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On being warm and friendly: The effect of socially responsible human resource management on employee fears of the threats of COVID-19

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Abstract

Purpose - The purpose of this research was to investigate the influence of socially-responsible human resource management (SRHRM) on employee fears of external threats during the COVID-19 outbreak, based on social support and event system theories. COVID-19 caused sharp profit declines and bankruptcies of hotels, restaurants, and travel agencies. In addition, employees faced threats to their health and job security. How to overcome employee anxieties and fears about the negative impacts of this crisis and promote psychological recovery is worthy of attention from researchers and practitioners. This research investigated the impacts of SRHRM on employee fears through organizational trust, with the COVID-19 pandemic playing a moderating role between SRHRM and employee fears.

Design/methodology/approach - The hypotheses were tested through multiple linear regression analysis based on a survey of 408 employees in hospitality and tourism firms in China. Qualitative data were also gathered through interviews with selected managers.

Findings - The results showed that SRHRM had a negative influence on employee fears of external threats by enhancing trust in their organizations. In addition, the strength of the COVID-19 pandemic positively moderated the effect of SRHRM on employee fears. When the pandemic strength was more robust, the negative effects of SRHRM on employee fears were more significant.

Originality/value - This research explored strategic HRM by examining the effects of SRHRM on employee fears in the midst of a severe crisis, specifically COVID-19. The moderation effect of event strength and mediation effect of organizational trust were tested. It is of great value for hospitality and tourism firms to foster employee psychological recovery during a crisis such as COVID-19.

Research limitations/implications - This research illustrated the contribution of SRHRM in overcoming employee fears of external threats in the context of COVID-19. It shed light on the organizational contribution of SRHRM to hospitality and tourism employee psychological recovery during the crisis.

Keywords : Socially-responsible HRM (SRHRM); COVID-19 event strength; organizational trust; fear of external threats; social support theory; event system theory

1. Introduction

Employee fears of external threats represent negative psychological emotions involving uncertainty or danger resulting from undesirable events or harm from outside of the organization (Lebel, 2016). It is acknowledged that the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in China and spread worldwide, leading to profit declines and bankruptcies among hotels, restaurants and travel agencies. Compared to other industries, lockdown and social distancing policies directly caused steep declines in hospitality and tourism, because the sector relies on population mobility and personal service provided by employees (Yang *et al*., 2020). Hundreds of thousands of employees in hospitality and tourism companies faced threats to their health and job security because of the uncertainty and threat of loss brought by COVID-19, including major hotel chains such as Marriott and Hyatt.

Evidence shows that fear of external threats leads to employee silence in organizations (Kish-Gephart *et al*., 2009), reduces creativity (Deng *et al*., 2019), and damages employee well-being, performance and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) (Raja *et al*., 2020). Therefore, overcoming employee anxiety and fear in the wake of the disastrous outcomes of COVID-19 and promoting employee psychological

recovery drew significant attention from hospitality and tourism scholars and practitioners (Zenker and Kock, 2020).

To date, most research concerns the outcomes of employee fear (Kish-Gephart *et al*., 2009; Raja *et al*., 2020). However, the antecedents of employee fear seemingly have been neglected. It is acknowledged that HRM practices have a direct impact on employee psychological states, emotions, attitudes, and behaviors in the hospitality and tourism industry (Kloutsiniotis and Mihail, 2020; Madera *et al*., 2017; Sun *et al*., 2007). Specifically, the role of socially responsible HRM (SRHRM) is highlighted during crisis situations.

SRHRM emphasizes a bundle of practices aimed at improving employee socially responsible capabilities, motivations, and opportunities, often with humanitarian objectives and benefits (Shen and Benson, 2016; Shen and Zhang, 2019). SRHRM involves recruiting and retaining employees with a sense of social responsibility, providing CSR training, and assessing employee social responsibility in performance appraisals, compensation, and promotions (Zhao *et al*., 2019). For example, hotels and travel agencies trained and rewarded employees involved in socially responsible work during COVID-19 for receiving hospital medical staff, assisting community residents, providing transfer services, and voluntarily working in cabin hospitals. These practices could significantly impact employee perceptions (Shen and Zhang, 2019).

However, most previous research focuses on the relationship between SRHRM and employee attitudes and behaviors under normal operational conditions (Jia *et al*., 2019; Shen and Benson, 2016; Shen and Zhang, 2019; Zhao *et al*., 2019). With the

outbreak and spread of COVID-19, the pandemic caused hospitality and tourism companies to assume greater social responsibility and deal with relieving employee fears.

The impacts of SRHRM on employee fears of external threats need greater and more in-depth exploration. Generally, SRHRM affects employee attitudes and behaviors through organizational identity or social exchange (Newman *et al.*, 2016; Jia *et al*., 2019). The effects of SRHRM practices during COVID-19 may differ from HRM under normal circumstances. It is possible that SRHRM influences employee emotions and fears in other ways during a major crisis.

This research set out to investigate the social and psychological processes of how SRHRM influenced employee fears of threats through social support theory (Cohen and Wills, 1985; Hobfoll *et al*., 1990). This theory refers to the supporting and helping actions from government, society, organizations, family and friends, and it is essential in promoting well-being and reducing stress (Hobfoll, 2001). COVID-19 necessitated HRM intervention through demonstrating social responsibility because government agencies were not always reliable and available while individual power was weak (Watkins *et al*., 2015). Therefore, HRM had to assume greater social responsibility and this is especially required during a major crisis (Voegtlin and Greenwood, 2016).

According to social support theory, SRHRM is an important source impacting employees and organizational resources that may transform into individual resources through employee perceptions (Hobfoll *et al*., 2018). In this process, staff perceptions of organizational trust might mediate the effects of SRHRM in assisting employees to

overcome fears of external threats when experiencing economic and social dissonance.

Organizational trust is defined as the willingness to believe in an organization and have confidence of its benevolence and capabilities (Gould-Williams, 2003; Jia *et al*., 2019). Organizational trust usually links HRM and employee attitudes as a mediating mechanism in the hospitality and tourism industry (Kloutsiniotis and Mihail, 2020). SRHRM represents organizational benevolence with respect to employees that improves their feelings, perceptions, and attitudes (Alfes *et al*., 2013; Jia *et al*., 2019). SRHRM can promote organizational trust as a result of providing care and support to employees, protecting individual resources, and reducing negative emotions like fear (Halbesleben *et al*., 2014). It is proposed in applying social support theory that SRHRM is negatively related to employee fears of external threats.

Furthermore, the environment plays a role that influences the effectiveness of SRHRM, as it did with COVID-19. Based on an open systems view, organizations are not isolated islands; they are in systems impacted by external and internal environments. The environment and social resources interactively affect individual resources (Hobfoll *et al*., 1990; Hobfoll *et al*., 2018). Event system theory suggests their occurrence impacts actors' feelings, thoughts, and behaviors (Morgeson *et al*., 2015). Events such as the COVID-19 crisis present complex environments that due to novelty (event is varied and is an unexpected or new phenomenon), disruptive (event changes normal, day-to-day activities) and critical (event is important, essential and a priority) (Morgeson *et al*., 2015).

COVID-19 has been disruptive and critical to the hospitality and tourism industry,

and its unexpectedness caused widespread, sharp performance decreases in the industry in which employees faced layoffs or job losses. It brought unprecedented challenges for hospitality and tourism HRM practices to embrace social responsibility and demonstrate compassion and warmth for employees.

Unfortunately, the impacts of SRHRM on employee fears when faced with extreme dangers and uncertainty, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, remain conceptually and empirically unexplored. Employee fears of external threats are psychological states or feelings of uncertainty and danger as a result of undesirable events (Lebel, 2016). Therefore, this research analyzed the moderating effect of the event strength of COVID-19 on the relationship between SRHRM and employee fears.

This research was aimed at making three contributions to the literature. First, it determined the effects of SRHRM on employee fears of external threats during COVID-19, thereby enriching the strategic HRM research in crisis situations. Second, it shed light on how SRHRM helped to overcome employee fears of external threats through enhanced organizational trust based on social support theory. In so doing, it explored the underlying mechanisms of SRHRM's impacts on employee fears. Third, it examined the moderating effects of the event strength of COVID-19 on the relationship between SRHRM and employee fears, and expanded the boundary conditions of SRHRM. The research conceptual model is shown in Figure 1.

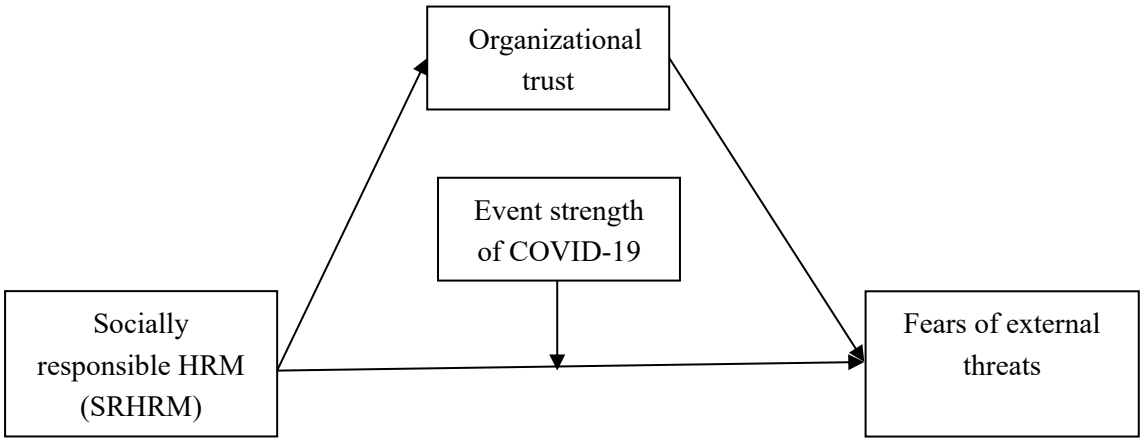

Figure 1. Conceptual model.

2. Literature review and hypotheses

2.1 SRHRM and organizational trust

Trust is mutual confidence in another party's capabilities and actions, including the perception of the other party's benevolence and dependability (Mayer *et al*., 1995). Based on the perspective proposed by Gould-Williams (2003), organizational trust refers to employee beliefs about the capabilities, benevolence, and predictability of the organization. Employees are willing to trust an organization when they have faith or confidence in its capabilities and benevolence, and the belief that the organization will not damage their interests or withhold benefits (Jia *et al*., 2019; Schuh *et al*., 2018).

It is reasonable to suggest that SRHRM may help in augmenting organizational trust. First, SRHRM practices promote employee trust motivation (Collins and Smith, 2006; Jiang *et al*., 2012). SRHRM may enhance organizational trust through incentives,

compensation and promotions for social contributions (Shen and Zhu, 2011; Waring and Lewer, 2004). Specifically, companies can consider employee social performance in rewards and compensation, promotion and performance appraisals; this tends to increase employee willingness to believe that the company supports socially responsible behaviors and cares about employee benefits (Jia *et al*., 2019; Salas-Vallina *et al*., 2020).

Second, SRHRM practices improve employee trust through enhanced capabilities (Bombiak and Marciniuk-Kluska, 2019; Jiang *et al*., 2012). For example, training to position CSR as a core organizational value and matching personal identity with CSR identity in recruitment and selection encourage employees to have confidence in the benevolence and CSR abilities of organizations (Archimi *et al*., 2018). Therefore, the first hypothesis was proposed as follows:

H_1. There is a positive relationship between SRHRM and organizational trust.

2.2 Organizational trust and employee fears of external threats

Employee fears of external threats represent negative psychological assessments of dangers at work resulting from uncertainty and hazards (De Clercq, *et al*., 2017; Lebel, 2016). Uncertain and changeable environments produce challenges for organizations, leading to employee fears of financial risks and job security threats. COVID-19 introduced high levels of unpredictability and peril for hospitality and tourism companies and their staff, including canceled bookings and the closure of tourist attractions. As a result, employees faced losing jobs, deep pay cuts and the ever-present

danger of viral infection. Under these unusual circumstances, it was paramount to build greater levels of trust between organizations and employees to overcome the fears and anxiety.

Organizational trust plays a crucial role in overcoming employee fears of external threats. First, enhanced organizational trust encourages employees to have greater belief that companies can and will provide support and help to them to overcome their struggles emanating from COVID-19 and reduce fears of threats. Second, greater recognition of organizational benevolence makes staff feel that companies are prioritizing benefits to employees, and having such positive feelings about companies, can decrease fears of job losses (Xu *et al*., 2016). Third, trust in organizational capabilities and benevolence increases confidence that companies and staff share common visions and targets in uncertain situations.

Employees with high levels of organizational trust have greater career satisfaction (Ilkhanizadeh and Karatepe, 2018), and lesser negative attitudes (Ozturk and Karatepe, 2019). Evidence shows that organizational trust promotes employee commitment (Aryee *et al*., 2002), feelings of psychological safety (Jia *et al.*, 2019), and greater ability to overcome fears (Lebel, 2016). Therefore, it was proposed that organizational trust has a negative association with fears of threats.

H_2. Organizational trust is negatively related to employee fears of threats.

2.3 Mediation effects of organizational trust

It is acknowledged that SRHRM can affect employee attitudes and behaviors in an

indirect way (Jia *et al*., 2019; Newman *et al*., 2016; Shen and Benson, 2016). SRHRM practices are likely to impact employee social and psychological processes through social support (Hobfoll, 2001). Social support theory highlights the social relationships providing support and assistance to individuals and groups, making individuals sense attachment care in times of frustration and difficulty (Hobfoll *et al*., 1990).

According to social support theory, SRHRM gives employees material and emotional resources, care, friendship, and a heightened sense of self-accomplishment in crisis situations. This organizational support and resources may be transformed into individual-level employee resources that assists in alleviating fears. Specifically, SRHRM can promote individual perceptions of trust in organizations that helps employees (Jia *et al*., 2019).

In addition, organizational trust makes employees recognize organizational support for retaining positive and reducing negative resources (Halbesleben *et al*., 2014; Hobfoll *et al*., 2018). Organizational trust emphasizing mutual confidence, loyalty and commitment about capabilities and actions transfers positive resources between organizations and employees (Ilkhanizadeh and Karatepe, 2018; Schnackenberg and Tomlinson, 2016). As a result, negative feelings are lessened through the elevated trust relationships between individuals and organizations (Jia *et al*., 2019; Peccei and Van De Voorde, 2019).

Therefore, organizational trust plays an important role in the social and psychological processes when SRHRM is impacting employee fears of external threats. SRHRM sends signals about organizational responsibility, benevolence, and

capabilities that enhance organizational trust and reduce fears of external threats (Newman *et al*., 2016). For example, SRHRM provided employees who were involved in volunteering work in cabin hospitals and transfer services with masks and protective suits, training to develop employee protection capabilities, and rewards and promotions to those employees participating during COVID-19. The employees felt the support and benevolence of their employers and had greater confidence about their companies' competitive standing and employee care. These SRHRM practices built employee trust in organizations and contributed to reducing employee fears of external threats. It is proposed, therefore, that SRHRM practices help in overcoming employee fears of external threats through organizational trust.

H_3. Organizational trust mediates the relationship between SRHRM and employee fears of external threats.

2.4 Moderation effects of COVID-19 event strength

The environment plays a crucial role in the process of social support transforming into personal resources (Hobfoll *et al*., 1990). Generally, the environment and social support have interactive effects on individuals. In addition, prior research recommends that it is important to explore the interactive effects of HR practices and contexts on employees (Becker and Huselid, 2010; Guest, 2017). As a severe crisis, COVID-19 crippled the hospitality and tourism industry and put employees at extreme health and economic risk. Thus, the pandemic constituted a highly significant external environmental situation, which influenced the effects of SRHRM practices on employees.

COVID-19 created high levels of uncertainty threatening or perceived to threaten security of life and property, and individual well-being. Event strength is an effective measure of the relevance and potential impacts of a crisis (Morgeson, 2005). It is the extent of novelty, disruption, and criticality associated with a crisis (Morgeson *et al*., 2015). The disruption and criticality of the COVID-19 pandemic are highlighted in this research. Event strength introduces discontinuity into environments and reflects the degree to which an event is important, essential, or a priority for organizations. According to event system theory (EST), events influence individual thoughts, feelings, and actions (Bundy *et al*., 2017; Morgeson *et al*., 2015).

As the COVID-19 event strength was very strong, the negative impacts of SRHRM on employee fears of threat were likely to be more significant. First, COVID-19 was hugely disruptive bringing great changes in HRM practices in hospitality and tourism companies. The more disruptive an event, the more likely it will change actors' feelings and attitudes (Morgeson *et al*., 2015). COVID-19 was extremely unsettling, making employees afraid about health threats, economic losses, and leading to mental anguish and confusion about the future. As such, it may be expected that HRM will fulfil its social responsibilities in this catastrophe (Hobfoll, 2001).

Evidence shows that crises motivate organizations to engage in helping others to reduce physical and psychological devastation (Muller *et al*., 2004). SRHRM offering resources and support for socially responsible behaviors is more recognized by staff, and the positive resources passing from organizations to employees are greater (Watkins *et al*., 2015). COVID-19 would not have influenced the effects of SRHRM

were it not so disruptive.

Second, COVID-19 was of critical importance and a priority for hospitality and tourism companies and staff, and to deal with COVID-19 became essential and a priority issue for the industry. When a crisis is more critical, it is likelier to change feelings and attitudes (Morgeson and DeRue, 2006; Morgeson *et al*., 2015). Companies were requested to suspend providing services immediately on January 24th, 2020 in China, hotels and tourism attractions closed, and numerous bookings were canceled. Due to the seriousness of COVID-19, employees were more afraid of external threats, and needed care and help from their employers. Dealing with COVID-19 became the most important issue for all organizations.

In this respect, SRHRM had to support and encourage employee socially responsible behavior and demonstrate care for staff members in greater need of support and feelings of attachment. The positive resources delivered through SRHRM help employees overcome fear, especially during crises. It is reasonable to posit that the stronger the COVID-19 event strength, the more significant was the negative effect of SRHRM on employee fears of external threats. Therefore, assuming greater social responsibility is more conducive to reducing employee fears of threats, the fourth hypothesis was:

H_4. COVID-19 event strength positively moderates the relationship between SRHRM and employee fear of external threats. As the COVID-19 event strength gets stronger, the negative impact of SRHRM on employee fears of threats is more significant.

3. Methodology

3.1 Measures

Five-point Likert scales were used to measure SRHRM, COVID-19 event strength, and organizational trust ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5), and fear of external threat ranging from "not at all" (1) to "very often" (5). The scales used for these four variables are now described. The questionnaires were originally constructed in English, and conventional and back translation were independently done by two Chinese bilingual academics (Sun *et al*., 2007). The scales for event strength and organizational trust in their English and Chinese versions were tested and showed good reliability and validity.

SRHRM. The scale for SRHRM from Shen and Zhu (2011) was applied. The items were as follows: *My company considers personal identity - CSR identity fit in recruitment and selection*; *My company provides adequate CSR training to promote CSR as a core organizational value*; *My company provides CSR training to develop employees' skills in stakeholder engagement and communication*; *My company considers employee social performance in promotions*; *My company considers employee social performance in performance appraisals*; *My company relates employee social performance to rewards and compensation*. The scale showed good reliability with a Cronbach's α of 0.912.

COVID-19 event strength. The measures of COVID-19 event strength focused on event disruption and criticality and followed the Liu and Liu (2017) scale. The Cronbach's α was 0.782. The important items included: *This event is critical for the long-term success of our company; This event is a priority to our company; This is an important event for our company; This event disrupts our company's ability to get its*

work done; This event causes our company to stop and think about how to respond; The event required our company to change the way we work.

Organizational trust. The scale of organizational trust was adapted from Gould-Williams (2003). The important items included: *I am treated fairly by this organization*; *In general, I trust this organization to keep its promises or commitment to me and other employees*; *This organization has always kept its promises about the demands of my job and the amount of work required of me*; *I trust management to look after my best interests*; and *This organization has always kept its promises about my career development*. The Cronbach's α was 0.919.

Fears of external threats. The measures for fears of external threats were adapted from Lebel (2016) and asked how frequently people felt fearful during COVID-19. The items were: *The economic downturn will negatively impact this organization*; *This organization will lose sales or revenue*; *There will be layoffs at this organization*; *Our organization will lose business to competitors*; *An industry downturn will negatively impact this organization*. The Cronbach's α was 0.830.

Control variables. The researchers controlled for demographic factors (age, gender, educational level, position and tenure, and company ownership) related to individuals (Liu *et al*., 2010). In addition, the location of respondents was controlled. Since Wuhan was the center of COVID-19 in China followed by other areas of Hubei Province, two dummy variables (D1 and D2) were created - D1 was denoted by (0,1) where 1= "areas of Hubei Province except Wuhan ", 0 = "other"; D2 was (0,1), where 1 = "areas of China except Hubei Province", 0 = "other".

3.2 Sample and procedures

A questionnaire survey was conducted of employees in hospitality and tourism

companies (including hotels, travel agencies, scenic spots, tourism planning companies, and others) during the outbreak of COVID-19 in February in China. The respondents were from hotels including the Banyan Tree and InterContinental hotels in Hangzhou, Hyatt hotels in Ningbo, Marriott hotels in Wuhan, Ctrip travel in Wuhan, and the BES Cultural Tourism Group.

There were two reasons for choosing hospitality and tourism companies. First, COVID-19 directly impacted the industry especially as the disease spread in China in January and since China was the first country to experience COVID-19. The hospitality and tourism companies were almost stagnant and faced significant challenges across several months. Second, in a labor-intensive service industry, the development of a hospitality and tourism company relies on human resources, and employee psychological states directly affect the quality of service, customer satisfaction and loyalty. Therefore, employee psychological state recovery is a key to the healthy and sustainable development of the hospitality and tourism industry.

Questionnaires were sent to employees through WeChat, a viable method to survey more respondents without face-to-face contact. The snowballing technique was followed as by Sun *et al*. (2007). A total of 436 responses were received. Of these, 408 valid questionnaires were retained after excluding 28 invalid forms because of inattentiveness (completion in less than three minutes) and having obvious tendencies in answers (the same answers for more than eight consecutive questions).

It is noteworthy that 175 respondents were from Wuhan (42.9%), the epicenter of the COVID-19 outbreak; 158 respondents were from other areas of Hubei Province outside of Wuhan (38.7%); and 75 respondents were from other areas in China outside of Hubei (18.4%). Males represented 55.1% and females were 44.9% of the respondents. Most of the employees were aged 20-39 (72.8%) and 64.2% had college degrees or

higher. Front-line employees were 38.5%; supervisors accounted for 19.4%; and middle-senior managers were at 42.2%.

In addition, semi-structured interviews with managers from hotels and tourism companies in Wuhan were conducted to provide deeper qualitative evidence to confirm and explain the relationships presented in the theoretical model (Zhuang *et al*., 2018). Hotels and tourism companies in Wuhan were used for this research because they were obviously and directly affected by the COVID-19 crisis. The interviews provided evidence to better understand relationships in organizational SRHRM, organizational trust, COVID-19 event strength, and employee fears of external threats. The respondents were five managers from brand hotels, travel agencies, and tourism planning companies in Wuhan, and each interview lasted for around 50 to 90 minutes.

4. Results

4.1 Confirmatory factor analysis

LISREL 8.80 was applied to test the validity of key variables. COVID-19 event strength was treated as a second-order variable, involving event disruption and criticality. The validity of event disruption and criticality was tested in the CFA process. The CFA results showed that the five-factor model (SRHRM; event disruption; event criticality; organizational trust; fears of external threats) fit the data better than alternative models. The five-factor model ($\chi 2$/df = 3.94 < 5; NFI = 0.94； NNFI = 0.94; CFI = 0.95; IFI = 0.95; RMSEA = 0.085 < 0.01) showed more acceptable fit than alternative models (Table 1). The variables all possessed acceptable degrees of internal consistency and reliability.

Table 1. Results of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)

Models	Factors	χ^2/df	RMSEA	NFI	NNFI	CFI	IFI
One-factor	HRM+ED+EC+TO+FT	13.30	0.174	0.77	0.77	0.79	0.79
Two-factor	SRHRM+ED+EC;TO+FT	10.99	0.157	0.81	0.81	0.83	0.83
Three-factor	SRHRM;ED+EC;TO+FT	8.67	0.137	0.86	0.85	0.87	0.87
Four-factor	SRHRM;ED+EC;TO;FT	4.67	0.095	0.92	0.93	0.94	0.94
Five-factor	SRHRM;ED;EC;TO+FT	**3.94**	**0.085**	**0.94**	**0.94**	**0.95**	**0.95**

Note. N = 408. RMESE = root mean square error of approximation; NFI = normed fit index; NNFI = non-normed fit index; CFI = comparative fit index; IFI = incremental fit index
SRHRM: socially responsible HRM; ED: event disruption; EC: event criticality; TO: trust in organizations; FT: fear of external threats

4.2 Descriptive statistics

The means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliability statistics for the key variables are presented in Table 2. The correlation analysis indicated that SRHRM was positively related to organizational trust ($r = 0.729$, $p < 0.01$), and negatively related to fears of external threats ($r = -0.260$, $p < 0.01$). Organizational trust was negatively related to fears of external threats ($r = -0.246$, $p < 0.01$).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlations for key variables

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1 SRHRM	3.97	0.68	1.00			
2 COVID-19 event strength	4.20	0.53	0.453**	1.00		
3 Organizational trust	4.01	0.68	0.729**	0.437**	1.00	
4 Fear of external threats	2.88	0.98	-0.260**	0.035	-0.246**	1.00

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$

4.3 Hypothesis testing

SPSS 22 process 3.3 was used to test the mediating effect of organizational trust and moderating effect of event strength. The mediating effects testing process was as follows: During step 1, examining the relationship between SRHRM and organizational

trust, SRHRM was positively related to organizational trust (M1: $b = 0.738$, $p < 0.001$) (Table 3). SRHRM had a positive effect on organizational trust. This result supported H_1.

H_2 proposed that organizational trust had a negative effect on fears of external threats. The result indicated that organizational trust was negatively associated with fears of external threats (M2: $b = -0.288$, $p < 0.01$) (Table 3), supporting H2.

Third, the mediation effect of organizational trust between SRHRM and fears of external threats was regressed after demographic variables were controlled, and there was a significant mediating effect of organizational trust between SRHRM on employee fears of external threats. In addition, the bootstrapping procedure was applied based on 5,000 samples with a 95% confidence interval (CI) to test the mediation effect of organizational trust. The results showed an indirect effect = -0.213, SE = 0.064, 95% CI= (-0.331, -0.075), not including 0. The 95% CI bootstrap test confirmed that the mediation effect of organizational trust between SRHRM and fears of external threats was significant, supporting H3.

The moderating effect of COVID-19 event strength was tested by regression analysis. The results showed that SRHRM was negatively related to fears of external threats (M2: $b = -0.273$, $p < 0.01$), while COVID-19 event strength positively impacted fears of external threats (M2: $b = 0.309$, $p < 0.01$). The results indicated that the interactive effect of SRHRM and COVID-19 event strength was negatively related to fears of external threats (M2: $b = -0.215$, $p < 0.01$) (Table 3), suggesting that COVID-19 event strength had a negative moderating effect on fears of external threats.

Table 3. Mediating effect of organizational trust and moderating effect of event strength.

Variables	Organizational trust	Fear of external threats

	M1	M2
Constant	3.814	3.851
Control variables		
Gender	0.075	-0.046
Age	-0.011	0.195*
Education	0.060	0.179*
Ownership	0.021	-0.038
Position	-0.052	-0.088
Tenure	0.024	-0.062
D1	-0.058	-0.274*
D2	0.018	-0.087
Independent variables		
SRHRM	**0.738****	**-0.273****
Mediator		
Trust in organizations		**-0.288****
Moderator		
ES		**0.309****
SRHRM*ES		**-0.215****
R	0.741	0.434
R^2	0.549	0.188
F	53.952	7.637
P	0.000	0.000

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$; SRHRM: socially responsible HRM; ES: event strength

In addition, the 95% CI bootstrap test showed the slope computation at high (1 SD above the mean: b = -0.387, 95%CI = [-0.603, -0.170]), mean (b = -0.273 , 95%CI = [-0.475, -0.072]) and low (1SD below the mean: b = -0.160 , 95% CI = [-0.379, 0.061]) (Table 4). The index demonstrated that the negative relationship between SRHRM and fears was significant when the event strength was at the mean and high levels, while it was not significant when event strength was at a low level. Event strength played a significant moderating role between SRHRM and fears of external threats. The stronger the event strength, the more significant was the negative effect of SRHRM on fears of external threats. H4 was thus supported.

Table 4. Index of moderation results.

Moderator (COVID-19 event strength)	Effect	Boot SE	P	Bootstrap 95%CI	
				LLCI	ULCI
Low(-SD)	-0.160	0.111	0.151	-0.379	0.061
mean	-0.273	0.102	0.008	-0.475	-0.072
High(+SD)	-0.387	0.110	0.001	-0.603	-0.170

The moderating effect of COVID-19 event strength between SRHRM and fears of external threats was as shown in Figure 2. This indicates that the higher the COVID-19 event strength, the more significant was the negative effect of SRHRM on fears of external threats.

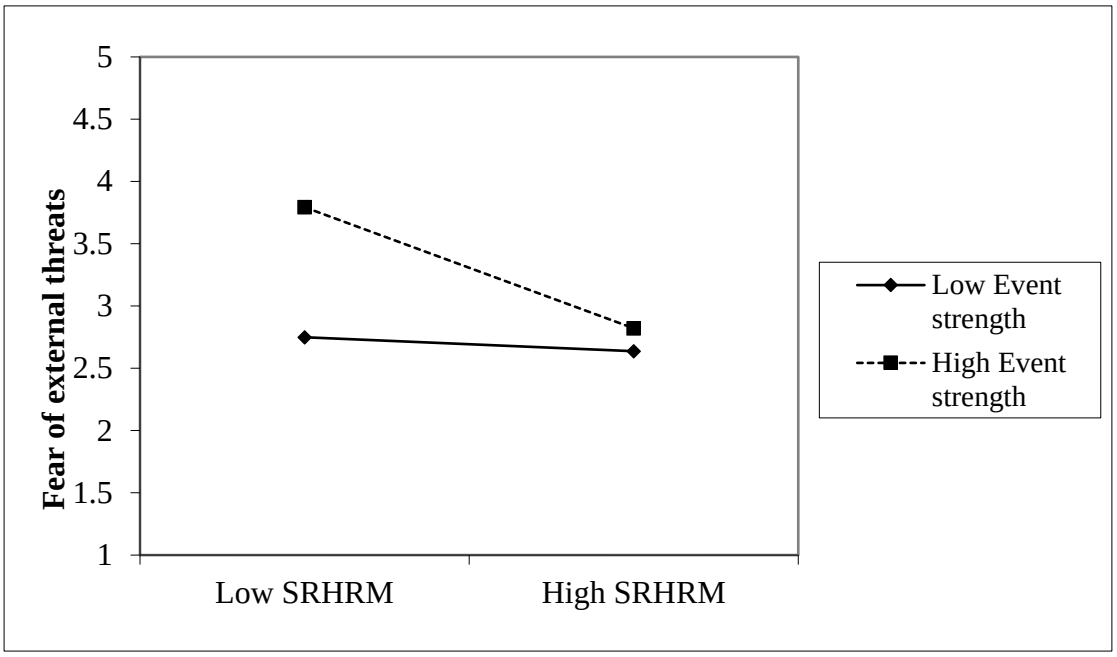

Figure 2. Moderating effect of COVID-19 event strength.

4.4 Alternative model analysis

Organizational support and resources impact individual resources through perceived trust (Halbesleben *et al*., 2014; Hobfoll *et al*., 2018). Therefore, this research proposed that SRHRM reduced fears through enhanced perceived organizational trust. To compare with the original model, the mediating and outcome variables were reversed and then the new alternative model was examined. In the alternative model, fears of external threats was the mediating and organizational trust was the outcome variables. The results showed that the relationship between fears and organizational trust was much weaker (M4: b = -0.073, $p < 0.05$) (Table 5), and the moderating effects of event strength on organizational trust was not significant (M4: b = -0.013, ns).

The bootstrapping procedure was applied based on 5,000 samples with a 95% confidence interval (CI) to test the mediation effect of fears of external threats. The results showed an indirect effect = 0.026, SE = 0.010, 95% CI = (0.008, 0.047). The effect of organizational trust on fears of external threats was stronger and more significant than the effect of fears of external threats on organizational trust. Therefore, the results supported the model that SRHRM impacts fears through organizational trust, and the original model was more robust and acceptable than the alternative one.

Table 5. Mediating effect of Fear of external threats and moderating effect of event strength.

Variables	Fear of external threats	Organizational trust
	M3	M4
Constant	2.685	4.040
Control variables		
Gender	-0.029	-0.046
Age	0.194	0.002
Education	0.160	0.074
Ownership	-0.052	0.020
Position	-0.078	-0.053
Tenure	-0.061	0.015
D1	-0.238	-0.076
D2	-0.097	0.019
Independent variables		
SRHRM	**-0.354*****	**0.645****
Mediator		
Fear of external threats		**-0.073***
Moderator		
ES		**0.181****
SRHRM*ES		**-0.013**
R	0.363	0.756
R^2	0.132	0.571
F	6.714	43.769
P	0.000	0.000

$^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$; SRHRM: socially responsible HRM; ES: event strength

Qualitative research

Qualitative evidence was gathered to supplement the quantitative findings. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with managers from hotels and tourism companies in Wuhan to provide deeper qualitative evidence to explain the relationships presented in the conceptual model (Zhuang *et al*., 2018). Hotels and tourism companies in Wuhan were used and the five interviews were with experienced managers in hotels and tourism companies, including CITIC Travel (Hubei) Company, New Beacon Hotels

Group (Wuhan), and BES Cultural Tourism Group. The data from the interviews are shown in Table 6.

Table 6. An overview of interview.

Interviewees	Gender	Company type	Position	Duration
Wang	Female	Travel agency	Senior manager	74 mins
Zheng	Male	Travel agency	Junior manager	54mins
Tang	Male	five-star hotel	Senior manager	57mins
Yin	Male	Tourism planning company	Senior manager	89mins
Liu	Male	Travel agency	Senior manager	83mins

The interviews provided further evidence to confirm and more deeply understand the relationships among SRHRM, organizational trust, COVID-19 event strength, and fears of external threats. First, the feedback suggested that SRHRM enhanced organizational trust. This trust is influenced by HRM practices and SRHRM delivers support and care to staff and gives employees greater confidence in organizational capabilities and benevolence. Generally, SRHRM impacts the trust relationships in organizations (Jia *et al*., 2019). The following statement confirmed this relationship:

"There are regular training sessions on socially responsible work. For example, the travel agency goes to communities to organize film-watching and delivers goods to communities and nursing homes. The purpose is certainly to expand the brand influence of the travel agency in the local area. At the same time, these activities promote social and community well-being. We are trained to implement these plans and learn how to communicate with communities. Besides, our company supports socially responsible

behavior and activity. During COVID-19, our company purchased masks and protective suits from overseas, and donated money to hospitals and the Red Cross.

It is quite fair in our company, and the company respects your contribution and performance. I trust our company to keep its promises. For example, I was a sales champion, and was promoted from a salesman to a middle-level manager. Employees get along well and show high loyalty to the company." (Liu, senior manager in travel agency)

Second, organizational trust helped to overcome fears of external threats. Greater organizational trust tended to heighten people's beliefs about organizational capabilities and benevolence. If employees have organizational trust, they feel safer and show less fear (Lebel, 2016; Xu *et al*., 2016), as echoed in the following:

"This organization treats its employees fairly and has kept its promises about my development and individual interests. For example, our company is a leading organization and highlights improving employee leadership capabilities. In addition, our leader has great capacity in achieving organizational goals, and to cultivate new employees. Occasionally, I thought about the negative effects of COVID-19 on investment confidence and business, profits and even layoffs. However, I am still optimistic about our company although times are still hard for us now. I believe this company cares about employee interests, and I identify with our brand and management. I have faith that our company is better than most others in the industry. We keep positive and communicate positive feelings to our customers. " (Yin, senior manager in a tourism planning company)

Third, organizational trust played a mediating role between SRHRM and fears of external threats. According to social support theory, SRHRM representing organizational support and care is a critical resource helping individuals overcome fears of external threats (Hobfoll, 2001). When provided with social support, people have lesser resource loss through enhanced trust, because trust helps individuals realize resource gains (Halbesleben *et al*., 2014), as evidenced in this statement:

"In recruitment and selection, it is necessary to check the CSR identity fit between individuals and organizations, and consistency with company philosophy about love and social responsibility. Our company highlights social responsibility and dedication values, and there are socially responsible practices to support blind children and deaf schools. We have to learn some sign language to communicate with these children, and the company has trained us to do so. In addition, the company promotion, appraisal and incentive management consider socially responsible behaviors, and employees are motivated to engage in these activities. During COVID19, I was a volunteer worker at the Second Yangtze River Bridge to maintain traffic order and measure body temperatures. Our company praised me as "the most beautiful volunteer" and wrote an article published by headquarters.

Generally speaking, our company is fair. It keeps its promises to employees and has helped in my career development, and I have learned much in this company. In addition, I trust our leader; she is great. I admire her capabilities and strategic perspectives.

Because of COVID-19，there is a decrease in performance and profits. However,

our company promised employees a basic income. In addition, our company did not lay off any employees, and even tried to recruit new employees. We are not fearful, and we are confident about our company in all aspects, such as competitive products, and close customer relationships. We will be stronger after COVID-19." (Zheng, junior manager in a travel agency)

Fourth, the COVID-19 event strength augmented the negative effects of SRHRM on fears. It has been suggested that environmental contexts impact the effects of HRM on employees (Guest, 2017). Indeed, the COVID-19 event strength augmented the negative relationship between SRHRM and fears. When a crisis is stronger, employees are more eager for support and care from their organizations (Watkins *et al*., 2015). The more disruptive and critical was the pandemic, the more negative were the effects of SRHRM on fears of external threats. External events can instigate differences in organizational management and outcomes, and it is of value to explore event system theory in organizational behavior research (Liu and Liu, 2017), as stated by this interviewee:

"Our hotel supported and affirmed employee social responsibility behavior, returning lost money and firefighting, for example. Our hotel praised socially responsible behavior and wrote articles to advocate those behaviors in our official account (on WeChat) and OA system, and incentives were provided as well. Our hotel supported employees to engage in fighting the pandemic and provided volunteering services in COVID-19.

Well, there is a great impact of the pandemic on the service industries. The

customers of the hotel used to be dominated by business guests; they have disappeared during COVID-19. There were no travelers in this area. All conferences and banquets in the hotel were stopped; this was really a shock. The hotel group pursued rapid development and brand extension, but now transformation became the first priority with the changing consumption habits of guests. The hotel conference room bookings were cancelled. Receiving business guests changed to local community service, and housekeeping, cleaning and elderly care. In addition, fighting with COVID-19 became the most important work in our hotel.

We stopped operations and made great contributions in isolation during the pandemic. The hotel supported and encouraged employees to take social responsibility in COVID-19. They had to take risks, and deserve praise, extra allowances and incentives. In the process of serving medical teams, we encourage employees to improve service quality and to work creatively, for instance, organizing birthday parties for medical staff and improving the safety protection of the hotel.

Although performance and profits decreased during COVID-19, the hotel did not lay off employees. We applied job rotation and worked online to resolve difficulties brought by the pandemic. Sometimes, we felt anxious but not fearful. This depended on the successful business transformation."(Tang, senior manager in five-star hotel)

5. Conclusions and implications

5.1 Conclusions

The purpose of this research was to explore how SRHRM influenced fears of external

threats in hospitality and tourism companies during COVID-19. The results suggested that SRHRM helped to overcome fears in the COVID-19 pandemic through greater organizational trust. In addition, COVID-19 event strength accentuated the negative effects of SRHRM on fears of external threats.

The main conclusions from the qualitive evidence were as follows. First, SRHRM is an important organizational resource supporting employees to deal with a crisis. Second, resources from organizations are transformed into individual resources through greater organizational trust. Third, the external COVID-19 crisis strengthened the negative effects of SRHRM on fears. The stronger the COVID-19 crisis, the greater was the negative impact of SRHRM on fears. Most of the existing literature focuses on the effects of SHRM in normal conditions. However, more research to explore HRM with socially responsibility in crises should be conducted in the future.

This research investigated the effects of SRHRM in overcoming fears of external threats in hospitality and tourism companies in China following the COVID-19 outbreak. The results showed that organizations played an important role in improving employee negative psychological states in the disastrous COVID-19 pandemic. HRM should be warm-hearted and take greater responsibility in a major crisis such as COVID-19. Unlike HRM under normal conditions, the expanded conceptual model illustrated the value of SRHRM in reducing fears during COVID-19 through elevated organizational trust. More creativity and research are needed during crises in the future to improve organizational HRM in times of uncertainty and threatening environments.

5.2 Theoretical implications

First, this research explored the effects of SRHRM on employee fears during a crisis, thus contributing to strategic HRM research in hospitality and tourism. Most of the existing literature focuses on the impacts of SRHRM on individual attitudes under normal conditions (Jia *et al*., 2019; Newman *et al*., 2016; Pham *et al*., 2019; Shen and Zhang, 2019; Zhao *et al.*, 2019). However, HRM must assume more social responsibility, especially in major crises, and help employees to deal with negative emotions (Parkes and Davis, 2013; Voegtlin and Greenwood, 2016; Watkins *et al*., 2015).

The findings demonstrated that SRHRM sends positive messages to employees and builds a stronger trust relationship that helps them overcome fears of threats. This research fills a literature gap by explaining the effects of SRHRM on overcoming fears of external threats in the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the study is in response to the call for more responsible HRM research, and it enriches strategic HRM research (Shen and Benson, 2016; Morgeson *et al.*, 2013; Voegtlin and Greenwood, 2016).

Second, this investigation improves the understanding of the underlying mechanisms about the effects of SRHRM on employee fears of external threats. On the foundation of social support theory, this empirical work provided evidence that SRHRM enhances organizational trust and contributes to reducing fears of external threats. According to social support theory, organizations can be an important resource and offer a sense of attachment to people (Hobfoll, 2000; Hobfoll *et al*., 2018), and organizational trust may mediate the effect of SRHRM and make individuals value

resource protection and reduce resource loss (Halbesleben *et al*., 2014).

This paper supports the view that SRHRM helped to overcome negative psychological states during the COVID-19 pandemic through enhanced organizational trust. Therefore, it confirmed the process of organizational resources contributing to individual resources (Halbesleben *et al*., 2014; Hobfoll *et al*., 2018).

Third, this research extends the strategic HRM literature by applying event strength as a boundary condition to explain the impacts of SRHRM on employee fears of external threats. According to event system theory, events occur and play critical roles in shaping individual thoughts, feelings and actions (Morgeson *et al*., 2015; Liu and Liu, 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic worldwide shocked hospitality and travel companies and their employees. This research tested the moderating effect of COVID-19 event strength between SRHRM and fears of external threats and provided an integrative view about the effects of SRHRM.

The COVID-19 event strength made the effects of SRHRM greater in reducing fear of external threats. The more disruptive and critical are crises like COVID-19, the more SRHRM is needed in hospitality and tourism companies. Therefore, this research provides a comprehensive understanding about the effects of SRHRM in the COVID-19 pandemic and potentially the results can help to improve crisis management in organizations (Bundy *et al*., 2017; William *et al.*, 2017).

5.3 Managerial implications

Hospitality and tourism companies should help employees to overcome fears of external threats during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. The ongoing prosperity of the hospitality and tourism industry depends on population mobility and uninterrupted, quality service; therefore, the lockdown and social distancing policies during COVID-19 had a direct and negative impact. The crisis relief efforts of government agencies were not always timely, available, reliable or effective. In addition, personal resources and power were insufficient and too weak to deal with the pressures of COVID-19. Therefore, organizations should provide support and help to employees during and in the aftermath of a crisis.

SRHRM can be a critical organizational resource for overcoming employee fears. SRHRM provided masks and protective suits to employees involved in volunteering work in cabin hospitals and transfer services, trained employees in protection skills and resilience capabilities, and rewarded employees engaging in socially responsible work during COVID-19. Therefore, employees sensed the support and benevolence of their employers and had greater confidence about their companies' competitive standing and employee care. This augmented organizational trust leading to reductions in fears of threats. It is valuable for hospitality and tourism companies to adopt SRHRM to build trust and to address severe challenges such as COVID-19, thereby helping employees to overcome fears of economic and psychological threats.

Managers must highlight organizational trust, especially during crisis situations.

Greater organizational trust makes employees more appreciate the resource support from their organizations and transform these into individual resources in difficult times. In addition, enhanced trust can transform organizational resources to individual employee resources, and this helped employees overcome fears during COVID-19. Building organizational trust is essential in promoting the relationships between organizations and employees and in hospitality and tourism industry recovery.

SRHRM should be applied in hospitality and tourism companies, especially in tragic events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 outbreak in China and worldwide from January 2020 inflicted severe negative impacts on hospitality and tourism companies and employees. SRHRM helps hotels and travel agencies to improve employee trust during crises. Specifically, responsible recruitment and selection, CSR training and education, and the related performance appraisal, compensation and promotion involve social responsibility. These SRHRM practices strengthen employee organizational support perceptions and contribute to organizational trust and reduce employee fears in facing the great challenges during a major crisis.

SRHRM was effective in the COVID-19 crisis in China. The more severe the COVID-19 event strength, the more significant were the negative effects of SRHRM on fears of threats. This is because COVID-19 made organizations and employees become a community of common destiny. Employees are not a burden for companies in a crisis but represent a sustainable resource to be relied upon in recovery. Being warm and friendly when there is a huge need is not only a humanitarian gesture, but also

should become a requirement for hospitality and tourism companies and their HRM departments.

5.4 Limitations and future research directions

It is acknowledged that there are several shortcomings in this analysis. First, the research focus was on employee perceptions of SRHRM, organizational trust, and fears of external threats. The cross-sectional design is limited in explaining the causality relationship between SRHRM and fears of external threats. In the future, longitudinal research is needed to explore the causality relationship between SRHRM and fears of external threats.

The data were collected from employees in hospitality and tourism companies, and having a single source inevitably leads to common variance. An attempt was made to control for common variance bias by examining whether the common variance bias was acceptable in this research. Future researchers should gather data from multiple sources including managers and employees and develop multi-level research studies on SRHRM and individual outcomes. In addition, this research focused only on hospitality and tourism and may not be generalizable to other economic sectors; thus, the conceptual model should be tested in different industries in the future.

Third, this analysis emphasized the effects of SRHRM on fears of threats. Although it is valuable to reduce fears of threats during a crisis, examining SRHRM's effects on positive psychological outcomes and mediating effects are also important directions for the future.

Finally, this research did not consider the impacts of organizational context. For example, leadership and HRM are important antecedents of staff attitudes and behaviors. In the future, an expanded conceptual model should be designed to test the interaction effects of leadership and SRHRM practices.

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