

# BEING INNOVATIVE: DOES FELT TRUST MATTER?

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## INTRODUCTION

In conjunction with the increased pressure to be more competitive, customer-centric, and sustainable (Hao et al., 2020), service innovation is of fundamental importance to the growth and success of hotel operations (Hameed et al., 2021). According to Storey et al.'s (2016) meta-analysis, frontline staff involvement is one of the top ten antecedents to the commercial success of service innovation. Employees' innovative behavior reflects the generation, advocacy, and implementation of innovative or improved ideas and practices (Janssen, 2003). It has been proven to attain the goals of service innovation and positive customer/business outcomes (Stock et al., 2017). Given its importance for service innovation in hotel organizations, it is imperative to identify ways to motivate employees' engagement in innovative behavior (Kwon & Kim, 2020).

As supervisors bear an important role in guiding, nurturing, and assisting their subordinates in effectively achieving team/organizational goals (Dai et al., 2018), how felt trust would shape hotel employees' innovative behavior remains unclear and deserves investigation. Felt trust reflects how much the employees believe that their supervisors trust them and are willing to assume risk with them (Lau et al., 2014). Drawing upon social exchange theory, this study posits that the norm of reciprocity nested in a trusting relationship may guide trusted employees to engage in innovative behavior.

Guided by self-determination theory, this study proposes autonomous motivation as the mediating mechanism for the relationship between felt trust and innovative behavior. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Gagné & Deci, 2005) suggests that in addition to the simple dichotomy between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, human motivation can be differentiated into two broad categories of autonomous and controlled regulation

along a self-determination continuum. Autonomous forms of motivation subsume intrinsic, integrated, and identified motivations. Intrinsic motivation reflects individuals' full sense of volition to engage in a task that they find interesting, fun, and satisfying (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Integrated motivation and identified motivation are internalized forms of extrinsic motivation. Integrated motivation is volitional but remains instrumental (Deci & Ryan, 2000). It is theorized to describe individuals' regulation of behavior because they accept the task being an integral part of their self-identity and lives. Identified motivation involves moderate volition and concerns individuals' identification with the value of the task and perceived congruence between the task and personal goals. Since scholars have noted the difficulty of psychometrically differentiating between integrated and identified motivation (Gagné et al., 2010), this study will follow the practices in preceding empirical efforts and focus on only intrinsic and identified motivation as aspects of autonomous motivation.

Relatively limited research (e.g., Fan et al., 2021; Rouzi & Wang, 2021) has examined boundary conditions under which the effect of felt trust on employee outcomes can be amplified or attenuated. The present study argues that leadership styles of trustors matter in the functioning of felt trust for trusted employees may receive different treatment from their supervisors under different leadership styles. Ethical leaders are perceived as honest, trustworthy, fair, and caring (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Brown et al., 2005). Ethical leadership may induce employees' positive work attitudes and motivation (e.g., Bedi et al., 2016) and lower work stress and burnout (e.g., Vullingsh et al., 2020). Considering the positive traits associated with ethical leadership, it is posited that ethical leadership will moderate the effects of felt trust on autonomous motivation.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is

two-fold: (1) to examine the relationship between felt trust and hotel employees' innovative behavior, (2) to assess autonomous motivation (intrinsic and identified motivation) as the mediator in the relationship between felt trust and innovative behavior, and (3) to investigate the moderating role of ethical leadership in the relationship between felt trust and autonomous motivation.

## METHOD

A purposive sampling approach will be used to recruit frontline employees working at international tourist hotels in Taiwan. A two-wave panel design with a two-week lag will be used to collect data for this study. This study will also collect data from both employees and their supervisors. At Time 1, human resources staff will be asked to distribute survey packets to employees. Each survey packet consists of a consent form, a questionnaire for employees, a stamped and self-addressed return envelope, and a survey packet for their supervisors. Employees will be asked to provide responses for the measures of felt trust, ethical leadership, intrinsic motivation, identified motivation, and demographic information. Employees will also be asked to identify a supervisor with whom they work most closely within the division and use this supervisor as the target of evaluations for felt trust and ethical leadership. Employees will be asked to deliver the supervisor-version of survey packets to their supervisors. Supervisors will be instructed to observe their employees for a month (Time 2) and complete and return their questionnaires. Supervisors will be asked to rate their employees' innovative behavior and provide demographic information. Existing measures for felt trust, intrinsic motivation, identified motivation, ethical leadership, and innovative behavior will be used.

## ANTICIPATED IMPLICATIONS

This study will make several contributions to the literature. First, while felt trust has gained its scholarly attention in both management and hospitality research in recent years (e.g., Baer et al., 2015; Lau et al., 2014; Fan et al., 2021), this study will extend the literature on innovative behavior by

examining felt trust as a relevant antecedent of innovative behavior. Second, in view of a paucity of research examining motivational mechanisms associated with felt trust (Hao et al., 2021), this study incorporates autonomous motivation to better understand the link between felt trust and innovative behavior. While research has suggested that different forms of autonomous motivation may bring about different effects on employee outcomes (Gagné et al., 2015), this study extends Hao et al.'s (2021) focus on merely intrinsic motivation by assessing two forms of autonomous motivation – intrinsic and identified motivation. Third, this study attempts to explore the trustor's leadership style – ethical leadership – as the boundary condition that may strengthen or buffer the relationships of felt trust and mediating mechanisms. As much earlier work was devoted to identifying underlying psychological mechanisms of felt trust (e.g., Baer et al., 2015; Lau et al., 2014; Skiba & Wildman, 2019), anticipated findings of this study will provide insights into boundary conditions under which the bright side of felt trust can be amplified and its dark side can be suppressed, adding to the literature on felt trust. Fifth, anticipated findings of the present study will provide practical implications for hospitality businesses to develop and craft strategies to motivate their employees' engagement in innovative behavior. The consideration of ethical leadership in this study could provide insights into the appropriate approach to managing trusted employees.

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