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The effectiveness of supervisor support in lessening perceived uncertainties and emotional exhaustion of university employees during the COVID-19 crisis: the constraining role of organizational intransigence

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ABSTRACT

Despite the severity of the COVID-19 crisis, which has affected organizations worldwide, there is a lack of research on the organizational factors that affect the psychological wellbeing of the employees of an organization affected by the crisis. This research uses the case of employees at two international universities in Thailand that have been directly affected by the COVID-19 crisis. Grounded in social support theory and the job-demand resource model of job stress, this research examines the role of supervisor support in explaining the degree of perceived uncertainties and emotional exhaustion that employees experience due to the COVID-19 crisis. Moreover, this research examines whether the effect of supervisor support on the perceived uncertainties of employees can be moderated by organizational intransigence, that is, a prevailing climate of resistance to change at the workplace. The questionnaire survey data were obtained from a sample of 300 employees at two private international universities, and the partial least squares structural equation model was used for data analysis. The results significantly confirm that supervisor support has a negative effect on the perceived uncertainties of employees. Perceived uncertainties also significantly mediate the negative effect of supervisor support on the employees' emotional exhaustion. More importantly, the moderating effect analysis shows that the negative effect of supervisor support on the perceived uncertainties of employees presents only for employees who work in a workplace climate where there is low intransigence; in a workplace climate where there is high intransigence, supervisor support does not lower the perceived uncertainties of employees.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis has had significant impacts on society and business sectors at a global level. Particularly for business sectors, the impacts of the

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COVID-19 pandemic have brought about tremendous disruption to the activities and operations of businesses in almost every industry (McKibbin & Fernando, 2020). Not only does the crisis pose financial threats to organizations, it also affects the work and psychological wellbeing of their employees affected by the crisis (Hamouche, 2020). The negative impacts of the crisis also exist in the educational sector (DePietro, 2020; Sahu, 2020): According to UNESCO (2020), the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is causing widespread disruption to education globally. In particular, private international universities tend to be a sector of the educational industry that are among those most affected by the COVID-19 crisis, as their operations and revenues heavily depend on the enrollment of overseas students. The sharp decline in new student enrollment not only affects the universities financially, but also causes many uncertainties for faculty and staff members (DePietro, 2020). In addition to focusing efforts on migrating to online learning, it is expected that some institutions may need to reduce the financial strain caused by the crisis by cutting their staff numbers, or by merging with other institutions (DePietro, 2020). These changes generate pressure on and insecurity among the workforce in the academic sector. Given the high levels of stress and anxiety that employees inevitably experience from the COVID-19 crisis, it is important for research to investigate organizational factors that might alleviate the impact of the crisis on the psychological stress levels of employees. At this stage, given that the COVID-19 crisis is still a relatively new phenomenon, research areas of management attempt to clarify the impact of the crisis on the psychological wellbeing of employees, as well as interventions to address this problem in organizations, is still very sparse.

This research is based on the case of two private international universities in Thailand that have been significantly affected by the COVID-19 crisis. The research's first objective is to analyze the effect of the perceived uncertainties of the universities' employees regarding the impacts for them of the COVID-19 crisis on their level of emotional exhaustion. The second objective is to examine the role of supervisor support as an organizational variable that could reduce the degree of employees' perceived uncertainties. As prior research has found that supervisors tend to play a crucial role in reducing the uncertainties and ambiguities that employees experience in an organization (Blanco-Donoso, Moreno-Jiménez, Pereira, & Garrosa, 2019; Skiba & Wildman, 2019), the role of supervisor support might be essential to alleviate the level of uncertainties that employees experience during the COVID-19 crisis. Theoretically, this research is grounded in social support theory (Amason, Allen, & Holmes, 1999) and the job demand-resource (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) to explain the benefits of supervisor support in lowering the perceived uncertainties of employees, as well

as its subsequent effect on the emotional exhaustion employees experience arising from the crisis. In addition, the final objective of this research is to explore the moderating effect of organizational climate, in terms of intransigence, which might limit the effectiveness of supervisors in providing the support needed to reduce employees' uncertainties. This type of organizational climate basically reflects the tendency of an organization to cling to tradition and established ways of doing things in the workplace (Patterson et al., 2005), which can be counterproductive for organizations in dealing effectively with changes and uncertainties in a dynamic environment (Moussa, McMurray, & Muenjohn, 2018), such as the COVID-19 crisis.

The overall results from this research are expected to make a contribution to knowledge regarding the roles of social support and organizational ethos regarding change in influencing the levels of psychological stress experienced of employees during the COVID-19 crisis. From the managerial perspective, the results of this research provide crucial insights for management regarding policy and implementation that might mitigate the psychological effects of this crisis on employees.

Perceived uncertainties of university employees during the COVID-19 crisis

Coombs and Holladay (2005, p. 264) define a crisis as “a sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organization’s operation and poses a financial and reputational threat.” Not only does a crisis create financial and reputational threat, it also affects individuals psychologically. The psychological impacts of a crisis usually present in the form of uncertainties that individuals perceive when they are living through a crisis. In a general sense, uncertainty is defined as “an individual’s perceived inability to predict something accurately” (Milliken, 1987, p. 136). In particular, the COVID-19 situation is regarded as a crisis that threatens the financial stability of organizations and the psychological wellbeing of employees in almost every sector throughout the world. In the educational sector, private international universities tend to be the sector affected directly and most significantly by the COVID-19 crisis.

The crisis generates uncertainties for employees at the universities in several ways. Firstly, the crisis has caused student enrollment to drop sharply. Given that the revenues of private international universities depend heavily on the enrollment of new students from abroad, this sharp decline in enrollment has the potential to create a sense of job insecurity among employees due to the possibility of the university to downsize (that is, reduce the number of staff). Moreover, the management, as well as faculty members and staff, must develop plans to maintain student engagement

during the crisis. Furthermore, university departments must frequently address students' and parents' questions and concerns, which increases employees' workload and their emotional strain. University personnel can also experience difficulties in providing immediate responses to questions because the university authorities need to assess the situation and take time to make decisions. Considering that the faculty and staff interact with people from partner institutions and students from various nations, health uncertainties can be created among those anxious about the spread of the virus. Overall, the COVID-19 situation has the appearance of being a crisis for employees at private international universities because it creates a sense of insecurity, uncertainty, and wariness, and poses overwhelming concerns for them. Thus, the employees at these universities are highly susceptible to psychological stress as a result of the uncertainties the crisis creates for them.

The effect of perceived uncertainties on emotional exhaustion

Research has shown that an organizational crisis can be harmful to the psychological wellbeing of employees (Charoensukmongkol, 2016, 2017; Claeys, Cauberghe, & Vyncke, 2010; Hurt & Abebe, 2015; Liu, Austin, & Jin, 2011). One particular type of psychological impact that employees experience from a crisis is emotional exhaustion. Emotional exhaustion is the core aspect of job burnout, which happens when employees suffer from stress for a prolonged period of time (Lambert, Qureshi, Frank, Klahm, & Smith, 2018; Moyer, Aziz, & Wuensch, 2017). People who experience emotional exhaustion tend to lose motivation to come to work, and feel that they have no power or control over what happens in the workplace (Seriwatana & Charoensukmongkol, 2020). Emotional exhaustion can greatly affect work motivation, performance, and the mental health of employees, thereby lowering their engagement with their work and resulting in absenteeism and the intention to quit their job.

The degree of the perceived uncertainties that university employees have regarding the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis can increase their level of emotional exhaustion. In particular, uncertainty about events that occur during the crisis, as well as its consequences, tend to make employees feel skeptical about the organization's likelihood of survival, as well as the impact that it may have on them as a result (Bordia, Hunt, Paulsen, Tourish, & DiFonzo, 2004). In addition, Bastien (1987) has argued that perceived uncertainty can lead to fear of loss due to its adverse effects on one's locus of control. In this respect, employees who are uncertain about a situation can neither prepare for nor deal with the unknown effectively (Bordia et al., 2004). Because the COVID-19 crisis has caused many

unpredictable events that interrupt the work and operations of the staff and faculty members at universities, and because the length of time required for the situation to be resolved or to become better is not known, it is quite common for employees to be anxious about the consequences for them, thereby resulting in a higher chance that they develop emotional exhaustion. Therefore, the following hypothesis is offered: The perceived uncertainties of university employees regarding the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis will increase their emotional exhaustion.

The effect of supervisor support on perceived uncertainties and emotional exhaustion

This research proposes that the degree of perceived uncertainties and emotional exhaustion caused by the COVID-19 crisis among employees can be alleviated by the level of supervisor support. Supervisor support indicates the degree to which subordinates receive support from their supervisor (Maertz et al., 2007). Supervisor support reflects the employees' perception of the quality of their relationship with supervisors (Stinglhamber & Vandenberghe, 2003); and it represents the degree to which employees realize that their supervisor cares about their personal concerns and wellbeing (Ru Hsu, 2011). Scholars have asserted that supervisor support plays a role in fostering positive attitudes regarding their organization among employees (Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, & Rhoades, 2002). In particular, the role of supervisor support is important in sustaining employees' work morale and psychological wellbeing during a time of crisis (Cole, Bruch, & Vogel, 2006). For example, a study of Cole et al. (2006), which was based on the case of a medical technology company in Switzerland, found that the supervisor tended to play a supporting role in lessening the cynicism of employees during an organizational crisis.

From the theoretical perspective, the role of supervisor support in reducing the perceived uncertainties and emotional exhaustion of employees during the COVID-19 crisis can be explained by social support theory, which suggests that social support protects people from the harmful effects of stressful events by influencing what they think about and how they cope with events (Shumaker & Brownell, 1984). Social support refers to a social network's provision of psychological and material resources intended to benefit an individual's capacity to cope with stress (Amason et al., 1999). Supervisors are considered as the main source of social support for employees because they are in a position to provide rewards, protection, encouragement, and motivation to employees (Phungsoonthorn & Charoensukmongkol, 2019). Supervisors also support employees through providing information that eases their concerns about uncertainties (Skiba

& Wildman, 2019). This idea is supported in the study of Skiba and Wildman (2019), which found that the quality of the relationship that employees develop with their supervisors plays a crucial role in reducing the workplace uncertainty of employees, thereby lowering turnover intention. For this reason, the authority of the supervisor in providing key resources and information to employees can play a critical supporting role in reducing the perceived uncertainties of employees regarding the impacts of a crisis (Tummers, Steijn, Nevicka, & Heerema, 2018), as well reducing the emotional exhaustion that might follow (Charoensukmongkol, Murad, & Gutierrez-Wirsching, 2016).

In addition to social support theory, the role of supervisor support in reducing emotional exhaustion can be explained by the JD-R model of work stress (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The JD-R model describes the balance between job demands and job resources that determines the level of work stress that employees experience. Job demands can be described as psychological and quantitative workloads that create psychological strains on employees. Job resources means facilitating conditions, favorable work characteristics, and social support that help employees cope with the job demands they face. The JD-R model postulates that employees' level of stress perception can be attenuated when they have sufficient job resources to deal with their job demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). In particular, the literature on the JD-R model indicates that one crucial aspect of job resources that significantly helps employees cope with job demands is supervisor support (Hu, Schaufeli Wilmar, & Taris Toon, 2016). In the case of the COVID-19 crisis in organizations, the high level of employees' perceived uncertainties can be regarded as a job demand that affects their well-being. The perception of uncertainties makes employees feel insecure and anxious about the unpredictability of their work situation, which, in turn, makes them feel emotionally exhausted (Skiba & Wildman, 2019). On the other hand, support from supervisors is regarded as a job resource in that it is social support that can lessen the concerns that employees have about uncertainties caused by the crisis. For example, this role of the supervisor is discussed in the study of Blanco-Donoso et al. (2019), which found that supervisor support plays a crucial role in helping employees deal effectively with ambiguity at work. When employees receive more support from their supervisor, their level of uncertainties should be lessened as they can feel greater confidence that they can rely on their supervisor to help them deal with the uncertainties (Skiba & Wildman, 2019).

Overall, from the theoretical perspective of social support theory and the JD-R model, it can be expected that supervisor support can directly reduce the perceived uncertainties of universities employees during the COVID-19 crisis. Considering that perceived uncertainties can determine the

emotional exhaustion of employees, supervisor support could also reduce employees' emotional exhaustion through the mediating role of perceived uncertainties. Thus, the following hypotheses are presented: supervisor support will lessen the perceived uncertainties of university employees regarding the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis, and the negative effect of supervisor support on the emotional exhaustion of employees is mediated by perceived uncertainties.

The moderating effect of organizational intransigence

Although supervisor support is postulated to reduce the perceived uncertainties of employees, it is plausible that this benefit might be limited by characteristics present in the work climate in the organization. In particular, this research focuses on the role of resistance to change climate in a workplace namely *organizational intransigence*, that might limit the ability of the supervisor to provide support to reduce employees' uncertainties. At root, an organization characterized by great intransigence tends to cling to traditional ways of managing activities in the workplace (Døjbak Haakonsson, Burton Richard, Obel, & Lauridsen, 2008). Moreover, senior managers in this type of workplace tend to have levels of interest in trying out new ideas, preferring to keep to established and traditional ways of workplace practices and processes (Patterson et al., 2005). Moreover, changes in how things are done in the organization tend to happen very slowly (Patterson et al., 2005). Research has shown that organizations and work units that are characterized by intransigence tend to be less effective in dealing with changes and uncertainties in a dynamic environment (Moussa et al., 2018). Particularly during a crisis in which decision latitudes and the managerial flexibility of the management are required to help organizations deal promptly with expectations (Weisaeth, Knudsen, & Tønnessen), this type of workplace climate militate against the organization's ability to respond effectively to the uncertainties that exist during a crisis (Gill, 2002).

Given the characteristics of workplaces with a climate that resists change, which create constraints for supervisors in executing their work and authority when they deviate from organizational tradition, this research hypothesizes that the benefit of supervisor support in lowering the perceived uncertainties of employees might not be effective in workplaces characterized by such a climate. In particular, the nature of senior management in the such a climate that has a strong attachment to established and traditional ways of doing things can potentially limit the autonomy and effectiveness of supervisors in making decisions that are necessary to help employees lessen the uncertainties raised by a crisis (Giberson et al., 2009).

Given that the discretion of supervisors is strongly bounded by the influence of this organizational climate (Dov, 2008), it is difficult for them to implement any activity to deal with novel challenges that deviates from the traditional methods usually followed by the organization. Moreover, considering that changes in the way things are done in the workplace tend to happen very slowly in this type of organizational climate, supervisors can face obstacles in exercising their authority to address the concerns of employees promptly in order to reduce uncertainties. Even though supervisors are motivated to provide support to help employees deal with a crisis, their support may not be effective when the change initiatives are not supported by the organization. Thus, it is plausible that the negative effect of supervisor support on perceived uncertainties will present in a workplace that is characterized by low organizational intransigence, but not in the workplace characterized by high organizational intransigence. This leads to the following hypothesis: the effect of supervisor support on the perceived uncertainties of the university employees is moderated by the level of organizational intransigence.

Methods

Research context and sample selection procedure

This research collected data from employees, including lecturers and staff members working at two private international universities in Bangkok, Thailand. These two private international universities were a suitable context for studying the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis because they are among the universities that have been adversely affected by it. Both universities have a high percentage of overseas students. Because the COVID-19 crisis has caused the enrollment rate of their overseas students to drop sharply, it has led to a tremendous decline in their revenues. This drop in revenues and the ongoing expenses that the universities need to bear have posed significant threats to the job security of the employees. In particular, many employees are uncertain about their job security as downsizing has been applied to some positions and work units in order to reduce expenses. The COVID-19 crisis has also made faculty and staff members uncertain about their work procedures and has caused their workloads to increase. Given that teaching and many of the routine work activities of the faculty and staff members now have to be carried out online, it has created ambiguity and difficulties for the preponderance of the faculty and staff, who are not familiar with online teaching or online working. Nonetheless, although teaching and some of the work processes have been shifted online, some of the faculty and staff members are still required physically to go to the universities to perform certain administrative tasks, thereby causing

them to be concerned and feel uncertain about the chance of contracting the virus when they travel. All of the uncertainties that the employees have experienced due to the COVID-19 crisis make them highly susceptible to emotional exhaustion.

In total, the sampling frame for this research covers 438 employees from both universities. All 438 employees were invited to participate in the survey data collection, for which a self-administered questionnaire survey was used. Data collection was undertaken in April 2020, which was the month in which the COVID-19 situation was at its most severe in Thailand. Permission to conduct the survey was given by the management of each university prior to the data collection. The researcher visited each department to distribute the questionnaire packages in person, and the respondents participated in this study on a voluntary basis. The English version of the questionnaire was used, given that all faculties and staff at the two international universities use English for day-to-day communication. The cover letter that was included in each questionnaire package advised about the objectives of this research and its ethics policy, and they were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of the data collection. In addition to the paper questionnaires, participants were given the option to complete the questionnaire online by using a link and QR code provided in the cover letter. The questionnaire data collection was administered during weekdays; the order of the scale items was randomized; it took approximately 15 minutes for participants to complete the questionnaire; and data collection took about four weeks. The researcher then took a secure container to collect the questionnaires from the participants in person a few days later. At the end of the data collection period, the research obtained 300 usable questionnaires for data analysis, which is a 68.49% response rate. [Table 1](#) report the demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Table 1. Characteristics of the respondents.

Demographic factors	Descriptive statistics
Gender	Male: 147 (49%) Female: 153 (51%)
Age	Mean: 43.04 S.D.: 10.14
Job tenure	Less than 1 year: 16 (5.3%) 1–2 years: 31 (10.3%) 3–4 years: 57 (20%) 5–6 years: 57 (19%) 7–8 years: 34 (19%) 9–10 years: 31 (11.3%) More than 10 years: 74 (24.7%)
Job type	Faculty: 210 (70%) Staff: 90 (30%)

Measures

Because the COVID-19 crisis at the universities is an unprecedented phenomenon, and consequently there is no existing scale that measures *perceived uncertainty* in this specific context, the present study used a measure of perceived uncertainty adapted from the study of Allen, Jimmieson, Bordia, and Irmer (2007), which was originally designed to measure the degree of perceived uncertainty of hospital employees during organizational change. This scale was chosen because it contains questions that reflect the uncertainties that employees had about their job security, compensation, welfare, and work processes that were affected by the organizational change crisis; these aspects of uncertainties are similar to the situations that the university employees are facing due to the COVID-19 crisis. Questions from the original scales that were unrelated to the context of the COVID-19 and not relevant to the university employees were removed. Some new questions were added, which were derived from information the researchers obtained from informal interviews with some employees at the universities regarding their concerns about the unknowns they face due to the COVID-19 crisis. The respondents were asked to evaluate how uncertain they were about the effects of ten aspects of the crisis. The items comprised the following “The likelihood that the problem will be solved;” “The likelihood that the problem will not be prolonged;” “The likelihood that the problem will come to an end;” “The possibility of achieving a solution to the problem;” “The certainty about the scope and time frame of the problem;” “The effectiveness of the university’s actions to prevent the problem;” “The fear that you will get COVID-19 infection;” “Whether your job will be secure;” “Whether your pay, salary, and possibility of a promotion will be affected;” and “The extent to which your job roles/tasks will change.” All of the items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*very certain*) to 5 (*very uncertain*).

Supervisor support was measured using the scale of Cole et al. (2006), which has four items. The scale was rated on 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The respondents were asked to evaluate the supervisor at their department or work unit. Sample items included “Management shows active concern for my feelings” and “Management assures us that help is available if it is needed.”

Emotional exhaustion was measured using the scale of Maslach and Jackson (1981), which has five items. The items were rated on 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Sample items included “I feel emotionally drained from my work” and “I feel burned out from my work.”

Organizational intransigence was measured using the scale of Patterson et al. (2005), which contains five questions, all of which were assessed on a

5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Sample items included “Senior management likes to keep to established, traditional ways of doing things” and “Changes in the way things are done here happen very slowly.”

Control variables

This research considered some of the demographic factors and work characteristics of the employees as control variables, namely age, gender, job tenure, and job type. Age was measured as actual age in years; gender was measured as a categorical variable (Male = 1; Female = 0); *job tenure* was measured as a ranked variable (1 = less than 1 year; 2 = 1–2 years; 3 = 3–4 years; 4 = 4–5 years; 6 = 6–7 years; 7 = 8–9 years, 8 = 10 years or more; and *Job type* was measured as a categorical variable (Faculty = 0; Staff = 1).

Statistical analyses

The statistical analysis was performed using Partial least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). PLS-SEM is a statistical technique that combines principal component analysis, path analysis, and a set of regressions to generate estimates of the standardized regression coefficients for the model’s paths, and factor loadings for the measurement items. PLS-SEM is recommended for analyzing models with less consecrated theoretical support (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2014). PLS-SEM also offers more flexibility than covariance-based SEM because it produces less bias estimation when data are not distributed normally, and when the sample size is small (Chin & Todd, 1995). Because the Jarque-Bera and the Robust Jarque-Bera tests of normality indicated that the majority of the variables included in the analysis were not distributed normally, PLS-SEM was appropriate for this research. Moreover, PLS-SEM is suitable given the relatively small sample size used in this this research. The PLS-SEM analysis was performed using WarpPLS software.

Results

Validity and reliability assessment

Prior to model estimation using PLS-SEM, the study ensured that all of the constructs had satisfactory psychometric properties. Firstly, convergent validity was analyzed using factor loadings, which must be above .5 to confirm a satisfactory degree of convergent validity (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006). All the factor loadings of the latent constructs were

Table 2. Variable correlations and square root of average variance extracted.

Variables	Cronbach's α coefficient	Composite reliability coefficient	SP	PU	EMX	OI	AGE	GEN	TEN	TYPE
SP	0.958	0.966	(0.937)	-0.046	-0.024	0.055	0.092	0.145*	-0.032	-0.105
PU	0.904	0.916		(0.724)	0.436**	0.289**	-0.035	0.028	0.134*	-0.003
EMX	0.955	0.965			(0.920)	0.453**	-0.165**	0.147*	0.279**	0.11
OI	0.939	0.955				(0.917)	-0.098	0.146*	0.169**	0.068
AGE	n/a	n/a					(1)	-0.038	0.391**	-0.435**
GEN	n/a	n/a						(1)	0.063	0.132*
TEN	n/a	n/a							(1)	-0.205**
TYPE	n/a	n/a								(1)

Notes: * p -value < .05; ** p -value < .01.

Square root of AVE is presented in parentheses.

SP: supervisor support; PU: perceived uncertainties; EMX: emotional exhaustion; OI: organizational intransigence;

AGE: age of employees; GEN: gender of employees (male = 0; female = 1); TEN: job tenure of employees;

TYPE: job type of employees (faculty = 0, staff = 1).

above .5, confirming satisfactory convergent validity. Secondly, discriminant validity was analyzed by comparing the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) with its corresponding correlations with other constructs. To support discriminant validity, the square root of the AVE for each construct must exceed its correlation with any other construct (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Table 2 reports the square roots of the AVEs and the correlations among the variables. The results reported in Table 2 confirm that all of the square roots of the AVEs met this requirement; thus, discriminant validity was satisfactory. Thirdly, the quality of construct reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient and a composite reliability coefficient. All of the alphas were .90 or above; thus, the reliability of all the constructs was adequate.

Multicollinearity and common method bias assessment

Next, multicollinearity was assessed by using full variance inflation factor (VIF) statistics. A value lower than 3.3 confirms that multicollinearity is not a serious issue (Kock, Lynn, & Texas A&M International University, 2012). The results showed a range of the full VIFs with latent variables between 1.078 and 1.759, which confirmed that multicollinearity is not a serious issue in this study. Additionally, the study also used Harman's single-factor test to assess common method bias (CMB). The study analyzed all indicators in the model by extracting a single factor in the principal component analysis. The result showed that the one-factor solution explained only 35.13% of the variance, which was substantially smaller than the 50% threshold. The one-factor confirmatory factor analysis model did not fit the data well ($\chi^2=4,542.001$; d.f.=1,529; $p<.001$). Overall, the results confirmed that CMB was not a major problem in the data collection.

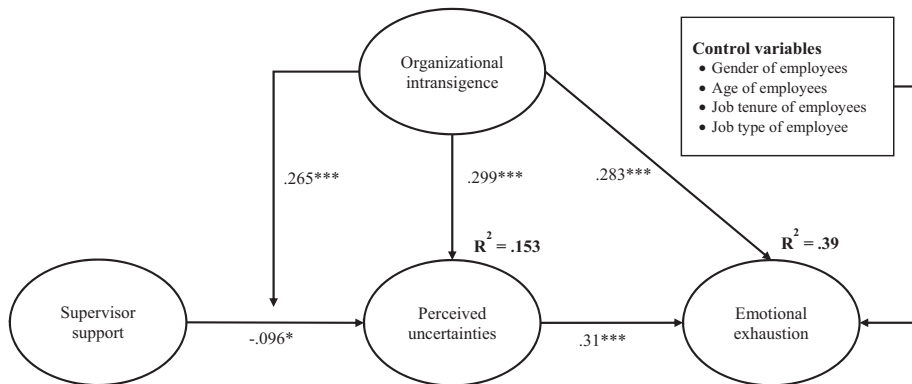


Figure 1. Results from hypotheses testing. *Notes:* *** $p < .001$; * $p < .05$. Standardized coefficients are reported.

Hypothesis testing

Figure 1 reports the results from PLS-SEM estimation. The factor scores of the latent variable were calculated using PLS algorithm; they were calculated as an exact linear combination of the indicator scores (Kock, 2019). Regarding the hypothesis suggesting that the perceived uncertainties of the university employees will increase their emotional exhaustion, the results from the model assessment show that perceived uncertainties and emotional exhaustion were positively associated ($\beta = 0.31$; $p < .001$; Effect size = 0.135). Regarding the hypothesis suggesting that supervisor support will lessen the perceived uncertainties of university employees, the results from the model assessment show that supervisor support and perceived uncertainties were positively associated ($\beta = -0.096$; $p = .026$; Effect size = 0.024). The hypothesis suggesting that the negative effect of supervisor support on the emotional exhaustion of employees is mediated by perceived uncertainties was confirmed using the Sobel test (Baron & Kenny, 1986). The results show that perceived uncertainties positively mediate the linkage between supervisor support and emotional exhaustion ($t = -1.983$; $p = .041$; Effect size = 0.025). Considering the direct correlation between supervisor support and emotional exhaustion in Table 2, which was not statistically significant ($r = -0.024$; $p = .684$), it can be concluded that perceived uncertainties fully mediate the effect of supervisor support on emotional exhaustion.

The hypothesis suggesting that the effect of supervisor support on perceived uncertainties is moderated by the level of organizational intransigence was confirmed by the beta coefficient of the interaction between supervisor support and perceived uncertainties. The results show that the beta coefficient of the interaction demonstrated a positive sign ($\beta = 0.265$; $p < .001$; Effect size = 0.064), which was also statistically significant. This result implies that the negative effect of supervisor support on perceived

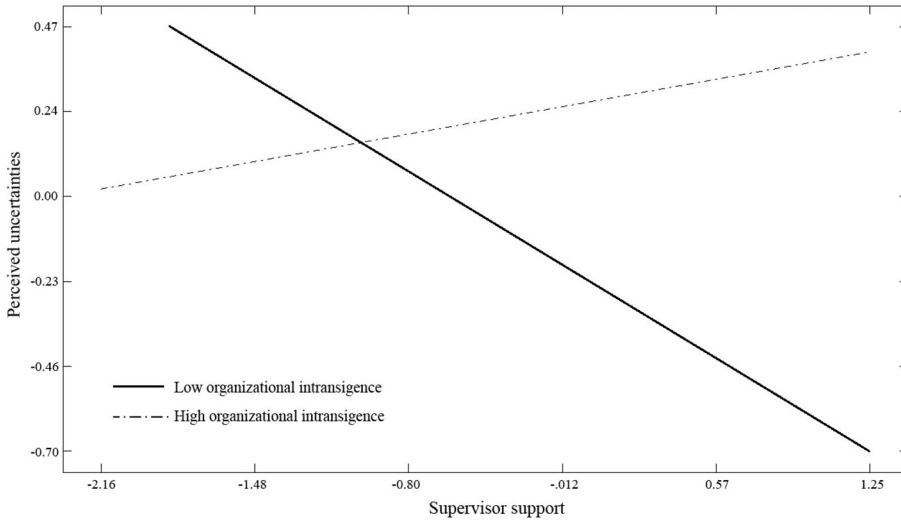


Figure 2. Moderating effect of organizational intransigence.

uncertainties can be suppressed by organizational intransigence. **Figure 2** presents the interaction effect. The regression lines were plotted using standardized values suggested by Aiken and West (1991). The line graph, which represents the association between supervisor support and perceived uncertainties moderated by organizational intransigence was constructed by plotting supervisor support scores one standard deviation above and below the mean across the high organizational intransigence (+1.00 SD) and low organizational intransigence (-1.00 SD). The illustration confirms that the negative effect of supervisor support on perceived uncertainties present only when there is low organizational intransigence. Conversely when organizational intransigence is high, supervisor support was not seen to be related to perceived uncertainties.

Discussion

The results of hypothesis testing support the role of supervisor support in explaining the perceived uncertainties and emotional exhaustion that employees experience from the COVID-19 crisis. Firstly, the results confirm the negative effect of perceived uncertainties on employees' emotional exhaustion. This result adds evidence to prior research, which showed that uncertainties during a crisis are a key factor in employees experiencing psychological distress and anxiety (Bordia et al., 2004). This also supports the nature of a crisis, which normally generates fear of loss, and adversely affects employees' locus of control (Bastien, 1987), thereby limiting their ability to deal with the unknown effectively (Bordia et al., 2004). This is also common in the case of the COVID-19 crisis, which has caused

university employees to face many uncertainties regarding their job security and wellbeing, thereby causing them to develop emotional exhaustion. Secondly, the results confirm that supervisor support is negatively associated with employees' perceived uncertainties. In addition, the analysis shows that perceived uncertainties significantly mediate the negative effect of supervisor support on emotional exhaustion. This result suggests that supervisors can help employees lower emotional exhaustion by reducing the degree of the perceived uncertainties they feel regarding the impact of the COVID-19 crisis. Overall, the findings regarding the role of supervisor support during the crisis is in congruence with prior research and literature showing that supervisors play a crucial role in reducing psychological impacts on employees (Charoensukmongkol et al., 2016; Tummers et al., 2018). This is in line with the study of Skiba and Wildman (2019), which found that supervisors can reduce employees' intention to leave their jobs by reducing workplace uncertainty. Especially in the context of a crisis, this result is in accordance with the finding of Cole et al. (2006), which asserted the importance of supervisors in addressing employees' concerns during an organizational crisis.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the analysis shows that the negative effect of supervisor support on the perceived uncertainties of employees is significantly limited by organizational intransigence—its climate of resistance to change. In particular, the results show that the negative association between supervisor support and the employees' emotional exhaustion exist only for employees working in a workplace that has low resistance to change, while in workplaces where resistance to change is high, supervisor support is not negatively associated with employees' emotional exhaustion. This result regarding the moderating effect of organizational intransigence is consistent with prior research that showed that the effectiveness of supervisors can be significantly constrained by the influence of an organizational climate that does not help supervisors execute their roles and authority to support employees (Dov, 2008; Giberson et al., 2009). This result is also in conformity with prior studies that found that the actions of supervisors that are misaligned with the organizational climate can significantly weaken their performance (Døjbak Haakonsson et al., 2008; Stirpe, Bonache, & Trullen, 2015).

Contributions to theory

The results from this research provide contributions to both social support theory and the JD-R model. The results particularly contributed to social support theory by showing that the support from supervisors during the COVID-19 crisis also plays a crucial role in providing psychological and

material resources that help employees cope with the stress caused by uncertainties arising from the crisis (Amason et al., 1999). Given that the authority of supervisors can directly influence the allocation of important resources and support that can promote employees' wellbeing, they are the main source of social support in an organization, which can significantly lessen the uncertainties that employees perceive during the crisis. Furthermore, from the JD-R perspective, this research adds that support from supervisors can serve as a critical job resource that employees can depend on to help them alleviate the negative impacts of job demands caused by the uncertainties they experience due to the COVID-19 crisis (Skiba & Wildman, 2019). With benevolent support and caring from supervisors in the form of psychological and material resources, employees tend to be more confident about situations and tend to have less concern about uncertainties associated with COVID-19 impacts; this also eased the level of emotional exhaustion that followed. However, even though supervisors were willing to provide support in order to lessen the concerns and uncertainties of the employees regarding the impacts of the crisis, their effectiveness in providing this support was completely limited by the influence of workplace resistance to change, which does not help the supervisors exercise their authority in a way that deviates from organizational tradition (Giberson et al., 2009). Therefore, this research contributes to theories by clarifying that the role of supervisors from the perspective of social support theory and the JD-R model can be bounded by the influence of the organizational macro environment that governs the behaviors of members of the organization (Døjbak Haakonsson et al., 2008; Stirpe et al., 2015). This in turn limits the potential of supervisors to provide support that benefits employees. This contribution makes a recommendation for future research: to explore the role of supervisors in taking the role in the organizational macro environment, such as organizational culture and organizational climates, into consideration. This recommendation is essential to generate a more complete understanding of some of the boundary conditions that can act as enabling or limiting factors regarding the effectiveness of supervisors in the performance outcomes that they demonstrate.

Contributions to management and the organization

This research provides recommendations for top management regarding policies that may need to be implemented during the COVID-19 crisis in order to alleviate some of the harmful psychological impacts that the crisis causes for employees. Regarding the role of supervisor support, which was found to reduce the uncertainties and emotional exhaustion of university employees during the crisis, it is important for management to allow and

encourage the supervisors of all work units or departments to provide the support necessary to address the concerns of their employees during the crisis. However, it is also very important for top management to realize that characteristics of the workplace climate in the organization may militate against the ability of the supervisors to exercise their authority to help employees effectively. This is especially true when an intransigent workplace climate—one that prevents supervisors from taking actions in a way that deviates from the organization's traditions—renders it difficult for them to exercise their authority effectively to provide prompt support that helps employees lessen their concerns about the crisis. Given that it is crucial for supervisors to have sufficient autonomy to take prompt action to address the uncertainties of employees during a crisis, top management should grant greater flexibility and autonomy to supervisors so that they can take their own actions in addressing the skepticism of employees and to ease their concerns. This policy recommendation may be crucial for organizations to be able to alleviate the psychological impacts that employees experience as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

Limitations

Some research limitations must be noted. Firstly, the findings of this research are based on the case of two private international universities in Thailand. Moreover, the sample size for the data collection is quite small, and this can limit the generalizability of the findings. Secondly, the cross-sectional data collection that was implemented in this research limits the potential to interpret the results in terms of causality, and the results are more likely to be interpreted as associations. Nonetheless, this limitation is inevitable given the short time period that the COVID-19 situation has had to create uncertainties among the university employees - it was difficult to design and conduct a longitudinal study within the short time limit. Thirdly, because the data were collected using a self-reporting questionnaire, some subjective bias may be present in the results.

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