.

Table 2: Correlation coefficient between workplace friendship and mental health.

S.no.	Predictor/Criterion	Mental Health
1	Workplace Friendship	.521**

*p<.05, **p<01

Results of Hierarchical Regression Analysis

To substantiate the findings of correlational analysis, hierarchical regression analyses were done in order to examine the contribution of predictor variable in the explanation of criterion variable. The results of hierarchical regression analyses predicting mental health from workplace friendship is illustrated in Table 3. The findings revealed that demographic variables did not account any significant impact in the prediction of psychological (mental) health and accounted only 2.1% of non-significant variance ($F_{7, 271}$ = .818) at Step-I. After controlling the effects of demographic variables, workplace friendship significantly positively predicted mental health (β = .527, p < .001) and explained 26% ($\Delta F_{1, 270}$ = 97.843, p < .001) of variance in the prediction of mental health. This result fully supported H1 of the study.

Table 3: Results of hierarchical regression analyses predicting mental health from workplace friendship.

Criterion Variable Predictor Variable	Psychological Health	
Demographic Variables	**Step 1**	**Step2**
Age	0.062	0.075
Marital status	-0.122	-0.035
Salary	0.016	-0.05
Type of Employment	-0.058	0.002
Size of The Team	0.048	0.042
Education Qualification	0.047	0.085
Total Job Experience	0.09	-0.001
Independent Variables		**Workplace Friendship**
		.527***
R^2	0.021	0.281
ΔR^2	0.021	0.26
F	0.818	13.201***
d. f.	7,271	8,270
F Change	0.818	97.843***
d. f. of F Change	7,271	1,270

*p<.05, **p<01.

Discussion

The major objective of the study was to examine the role of workplace friendship in mental health of hospitality employees. Workplace friendship is related to lower emotional exhaustion and higher emotional attachment and more effective coping strategies [28]. At work, where personal relations in the form of workplace friendship are present people/members want to maintain them. With this background, the important relationship explored in the present study was between workplace friendship and psychological health. The major findings of the hierarchical regression analyses revealed that workplace friendship was found to be significant predictor of psychological health. The finding of this study was consistent with the study of Bauminger et al. [27] who have also illustrated that workplace friendship actually affect physiological pathways that are protective of health. Employees who have meaningful friendship are happier than those who are alone [21]. Consistently, Wright [22] has asserted that lonely people are less happy. People who have significant friendships may be happy because good friends are willing to behave positively to each other [23]. It should be highlighted that happy employees are mostly sociable people who have more friends [24,25]. In this stream line, Anthony [30] has asserted that good friends encourage their friends to lead more healthy lifestyles, encourage their friends to seek help and access services when needed, and enhance their friends' coping skills in dealing with illness and other health problems. Good friends foster positive emotions among employees at work through which they can develop and maintain interrelationship with each other and it leads to enhancement of their psychological health. In conclusion, workplace friendship is associated with positive mental health of the employees as it includes affection, kindness, love, sympathy, empathy, honesty, altruism, mutual understanding and compassion, enjoyment of each other's company, trust, and opportunity to express one's feelings. Hence, workplace friendship whether it is general or specific supportive behaviors contributed to a person's physical and mental well-being.

Hypothesis-1 of the present study completely supported Implications, Limitations and Future Suggestions:

The primary theoretical contribution of this study has been illustrated that workplace friendship positively influences the mental health of hospitality employee. The findings of the present study add to the literature by testing the proposed model in the hospitality sector. The results of the current study suggest that workplace friendship can constitute and facilitate a social system in organizations by linking formal and informal, vertical and lateral interpersonal relationships at work [12]. Workplace friendship also plays a key role in helping someone live with or recover from a mental health problem and overcome the isolation that often comes with it. Further, the rewarding benefits of workplace friendship may have significant implications in the hospitality industry with respect to the industry's major issues such as high turnover rate, long work hours, low pay, diversity, and emotional labor. Despite a variety of potential benefits of workplace friendship, not much attention has been paid to the topic of workplace friendship in the hospitality industry [32-36].

This study has undergone some limitations. Firstly, the results were derived from a cross-sectional research design, which cannot confirm the direction of causality among variables of this study. Secondly, limitations were related to the sample of this research, which included only one sector, the hospitality sector. Thus, the results may limit the generalizability of the finding to other occupational groups. It is recommended that future research also cover other organizational sectors such as health care, educational, manufacturing etc. The current findings should be tested in different public and private sectors including education, health-care, manufacturing etc. [37-40].

Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of the study support the conclusion that workplace friendship positively influences the mental health of employees. Workplace friendship is associated with positive mental health of the employees as it includes affection, kindness, love, sympathy, empathy, honesty, altruism, mutual understanding and compassion, enjoyment of each other's company, trust, and opportunity to express one's feelings. It also positively affects employees' work-related attitudes and behaviors which, in turn, enhance organizational outcomes.

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