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CUSTOMER-RELATED SOCIAL STRESSORS AND FRONTLINE EMPLOYEE TURNOVER INTENTION: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF JOB- RELATED ANXIETY

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Abstract

Theory and empirical evidence suggests that customer stressors were positively related to frontline employee turnover intention. However, little work has focused on testing why and in what way customer stressors are related to such employee attitudinal outcome. To address this knowledge gap, we developed and tested a mediation model of turnover intention. Drawing on conservation of resources theory, we suggest that job-related anxiety might be a fundamental reason why customer-related stressors predicts frontline employee turnover intention. The model was tested with a sample of 258 restaurant frontline service employees. Results suggest a positive and significant relationship between customer-related stressors and employee turnover intention. Also, job-related anxiety was found to mediate the relationship between customer stressors and frontline employee turnover intention. These results highlight the importance of job-related anxiety as a fundamental mechanism which explains why and in what way customer stressors are related to frontline employee turnover intention.

Keywords: Antecedents of Turnover Intention, Conservation of Resources Theory, Customer Stressors, Job-Related Anxiety, Turnover Intention

INTRODUCTION

In both the popular press and the scholarly literature, employee turnover has repeatedly been shown to have detrimental consequences for organizations and its members (Abubakar, Chauhan, & Kura, 2014; Oxford Economics, 2014; Sunder, Kumar, Goreczny, & Maurer, 2017; Vanderpool & Way, 2013). For example, Boles, Dudley, Onyemah, Rouziès, and Weeks (2012) reported that the direct costs associated with hiring and training a new employee have been as much as to be 200% of salary that employee who quits his or her job. It is estimated that U.S. firms spend as much as \$15 billion every year to train newly salespeople and another \$800 billion on incentives, and salespeople's attrition reduces firms 'overall return on investments (Wheeler, 2017). In Nigeria, it has been reported that banks are affected by escalating employee turnover in recent years (Aroloye, 2015).

Given its detrimental consequences, gaining a thorough understanding of the underlying antecedents of employee turnover is of utmost importance in terms of minimizing such phenomenon. Several antecedents of employee turnover have been suggested by researchers in the field of marketing and organizational behaviour (Hogh, Hoel, & Carneiro, 2011; Long, Perumal, & Ajagbe, 2012; Mardanov, Maertz, & Sterrett, 2008). To date, some of the factors that have been examined include organizational culture (San Park & Kim, 2009; Way *et al.*, 2007), job satisfaction (Castle, Engberg, Anderson, & Men, 2007; Grissom, Nicholson-Crotty, & Keiser, 2012), perceived organizational justice (Nadiri & Tanova, 2010; Ponnu & Chuah, 2010), human resource management practices (Batt & Valcour, 2003; Haines III,

Jallete, & Larose, 2009), perceived psychological contract breach (Blomme, van Rheede, & Tromp, 2010; Kickul & Lester, 2001) and perceived organizational support, among others (Allen, Shore, & Griffeth, 2003; Jawahar & Hemmasi, 2006).

Although prior empirical studies have provided useful information about the antecedents of employee turnover, relatively only a few studies have considered the influence of customer-related social stressors on frontline employee turnover intention (e.g., Adams & Buck, 2010; Chang, 2008; Harris, Harvey, & Kacmar, 2009; Kao, Cheng, Kuo, & Huang, 2014; Karatepe & Anumbose Nkendon, 2014). In general, these few empirical studies have demonstrated that customer-related social stressors, such as interactions with hostile and emotionally troubled customers, disproportionate customer expectation, unclear customer expectations, disliked customers' as well as customers' antisocial behaviour increase the tendency of employees to quit their jobs (Adams & Buck, 2010; Kim, Paek, Choi, & Lee, 2012). In addition, while the direct effects of customer-related social stressors on employee turnover intention have been documented in the few extant studies, the theoretical mechanisms underlying those effects are less clear.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to replicate and extend prior studies linking customer-related social stressors to employee turnover intention. Specifically, the present study is aimed at examining the mediating role of job-related anxiety in the relationships between customer-related social stressors and frontline employee turnover intention. Towards this end, the paper is organized into five major sections. In section 2, we quantitatively reviewed extant empirical studies on the customer-related social stressors - employee turnover intention relationships to develop our research hypotheses. In section 3, we described the research methodology employed in the present study, including the research design, participants and procedure, measures adapted for the key constructs, as well as analytical strategy. We then presented our results in section 4, before conclusion and discussion in the final section.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Customer-related social stressors and frontline employee turnover intention

Frontline employee turnover intention is an important construct in the fields of human resource management, marketing, and industrial and organizational psychology (Kao *et al.*, 2014; Kim *et al.*, 2012). Frontline employee turnover intention is defined as the likelihood of employees to leave their jobs or organization that they are currently working for (Schyns, Torka, & Gössling, 2007). Extant research suggests that work experiences, organizational and personal factors are the key antecedents of frontline employee turnover intention (Cotton & Tuttle, 1986; Ferris, Harrell-Cook, & Dulebohn, 2000; Ho, Sambasivan, & Liew, 2013; Porter & Steers, 1973). Customer-related social stressor (s) is one of the work experience factor that has been considered as the key determinant of Frontline employee turnover intention. As noted above, there are few empirical studies suggesting that Customer-related social stressors are positively related with frontline employee turnover intention in a variety of organizational settings (Adams & Buck, 2010; Chang, 2008; Harris *et al.*, 2009; Kao *et al.*, 2014; Karatepe & Anumbose Nkendon, 2014).

Conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000) provides a logical explanation for the relationships between customer-related social stressors and frontline employee turnover intention. Conservation of resources theory postulates that frontline employees invest a significant amount of resources in building relationships with their customers. Specifically, these resources could be emotional labour, such as time and feelings of achievement (Harris *et al.*, 2009). Conservation of resources theory

conjectures that frontline employees make efforts to conserve their valued resources in order to achieve desired goals (Grandey & Cropanzano, 1999; Harris *et al.*, 2009). When these resources are threatened or actually lost, frontline employees are likely to experience negative psychological and emotional consequences, which might activate the desire to quit their jobs or organization that they are currently working for (Harris *et al.*, 2009). Consistent with the above theoretical and empirical evidence, we advanced the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Customer-related social stressors will be positively related to frontline employees' turnover intention.

Mediating role of job-related anxiety between customer-related social stressors and frontline employee turnover intention

Although Customer-related social stressors have been theoretically and empirically linked to frontline employees' turnover intention, there has been a handful empirical research examining the fundamental mechanisms by which customer-related social stressors influence frontline employees' turnover intention. Given that a variety of different mechanisms may be involved in customer-related social stressors - employees' turnover intention relationship, we proposed the potential mediating role of job-related anxiety behind this relationship. Job-related anxiety is defined as a condition that is characterized by persistent feelings of exhaustion, worry, nervousness, or unease, emanating from employee's interaction with his or her work environment.

Conservation of resources theory underlines the role of job-related anxiety as a fundamental mechanism between customer-related social stressors and frontline employee turnover intention (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000). Vanderpool and Way (2013) contended that when customer-contact employees experience high levels of stress due to interaction with their customers, they may also experience high levels of job anxiety, which in turn may have a positive effect on their intention to quit their jobs. Because customer-related social stressors threaten employees' feelings of achievement (Harris *et al.*, 2009), they are likely to elicit turnover intention, through job-related anxiety. Therefore, the following hypothesis is advanced:

Hypothesis 2: Job-related anxiety will mediate the relationships between customer-related social stressors and frontline employees' turnover intention.

Based on the theoretical reasoning and empirical evidence (Adams & Buck, 2010; Chang, 2008; Harris *et al.*, 2009; Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000; Kao *et al.*, 2014; Karatepe & Anumbose Nkendong, 2014), a conceptual model depicted in Figure 1 is developed. The conceptual model depicts job-related anxiety as a potential mediating variable in the relationships between customer-related social stressors and frontline employees' turnover intention.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL

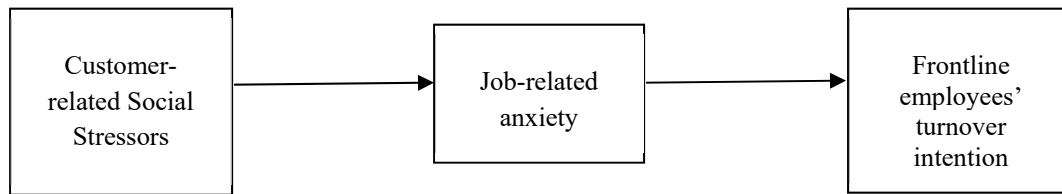


Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Model

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Sample and Procedure

Data were collected from 258 frontline service employees at several restaurants based in Kano and Kaduna metropolis in the northwest geo-political zone of Nigeria. We distributed 300 packets that included a cover letter, the questionnaire and a self-addressed stamped envelope. Two hundred and seventy surveys were returned; however, due to missing values and multivariate outliers, the final sample size was reduced to 258 for a valid response rate of 86%. Consistent with the high ratio of women to men in restaurants' frontline service jobs, 59% of the respondents were female, while the remaining 41% were their male counterpart. The average age of the respondents was 35.4 years with a standard deviation of 7.9 years

Measures

Customer-related social stressors: We adapted three items from Bailey and McCollough's (2000) Difficult Customer Perception Scale in order to measure customer-related social stressors. In addition, these items adapted were rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = (*never*) to 7 = (*Several times a day*). Sample item is: "How often do you deal with customers in your job?"

Job-related anxiety: Job-related anxiety was measured using the five items from a scale developed by Parker and DeCotiis (1983). A 7-point Likert response format 1 = (*strongly disagree*) to 7 = (*strongly agree*) was also adopted. Sample item is, "I often feel fidgety or nervous because of my job".

Frontline employees' turnover intention: To measure frontline employees' turnover intention, we adapted five-item Turnover Intention Survey, developed by Vanderpool and Way (2013). A 7-point Likert response format 1 = (*strongly disagree*) to 7 = (*strongly agree*) was utilized. Sample item for this scale is, "I have seriously thought about changing organizations since I began working for this restaurant".

RESULTS

The analytical and estimation approach adopted in the present study was Variance-based Structural Equation Modeling. This approach was chosen for four reasons. First, Variance-based Structural Equation Modeling approach has the ability to simultaneously estimate the relationships between latent constructs, as well as the relationships between indicators and their corresponding latent constructs (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2013; Henseler, Ringle, & Sinkovics, 2009). Second, Variance-based Structural Equation Modeling approach has advantage of providing statistically reliable estimates of indirect effects in simple mediation models based on bootstrapping techniques, which employs standard errors for path coefficients (c.f., Baron & Kenny, 1986; Hair, Hult, *et al.*, 2013; Kock, 2014; Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Third, the present study is prediction-oriented, aimed at explaining the effect of customer-related stressors and job-related anxiety on Frontline employees' turnover intention. As such, Variance-based Structural Equation Modeling approach is deemed appropriate. Fourth, regarding the tool of analysis, ADANCO 1.1 software (Henseler & Dijkstra, 2015) was chosen on the basis of its friendly graphical user interface, which help users to create and estimate a PLS path model easily. Consistent with Anderson and Gerbing's (1988) general recommendations, as well as PLS-SEM-specific guidelines, put forward by Henseler *et al.* (2009), we first tested the measurement model before considering the structural model. This was followed by the supplementary PLS-SEM analysis (i.e., mediator analysis).

Common method variance

Common method variance (CMV), also known to as monomethod bias is a major concern for scholars using self-report surveys (Lindell & Whitney, 2001; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003; Spector, 2006). We used Harman's (1967) single factor test to ensure that CMV is not an issue in the present study. Specifically, following Podsakoff, MacKenzie, and Podsakoff (2012a) suggestion, we subjected all items in this study into the principal components factor analysis and the results of the analysis yielded six factors, explaining a cumulative of 73% of the variance; with the first (largest) factor explaining 32% of the total variance, which is less than 50% (Kumar, 2012). Additionally, the results indicate that no single factor accounted for the majority of covariance in the predictor and criterion variables (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2012a). Hence, this suggests that CMV was not a major concern and is unlikely to inflate relationships between variables measured in the present study.

Measurement Model

In order to establish the reliability and validity of measures, individual item reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, as well as discriminant validity were evaluated (Hair, Hult, *et al.*, 2013; Hair, Sarstedt, Ringle, & Mena, 2012; Henseler *et al.*, 2009) as presented in Table I. First, individual item reliabilities were evaluated by examining the outer loadings of each construct's measure (Hulland, 1999). Following Hair *et al.*'s (2013) benchmark for retaining items with loadings between .40 and .70, none of the 13 items was deleted. Hence, in the whole model, the 13 items with loadings between 0.7687 and 0.9274 were retained. Second, as the upper bound for the true reliability, internal consistency reliability was examined by means of composite reliability coefficient (Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2013). It is generally recommended that the composite reliability coefficient for each latent construct should exceed 0.70 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988).

Table 1: Assessment Results of the Measurement Model

Construct/ Associated Indicator	Loading	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted
Customer-related social stressors		0.9323	0.8211
CRS01	0.9274		
CRS02	0.8961		
CRS03	0.8946		
Job-related anxiety		0.9339	0.7388
JRA01	0.8433		
JRA02	0.8286		
JRA03	0.8318		
JRA04	0.8867		
JRA05	0.9044		
Frontline employees' turnover intention		0.9199	0.6973
FET01	0.7687		
FET02	0.8911		
FET03	0.8742		
FET04	0.8298		
FET05	0.8054		

As shown in Table 1, the composite reliability coefficients, which range between 0.9199 and 0.9339, demonstrate adequate internal consistency reliability, as each was above 0.70 as traditionally recommended by Bagozzi and Yi (1988). Third, to ascertain the convergent validity, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each latent construct was analyzed. Generally, the AVE for each latent construct should exceed 0.50 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Hair, Hult, *et al.*, 2013). As shown in Table 1, the AVE for each latent construct has exceeded the threshold value of 0.50, hence, suggesting satisfactory convergent validity. Finally, Fornell-Larcker's criterium was used to ascertain the discriminant validity of measures as shown in Table 2. According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), discriminant validity is established only if the AVE for each latent construct is statistically significant and exceeds its squared correlation with any other construct. In Table 2, the squared correlations among the latent constructs were compared with the square root of the AVEs (values in bold face). Table 2 suggests adequate discriminant validity as the AVE for each latent construct exceeded its squared correlation with any other construct (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Besides Fornell and Larcker criterion, we also confirmed discriminant validity using heterotraitmonotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) approach, which is based on a multitrait-multimethod matrix, as recommended by Henseler, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2015). Using this criterion, discriminant validity is said to be adequate when HTMT values are below the threshold of 0.85 (Henseler *et al.*, 2015). The results in Table 3 showed that none of the HTMT values was larger than 0.85, which suggest that our measurement model fits the data well and it is also indication of adequate discriminant validity.

Table 2: Results of Discriminant Validity of Measures (Fornell–Larcker Criterion)

Construct	Customer-related social stressors	Frontline employees' turnover intention	Job-related anxiety
Customer-related social stressors	0.8211		
Frontline employees' turnover intention	0.2881	0.6973	
Job-related anxiety	0.2574	0.3452	0.7388

Note: Squared correlations; AVE in the diagonal.

Table 3: Results of Discriminant Validity of Measures (HTMT_{.85} Criterion)

Construct	Customer-related social stressors	Frontline employees' turnover intention	Job-related anxiety
Customer-related social stressors			
Frontline employees' turnover intention	0.5820		
Job-related anxiety	0.5595	0.6222	

Structural Model

Having ascertained the reliability and validity of the measurement model, we then evaluated the structural model. Based on the assessment criteria recommended by Henseler et al. (2009), as well as Hair et al. (2013), two metrics were used to judge the structural model, namely the significance of path coefficients and coefficient of determination (R^2). Furthermore, to assess the significance of path coefficients, we followed Preacher and Hayes' (2008; 2004) procedures for estimating indirect effects in mediation models by first testing the structural model which does not include a mediating variable. The results are presented in Figure 2 and Table 4.

Table 4: Results of Structural Model Without a Mediating Variable

Effect	Beta	SE	t-value	Percentile bootstrap quantiles	
				0.5%	99.5%
CRS -> FET	0.5376	0.0493	10.9108	0.4058	0.6588

Note: Customer-related social stressors = CRS; Frontline employees' turnover intention = FET

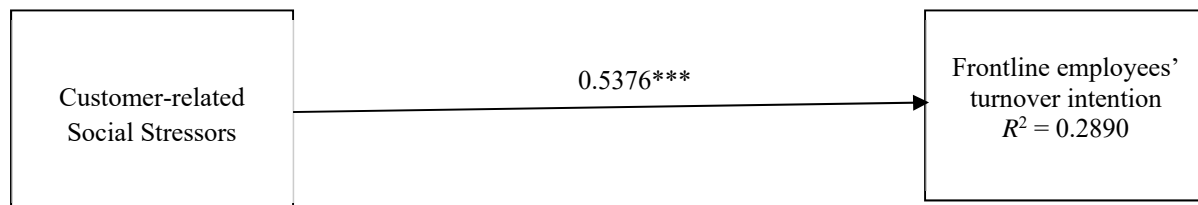


Figure 2: Structural Model Without a Mediating Variable

As shown Figure 2 and Table 4, there was a statistically significant positive relationship between customer-related social stressors and frontline employees' turnover intention ($\beta = 0.5376$, $t = 10.9108$, $CI = [0.4058; 0.6588]$). Hence, Hypothesis 1 was fully supported. Next, the structural model was tested after incorporating a mediating variable as presented in Figure 3 and Table 5.

Table 5: Results of Structural Model After including a Mediating Variable

Effect	Beta	SE	t-value	Percentile bootstrap quantiles	
				0.5%	99.5%
CRS ->FET	0.2135	0.0433	4.9274	0.1243	0.3464

Note: Customer-related social stressors = CRS; Frontline employees' turnover intention = FET

As indicated Figure 3 and Table 5, customer-related social stressors have a significant positive relationship with job-related anxiety, which in turns predicted frontline employees' turnover intention in a positive direction. The indirect effect of customer-related social stressors ($\beta = 0.2135$, $t = 4.9274$, $CI = [0.1243; 0.3464]$) via the mediator variable job-related anxiety was also found to be significant (Table 5).

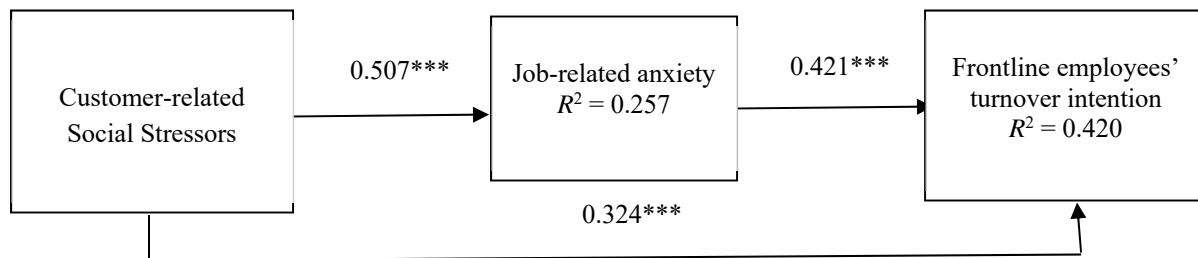


Figure 3: Structural Model After Incorporating a Mediating Variable

Similarly, the relationship between customer-related social stressors and frontline employees' turnover intention remains significant (Figure 2; $\beta = 0.324$, $t = 4.765$, $CI = [0.1462; 0.4900]$) but, with a difference of 0.2136, which is significantly lower than when job-related anxiety was not included. As such, job-related anxiety mediates the relationship between customer-related social stressors and frontline employees' turnover intention, which lends support for Hypothesis 2. Regarding the coefficient of determination (R^2), the model demonstrates that the percentages of explained variance for the frontline employees' turnover intention and job-related anxiety were 0.420 and 0.257, respectively. This suggests that the model accounts for 42% and 26% of explained variance for the frontline employees' turnover intention and job-related anxiety, Falk and Miller (1992) recommended that the coefficient of determination for an endogenous latent construct should be at least 0.10. Accordingly, following Falk and Miller's (1992) benchmark for determining acceptable level of coefficient of determination, it can be concluded that the two endogenous latent variables demonstrate acceptable levels of R-squared values.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Although extant research has established a positive association between customer-related social stressors and frontline employees' turnover intention, it is not fully clear why this occurs. Accordingly, the present study replicated and extended prior research by proposing and examining job-related anxiety as an explanatory mechanism behind this relationship. In particular, the present investigation replicated and extended prior research in the following ways. First, this study replicated prior findings (e.g., Adams & Buck, 2010; Chang, 2008; Harris *et al.*, 2009; Kao *et al.*, 2014; Karatepe & Anumbose Nkendon, 2014) demonstrating that customer-related social stressors are an important factor in predicting frontline employees' turnover intention. Hence, as hypothesized, the results of this investigation supported the positive relationship between customer-related social stressors and frontline employees' turnover intention. Second, as noted above, while prior studies have examined the direct relationship between customer-related social stressors and frontline employees' turnover intention, the present study extended past research by proposing and testing a mediation model to explain more about a mechanism through which job-related anxiety is translated into frontline employees' turnover intention (Adams & Buck, 2010; Chang, 2008; Harris *et al.*, 2009; Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000; Kao *et al.*, 2014; Karatepe & Anumbose Nkendon, 2014). Specifically, we argued that customer-related social stressors activates negative psychological and feelings, leading to employees the desire to quit their jobs or organization that they are currently working for.

While the results of this study provide an initial support regarding the role of job-related anxiety as a mediating link between between customer-related social stressors and frontline employees' turnover intention, before conclusions can be drawn, several limitations of this study must be acknowledged. First, the empirical results of this study are limited to a relatively small sample of frontline service employees of restaurants operating in Kano and Kaduna, Nigeria, and the research design is considered somewhat exploratory in nature, which does not provide the final answers to the research question. Therefore, future research is encouraged to cover a broader sample of frontline service employees from other states of Nigeria, particularly the remaining geo-political zones of Nigeria. Second, the present study has focused mainly on job-related anxiety as a mediating link. Future research should consider other job attitudes, such as job satisfaction and organisational commitment as mediators between customer-related social stressors and frontline employees' turnover intention. Finally, as suggested by Podsakoff, MacKenzie, and Podsakoff (2012b), when a research is conducted using survey, common method variance (CMV) may become a key concern. Although we used Harman's one-factor test to confirm that CMV is not an issue in our, future research might replicate this study by collecting data for each construct at different time to further minimize common method bias.

Despite its limitations, the results of this study offer some practical implications. For instance, the results suggest that customer-related social stressors were positively associated with job-related anxiety, which in turns predicted frontline employees' turnover intention. In other words, results suggest that frontline employees' turnover intention were strongly influenced by both customer-related social stressors and job-related anxiety. Theoretically, this study has also added to the domain of conservation of resources theory by replicating past studies that examined the direct influence of customer-related social stressors and frontline employees' turnover intention. From practical perspective, management of restaurants could minimize frontline employees' turnover intention by adopting several strategic measures. One strategic measures that can be used by restaurant management to cope with the problem customer-related social stressors is to understand the actual sources of customer-related social stressors to enable them make decisions about how to manage these social stressors. In addition, management of restaurants could reduce customer-related social stressors by means of better organizational design, clear work descriptions and work guidelines (Sug-Ing, 2008). Providing training on stress management for frontline restaurant personnel will be helpful in managing customer-related social stressors (Sug-Ing, 2008). In conclusion, the present study

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has provided an initial support for job-related anxiety as a mediating link between customer-related social stressors and frontline employees' turnover intention.

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