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The Secret Ingredient to Thriving Under Pressure: Psychological Capital, Organizational Dehumanization and Workplace Attachment in Hospitality Industry

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ABSTRACT **Original Research Article**

Waitstaff represent a critical yet vulnerable workforce, often subject to conditions that can foster a sense of being objectified or instrumentalized. Drawing on Conservation of Resources theory, this paper investigates the interplay between psychological capital (PsyCap), organizational dehumanization and workplace attachment. Using organizational dehumanization scale, psychological capital questionnaire and workplace attachment scale, a cross-sectional survey of one hundred and sixty employees within the high-pressure context of the hospitality service industry yielded three principal findings which indicates that organizational dehumanization was a significant negative predictor of workplace attachment, psychological capital was a significant positive predictor of workplace attachment and psychological capital failed to moderate the relationship between organizational dehumanization and workplace attachment. The results suggest that while fostering PsyCap is beneficial, it cannot substitute for the fundamental need to address and mitigate dehumanizing practices within the workplace. The study concludes that creating a humanizing organizational environment is paramount for fostering employee attachment in the service sector.

Keywords: Workplace Attachment, Organizational Dehumanization, Psychological Capital, Hospitality Industry.

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Introduction

The contemporary workplace presents a paradoxical landscape where organizations simultaneously strive to enhance employee engagement while inadvertently creating conditions that may undermine human dignity and possibility for organizational attachment. For waitstaff who are the frontline ambassadors of a restaurant, these pressures are acute as they navigate fast-paced tasks, manage complex customer interactions, utilize automated systems, operate within rigid organizational structures and steer complex competitive pressures that can lead to organizational dehumanization; which is the systematic treatment of employees as objects rather than individuals with inherent worth and dignity (Gul, et al. 2024). In recent years, organizational dehumanization has received increasing attention from researchers in an effort to identify its nomological network. Specifically, in their recent literature review, Brison et al. (2022) identified six categories of predictors of organizational dehumanization: Societal factors (e.g., national culture; Nguyen, et al., 2021), organizational characteristics (e.g., organizational rules; Lagios, Nguyen, et al., 2022), environmental factors (e.g., bad air quality or noise; Stinglhamber et al., 2022), job characteristics (e.g., job autonomy; Demoulin et al., 2021), interpersonal factors (e.g., abusive supervision; Caesens et al., 2019) and individual factors (e.g., negative affectivity; Nguyen et al., 2021). It was

all the more important to identify these antecedents because organizational dehumanization has very deleterious consequences for both employees and organizations (Arefin et al., 2026). First, organizational dehumanization impairs employees' well-being and fosters negative attitudes towards the organization. For instance, employees experiencing dehumanization at work reported low job satisfaction, more emotional exhaustion and psychological strains (Caesens et al., 2019; Lagios, Caesens, et al., 2022; Lagios, Nguyen, et al., 2022) but also more intentions to quit the organization and low organizational commitment (Caesens et al., 2017; Nguyen, Dao, et al., 2021). However, the negative impact of dehumanization on workplace attachment remains understudied, particularly in emerging economies like Nigeria. Existing literature suggests a strong inverse relationship between dehumanization and workplace attachment, as employees who feel dehumanized are less likely to identify with organizational goals or perceive value in their roles (Chen et al., 2020). Strong workplace attachment motivates employees to remain engaged, loyal and productive (Igbin, 2022). Concurrently, the importance of fostering meaningful workplace attachments has gained prominence as a critical determinant of employee retention, performance, and organizational success (El-Ashry et al 2025). Throughout adulthood, individuals devote a significant portion of their time to work and their workplace environment and modern organizations are placing greater emphasis on enhancing workplace conditions to foster employee well-being and productivity (Mohamad & Abiddin 2024) and on this basis, workplace attachment plays a pivotal role. Organizational attachment refers to the emotional bond employees develop with their workplace which includes feelings of belonging, identification and commitment to the organization (Al-Khindi & Al-Khodari, 2017). Workplace attachment is also defined as the extent to which employees develop a meaningful connection with their organizations, even turning it into a personalized environment that aligns with their social and professional needs (van Rossenberg et al. 2018; Hur et al. 2022). In the workplace, attachment extends beyond the mere physical environment to encompass the broader influence of organizational culture, which includes shared values, norms, and practices that shape employees' perceptions and interactions within the workplace (Rioux, 2006).

For waitstaff in Nigeria, where job insecurity and high workload are common, workplace attachment acts as a buffer against intentions to leave, fostering loyalty and engagement (Igbin, 2022) and at the intersection of these phenomena lies psychological capital (PsyCap), a multidimensional construct which has emerged as a significant moderating factor in organizational behavior research (Chen et al 2024). An individual's PsyCap consists of four positive psychological constructs: self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism (Cooke et al., 2019; Luthans et al., 2019). Specifically, hope refers to persistently striving toward goals and adjusting pathways when required; efficacy represents individuals' belief in their capability to meet challenges; resilience is the ability to effectively recover from setbacks; and optimism denotes a positive expectation of achieving success both now and in the future (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2007). Together, these PsyCap resources equip employees to effectively handle workplace demands and proactively strive toward desired outcomes. Unlike fixed personality traits, PsyCap can be developed through organizational support and targeted training initiatives (Abou et al. 2022). Thus, PsyCap has gained prominence in studies focused on improving employees' performance, satisfaction, and well-being, especially within high-pressure work environments such as hospitality. When effectively employed and developed, these elements work as psychological resources for optimum individual performance as they serve as a coping mechanism for perceived dehumanization, raises hope and optimism, and motivates people to perform better in light of occupational stressors (Dóci, et al., 2023).

Recent empirical evidence demonstrates that organizational dehumanization significantly undermines creative performance and organizational bond through threats to personal resources (Talpur et al 2024). Furthermore, organizational dehumanization has been linked to increased emotional exhaustion, particularly in contexts characterized by job insecurity, where employee resilience plays a crucial moderating role (Cheung, 2024). The proliferation of algorithmic evaluation systems has further exacerbated concerns about organizational dehumanization, with research indicating that automated processes generate stronger perceptions of disrespect and lack of individualized consideration compared to human-centered evaluations (Chun et al 2024).

Workplace attachments, conceptualized through the lens of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) and organizational commitment literature, represent the emotional and psychological bonds that employees form with their work environment, colleagues, and organizational mission (Ren et al. 2024). Recent theoretical developments have integrated attachment styles with self-regulatory frameworks to explain how individuals respond to workplace stressors and organizational cues (Ren et al. 2024). Empirical evidence also suggests strong associations between psychological capital and workplace attachment indicating that PsyCap may serve as a foundation for developing secure workplace attachments (El-Ashry et al. 2025). These findings align with broader research demonstrating that secure attachment orientations can moderate the negative effects of organizational dehumanization on employee engagement and well-being (Falvo, 2021).

Psychological capital has emerged as a critical psychological resource that influences how employees interpret, respond to, and recover from adverse organizational experiences. Meta-analytic evidence reveals that PsyCap is positively associated

with organizational citizenship behaviors while negatively correlating with workplace mistreatment experiences (Chen et al. 2024). More importantly, recent research has demonstrated that psychological capital can function as a buffer against the negative consequences of organizational dehumanization, reducing its impact on perceived incivility and deviant behaviors in work contexts (Gul et al 2024). This moderating effect suggests that employees with higher levels of PsyCap may be better equipped to maintain their psychological well-being and professional effectiveness even when exposed to dehumanizing organizational practices.

The intersection of organizational dehumanization, workplace attachments, and psychological capital presents a complex web of relationships that warrant careful theoretical and empirical examination. While existing research has explored these constructs in isolation or in dyadic relationships, there remains a significant gap in understanding how psychological capital moderates the relationship between organizational dehumanization and workplace attachments.

The theoretical foundation for examining the moderating role of psychological capital draws from several complementary frameworks. Conservation of Resources (COR) theory suggests that individuals strive to obtain, retain, and protect resources, and that psychological capital represents a valuable resource reservoir that can be drawn upon during times of stress (Hobfoll, 2001). Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) provides insight into how dehumanizing organizational practices may disrupt the reciprocal relationship between employees and organizations, potentially weakening psychological capital and formation of workplace bonds.

Recent empirical findings suggest at least two primary pathways through which these relationships may operate. First, organizational dehumanization may threaten self-esteem and dignity, leading to reduced performance and well-being, with psychological capital serving as a buffer against these negative outcomes (Talpur et al 2024; Cheung et al 2024). Second, organizational structures and practices that lack individualized consideration may generate perceptions of disrespect that weaken workplace attachments, with PsyCap potentially moderating these downstream responses (Chun et al 2024). These pathways highlight the need for comprehensive models that simultaneously consider attachment orientation, psychological capital, and organizational dehumanization in predicting workplace outcomes.

Despite the growing body of literature on workplace dynamics, several research gaps persist. Firstly, there is a paucity of empirical studies investigating the direct relationship between organizational dehumanization and workplace attachment within the specific context of the Nigerian hospitality industry. Secondly, there is a notable shortage of longitudinal, multi-source studies that simultaneously measure attachment orientation, psychological capital, and organizational dehumanization to test interactive and causal models (Cimon et al. 2024).

Existing research often adopts a global perspective, which may not fully capture the localized nuances of employee experiences in Nigeria, including cultural factors and specific industry challenges. Thirdly, the moderating role of psychological capital in this specific relationship has not been adequately explored. While the positive effects of PsyCap on various organizational outcomes are well-documented, its capacity to buffer the negative impact of dehumanization on workplace attachment in this particular sector remains an empirical question. Addressing these gaps will provide valuable insights for both academic understanding and practical interventions within the Nigerian hospitality context.

Based on the theoretical underpinnings and identified research gaps, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Organizational dehumanization will be negatively associated with workplace attachment among a sample of waitstaff in the Nigerian hospitality industry.

H2. Psychological capital will be positively associated with workplace attachment among a sample of waitstaff in the Nigerian hospitality industry.

H3: Psychological capital will positively moderate the relationship between organizational dehumanization and workplace attachment among a sample of waitstaff in the Nigerian hospitality industry

By examining these hypotheses, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the psychological mechanisms at play within the Nigerian hospitality industry, offering valuable insights for fostering more humane work environments and strengthening employee loyalty.

Method

Participants

Participants for this study comprised one hundred and sixty (160) employees with mean age of 24.74 and SD 5.3 drawn from the hospitality service industry in Enugu Metropolis, South East Nigeria. Using criterion and snowball sampling techniques, participants were recruited from ten selected hospitality establishments, including hotels, full-service restaurants as well as quick service restaurants. Eligibility criteria required participants to be full-time employees with a minimum tenure of six months within their respective organizations to ensure adequate exposure to workplace experiences and organizational practices. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to data collection.

Instruments

Organizational Dehumanization Scale (ODS)

Organizational dehumanization was measured using the scale created and validated by Caesens et al. (2017). The scale is

composed of 11 statements (e.g., “My organization considers me as a tool to use for its own ends”, “My organization treats me as if I were an object”) regarding how workers think they are treated by their organization as a whole. Answers were self-reported on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) Likert-scale with higher scores indicating greater perceptions of organizational dehumanization. The Organizational Dehumanization Scale (ODS) developed by Caesens et al. (2017) demonstrated excellent internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .93.

Psychological Capital Questionnaire (PCQ)

Psychological capital was assessed using the Psychological Capital Questionnaire (PCQ) developed by Luthans, et al. (2007). The instrument measures the four components of psychological capital: self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism. Responses are provided on a six-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Higher scores indicate higher levels of positive psychological resources. The Psychological Capital Questionnaire (PCQ) developed by Luthans et al. (2007) has consistently demonstrated high internal consistency, with an overall Cronbach's alpha of .91, while the subscales yielded reliability coefficients ranging from .71 to .85**.**

Workplace Attachment Scale (WAS)

Workplace attachment was measured using the Workplace Attachment Scale developed by Scrima, et al. (2014). The scale assesses the emotional bond and psychological connection employees develop toward their workplace environment. Participants responded to items on a Likert-type scale indicating the extent of their agreement with each statement. Higher scores reflect stronger attachment to the workplace and this instrument has also demonstrated good internal consistency, with an overall Cronbach's alpha of .88.

Procedure

Permission was sought from the management of ten selected participating hospitality organizations. Employees who met the inclusion criteria (full time employees and worked for at least six months) were approached during work breaks and informed about the purpose of the study, confidentiality of responses and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Copies of questionnaire were administered in paper-and-pen format and where necessary, through electronic survey platforms to facilitate participation. Respondents completed the Organizational Dehumanization Scale, Psychological Capital Questionnaire, and Workplace Attachment Scale anonymously. Data collection was conducted over a period of one month, and completed copies of questionnaire were screened for completeness before analysis.

Design

The study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional survey design and this design was considered appropriate because it enables the collection of data from participants at a single point in time and facilitates the examination of relationships among organizational dehumanization, psychological capital and workplace attachment. Cross-sectional designs are widely utilized in organizational and industrial psychology research when investigating associations among psychosocial variables within workplace settings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data was analysed using moderated hierarchical regression with Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 26.

Results

Table I: descriptive and correlational statistics

S/N	Variables	Mean	Std. D	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	Gender	1.504	.5022	1							
2	Age	24.74	5.311	-.162	1						
3	Marital status	1.646	.4803	.081	-.760**	1					
4	Years of service	2.486	1.488	-.081	.771**	-.643**	1				
5	Moderator	4874.	2557.	.175	-.010	-.099	-.041	1			
6	Organisational dehumanisation	73.18	23.56	.190*	.064	.001	.046	.645**	1		
7	Psychological capital	65.71	25.00	.056	-.063	-.108	-.059	.798**	.111	1	
8	Workplace attachment	71.06	21.96	-.139	-.085	.146	-.124	.025	-.324*	.452*	1

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

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

Table I above shows that age (r = -0.771**) at p < 0.01 has a positive relationship with years of service, indicating that an increase in age is associated with an increase in years of service. Organisational dehumanisation (r =- .324*) at p < .05 negatively relates to workplace attachment, meaning that an increase in organisational dehumanisation will cause a decrease in workplace attachment. Psychological capital (r=.452*) at p<.05 positively relates to workplace attachment, which means that an increase in psychological capital will cause an increase in workplace attachment.

Table II: Regression statistics

Model			Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t
			B	Std. Error	Beta	
Organisational dehumanisation	.052	.003	-.651*	.789*	-.672*	-1.017*
Psychological capital			.846*	.984*	.852*	1.545*
Moderator			-.003	.004	-.306	-.725
Gender			-6.383	4.347	-.146	-1.468
Age			.482	.758	.117	.636
Marital status			8.181	7.098	.179	1.153
Years of service			-1.642	2.268	-.111	-.724
a. Dependent Variable: workplace attachment						

Table II above shows that organisational dehumanisation, Stβ=-.672* t=-1.017* at p<.05, negatively predicts workplace attachment, which means that an increase in organisational dehumanisation will cause a decrease in workplace attachment. Psychological capital, Stβ=.852* t=1.545* at p<.05, positively predicts workplace attachment, which means that an increase in psychological capital will cause an increase in workplace attachment.

Psychological capital, Stβ=-.306 and t=-.725, did not moderate the relationship between organisational dehumanisation and workplace attachment. Age, Stβ= .117 t=.636, gender, Stβ=-.146 t=-1.468, marital status Stβ=.179 t=1.153, years of service, Stβ=-.111 t=-.724 did not predict workplace attachment.

Discussion of Findings

The study yielded clear and compelling findings regarding the direct impacts of the predictor variables but offered a surprising result for the moderation hypothesis.

Organizational dehumanization negatively predicts workplace attachment as waitstaff reported higher levels of feeling objectified or instrumentalized by their organization, their emotional attachment to their workplace decreased remarkably. The strong negative relationship between ODH and workplace attachment (H1) underscores the fundamentally social and human need for recognition and validation at work. When an organization treats its employees as mere instruments, it severs the potential for a positive emotional connection. For waitstaff, who are often required to perform high levels of emotional labour, the perception that their employer disregards their humanity is likely a profound psychological breach. This finding validates the assertions by Bell and Khoury (2011, 2016) that ODH is not a minor workplace annoyance but a powerful corrosive agent that directly undermines the employee-organization bond and outcomes.

Psychological capital positively predicted workplace attachment and this finding was also statistically significant and in line with findings by Saputra and Dahlan (2024), providing strong support for H2. Waitstaff with higher levels of hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism demonstrated a significantly stronger bond and connection to their place of work which confirms the value of personal psychological resources. Waitstaff high in PsyCap are better equipped to find meaning and pursue goals (Hope), feel capable in their demanding roles (Efficacy), bounce back from difficult customer and management interactions (Resilience), and maintain a positive outlook (Optimism). These resources naturally foster a more positive orientation toward the workplace, leading to greater attachment. This finding suggests that PsyCap functions as a robust internal engine for engagement and connection.

The last hypothesis stated that psychological capital did not moderate the relationship between organizational dehumanization and workplace attachment. This indicates that the strength of the relationship between dehumanization and workplace attachment did not differ based on an employee's level of PsyCap. Therefore, H3 was not supported. The most theoretically significant finding of this study is the lack of a moderating effect of PsyCap. This study hypothesized that high-PsyCap individuals would be able to use their psychological resources to shield themselves from the ill effects of a dehumanizing environment, thus maintaining their attachment. The data did not support this buffering hypothesis and this forces a deeper consideration of the nature of the variables and their interaction. Several explanations for this non-finding are plausible:

One compelling explanation is that organizational dehumanization is not an acute stressor (like a single rude customer) but a chronic, systemic, and atmospheric condition. PsyCap may be highly effective in helping an employee cope with event-based setbacks, but it may be insufficient to counteract the pervasive, identity-threatening nature of being systematically treated as an object. In this view, dehumanization is a contextual toxin so potent that individual resilience can do little to neutralize its effect on one's attachment to the source of the toxin. Psychological capital is an internal resource focused on agency and personal striving while organizational dehumanization is an external demand that fundamentally denies agency. PsyCap resources like hope and efficacy may fuel an employee's desire to change their situation or find a better one, rather than helping them endure and remain attached to a place that thwarts those very

qualities. A highly hopeful and capable person, when faced with a dehumanizing system, may be more likely to detach and seek employment elsewhere, rather than using their PsyCap to remain attached.

An alternative interpretation to the finding is that PsyCap operates differently than hypothesized in toxic environments. Instead of buffering the negative relationship with attachment, high PsyCap might facilitate a process of healthy disengagement. A resilient and optimistic individual may more quickly recognize that the dehumanizing environment is unchangeable and detrimental to their well-being. Their self-efficacy and hope would then empower them not to stay, but to plan and execute a successful exit.

The results of this study paint a nuanced picture of the psychological dynamics at play for waitstaff. The confirmation of the two results (H1 & H2) aligns with COR theory which assumes that organizational dehumanization depletes employees' valued resources and weakens workplace attachment, whereas psychological capital serves as a personal resource that helps employees acquire, preserve, and protect resources, thereby strengthening workplace attachment. While the rejection of the moderation hypothesis (H3) provides the most fertile ground for new insights and critical discussion.

Implications of the Findings

This study contributes to the Conservation of Resources theory by suggesting that when employees feel devalued, objectified or treated as less than human, they experience resource loss such as loss of dignity, respect, belonging and psychological safety and continued resource loss can weaken their emotional connection and attachment to the workplace. While PsyCap are personal psychological resources that help employees cope with difficult work conditions, maintain positive perceptions of their workplace and develop stronger attachment to it.

Empirically, the present finding that organizational dehumanization is negatively associated with workplace attachment is consistent with previous evidence showing that dehumanizing organizational experiences undermine positive employee attitudes and work-related outcomes (Abou Zeid et al. 2024; Hamel et al 2023) while the positive relationship between psychological capital and workplace attachment is also consistent with empirical evidence indicating that psychological resources promote employees' positive connection with their work and organization (Saputra & Dahlan, 2024).

Practically, organizations that combine psychological capital development programs with structural reforms to reduce dehumanizing practices may achieve more durable improvements in employee well-being and performance (Gul et al. 2024). Because you cannot hire your way out of a bad system while hiring for positive traits like resilience and optimism (i.e., high PsyCap) is beneficial, it is not a solution for a dehumanizing work culture. Even the most psychologically robust employees will see their attachment wither in an environment that treats them as disposable. The primary lever for improving workplace attachment is to directly reduce organizational dehumanization and this can be achieved through concrete actions such as: Allowing waitstaff some discretion over their work, such as how they interact with customers and tables rather than enforcing overly rigid scripts. Acknowledge employees as unique individuals and use their names, recognize personal milestones, and provide specific, constructive feedback that acknowledges their effort and skills. Involve staff in decisions that affect them, such as menu changes, section assignments, new service procedures as this signals that their perspective is valued. Train managers to act as supportive coaches who show empathy and concern for their team's well-being, not just as taskmasters. Continue to foster psychological capital even though it failed to moderate in this context, yet remains a powerful direct predictor of attachment. Organizations should still invest in developing PsyCap through targeted training, coaching and creating a supportive climate where employees can build their confidence, set goals, and learn from setbacks. Fostering PsyCap and reducing dehumanization should be seen as two complementary but distinct strategies.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study, like all research, has limitations, the cross-sectional design prevents causal inference and the reliance on self-report measures may introduce common method bias. Moreover, while the size of the sample was satisfactory considering the tight and regimented nature of their schedule, it is still possible to question its representativeness of waitstaff in general. Future research should use more representative samples so as to extend any replicated findings to the general population. Adopt longitudinal design which can track how changes in dehumanizing practices affect attachment over time. Researchers should explore other potential buffers, such as perceived supervisor support or team cohesion. It may be that external, social resources are more effective at combating a systemic issue like dehumanization than internal personal ones. Future studies should measure outcomes beyond attachment, such as well-being, burnout and turnover intentions, to test the healthy disengagement hypothesis proposed in the discussion. In-depth interviews with waitstaff could provide rich, contextualized narratives about their experiences of dehumanization and how they cope, offering deeper insight into why PsyCap did not function as a buffer.

Conclusion

This study sought to understand the complex interplay between organizational dehumanization, psychological

capital, and workplace attachment among one hundred and sixty waitstaff. The findings demonstrate that organizational dehumanization is averse to the employee-organization bond, while psychological capital is a potent nutrient. Crucially, however, the nutrient of PsyCap does not appear to neutralize the challenges of dehumanization. For employees in the demanding service industry, feeling seen, valued, and respected as a human being is a foundational need that cannot be outsourced to their own psychological fortitude. The ultimate responsibility for fostering a dedicated and attached workforce lies not in the resilience of the individual employee, but in the humanity of the organization itself.

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