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Does Plateau impact on Employee Withdrawal behavior at Workplace: A Moderated Mediation Model

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ABSTRACT

Purpose-The study's primary aim is to inquire about the job content plateau to employee psychological withdrawal behavior with mediating role of felt obligation and moderating by supervisor mentoring and theorized by social exchange theory.

Design/Methodology/approach-268 Service sector employees from Pakistan's twin cities (Rawalpindi and Islamabad) at various hierarchical levels completed a survey questionnaire encompassing 21 items with a 5- point Likert scale. To assess the impacts, we used SPSS 24.

Findings-The findings of this study showed that job content plateau has a significant positive relationship with employee withdrawal behavior, mediated by loss of obligation. While supervisor-mentoring moderates the relationship between loss of obligation and withdrawal behavior.

Implications-This suggests that companies can take constructive steps to manage plateaued people by modifying their beliefs and, as a result, their unfavourable attitudes toward their jobs. Organizations should re-evaluate their reward systems considering the evidence suggesting that aspiration for promotion causes the plateau-outcome link.

Originality/value-By using data to establish a causal association between job content plateau and employee withdrawal behavior, this study contributes usefully to the career-development literature.

Keywords: Job content Plateau, Psychological Withdrawal behavior, Felt Obligation, Mentoring

1. INTRODUCTION

Workplace environments and employee careers have been profoundly impacted by the unprecedented pace of technological change at the start of this century. Organizational and national economies are not immune to the effects of things like the war on terrorism, financial crises, and unusual pandemics (like COVID-19) (Lin & Chen,

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2020; Yang et al., 2020). To compete in today's globalized, highly competitive market, businesses must make drastic cost reductions brought on by these extraordinary international shifts (Kwon, 2022). Conversely, situations before and after the COVID-19 epidemic may lead to job uncertainty and anxiety about work, especially in developing nations (Brenan, 2020; Nebhay & Mutikani, 2020). Employees today suffer a higher level of career plateau due to slow promotion, in part because of low economic development, global instability, and uncertainty (Wang et al., 2021). A career plateau occurs when an individual feels like their career advancement opportunities have diminished and their professional duties have increased (FERENCE, Stoner, & Warren, 1977; Yang, Niven, & Johnson, 2019). On the other hand, reaching a higher degree of career plateau encourages several unfavourable behaviours and attitudes. These include a decline in motivation and job satisfaction, as well as an increase in bad morale, intention to leave the company, burnout, and absenteeism. Employees' mental and emotional well-being is negatively impacted by their bosses' and co-workers' unfavourable attitudes and actions (Kwon, 2022; Lin, Chen, & Lai, 2018; Tremblay, 2021).

Employees emotionally and physically withdraw their behaviour when their communities or jobs do not meet their needs. Employees find the lack of a clear path to advancement and the lack of consistency in promotions to be unsettling and detrimental to their mental health (Serfraz et al., 2022). As a result, reaching a career plateau encourages employees to exhibit negative behaviours like withdrawal, which are counterproductive for businesses (Yang, Niven, & Johnson, 2019).

It is also known that not only does the loss of obligation have an effect on the short-term and long-term career goals of employees, but it also brings about a decline in well-being and an increase in stress, emotional tiredness, and discontent (Kong et al., 2012; Xie & Zhou, 2014). This is because it makes people feel less committed to their jobs (Priesemuth & Taylor, 2016; Zacher & Rudolph, 2021). So the author De Clercq et al., (2020) proposed, it would be interesting to examine other unexplored mediators like employees' psychological withdrawal or perceived loss of obligation. The main research questions of this study are how job content plateau impact on employee psychological withdrawal behavior and how felt obligation mediate the relationship between job content

plateau and withdrawal behavior also investigates the moderating role of mentoring between felt obligation and employee outcome behavior. So, the main problem in our organization is to take action on it and find proper solutions to slow down the plateau situation.

However, academics and researchers in Pakistan have not paid enough attention to the causes, consequences, and potential solutions to the problem of job content plateau. Therefore, in-depth research on the Job content plateau in Pakistan is required to fully understand it (Zeb et al., 2020). The main objective of this study is to investigate the job content plateau to the withdrawal behavior of employees with mediating role of felt obligation and moderating by career mentoring and theorized by social exchange theory.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1. Social Exchange Theory

Based on the notion of social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano et al., 2017) postulates that employees want more from their employer than just a financial one (Bordia et al., 2017). According to this theory, the behavior of two parties toward one another is a continuous chain of acts of reciprocity: when people are treated kindly, they are obligated by an exchange norm to return the favour (Okada, 2020).

The idea of social exchange, in which the norm of reciprocity is disturbed, is related to this anticipation (Zhang et al., 2014). Like when job satisfaction levels off, workers who believe they are not being pushed by their employers sometimes feel disrespected and unsupported by their superiors. Employees may feel their efforts are undervalued when dysfunctional political dynamics permeate an organization, as promotions and pay raises are more likely to be handed out based on personal connections than actual performance (Chang et al., 2012; De Clercq et al., 2020). In other words, they have a weak belief that their efforts at work will lead to positive career outcomes, and as a result, they may express frustration about their limited career prospects and ultimately reject performance-enhancing work activities as a result of this manifestation of poor organisational support (Cao et al., 2014; Conner, 2013).

1.2. The direct relationship between Job content plateau and employee behavior

The idea of a career plateau has evolved over the previous few decades. Ference et al. (1977) seminal work on the topic of career stagnation has paved the way for much subsequent investigation. They defined a “career plateau as the point in a career where the likelihood of additional hierarchical promotion was very low” (Ference et al., 1977, p. 602). Also, Rotondo & Perrewé (2000) mentioned that a career plateau is the psychological feeling such as frustration and incapacity that employees have when they experience a temporary or permanent stop in the advancement of their careers. A career plateau is a state of being unable to move to a higher position but also describes a job where the content may be boring.

In today's era employee retention within an organization is the big issue that ultimately influences employee performance (Ayodele et al., 2020). The working criteria also change if the relationship is not stable with your organization then employees move to withdrawal behavior (Aggarwal et al., 2020).

This signifies that workers may not be able to save their limited resources when confronted with a stressful situation, such as a lack of clarity regarding their tasks or responsibilities, and instead must rely on their superiors to define their job requirements, which in turn may generate stress; (Zhou et al., 2016). Similarly, workers who encounter job content plateaus have drained resource reservoirs, have regular activities, experience less personal growth, have imprecise career goals, and may face a decline in health (Hurst et al., 2017).

Hypothesis 1: *Job content plateau positively affects employee psychological withdrawal behavior.*

Hypothesis 2: *Job content plateau positively affects the loss of obligation.*

1.3. Mediating relationship of Felt obligation.

Most people view reaching a plateau in their job satisfaction as a negative and disappointing experience. It's linked to unfavourable actions like job and career discontent, which in turn leads to low output, absenteeism, and even voluntary employee turnover (Raza et al., 2021).

According to Zhang et al. (2014) prediction, if workers at an organization don't think

they're being given opportunities to grow, they'll feel mistreated and abandoned by management. According to the hypothesis, employees would experience instant subjective effects like dissatisfaction if their efforts are not rewarded by the organization at either of these levels. Employees who have reached a plateau may feel neglected by their superiors, which can have a negative impact on their morale and productivity (Malhotra et al., 2022).

Hypothesis 3: *Loss of obligation mediate the relationship between job content plateau and employee psychological withdrawal behavior.*

1.4.Moderating the relationship between Mentoring and employee outcome behavior

Over the past few decades, there has been a great deal of study devoted to the topic of mentoring in the workplace (Kao et al., 2021), which has been defined as a developmental relationship between a less experienced employee (the protégé) and a more experienced individual (the mentor) (Haggard et al., 2011; Kram, 1985). The essence of a mentoring relationship is the mentor's sharing of their knowledge, wisdom, and experience with their mentee to help them improve as a person and as a professional (Sindell & Sindell, 2016).

Since employees' careers can plateau for a variety of organizational and personal reasons, and because employees' attributions for these plateaus can vary, managers within organizations may consciously (or unconsciously) categorize employees as competent and willing to move up the corporate ladder, and those who are not (Devi & Basariya, 2017).

When some employees show a clear decision to resist further promotion while others send the organization confused signals about potential promotions, mentoring can help close the gap by encouraging such employees to align their expectations with those of the company (Janssen et al., 2018).

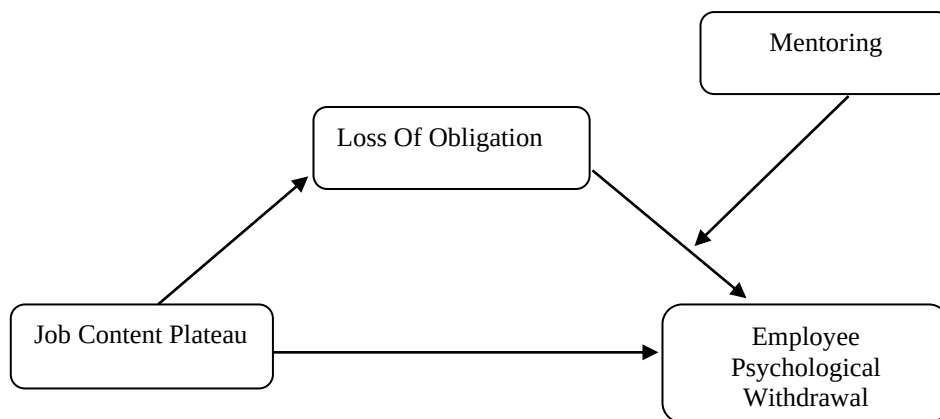
Hypothesis 4: *Supervisor mentoring moderates the relationship between loss of obligation and employee psychological withdrawal behavior.*

Hypothesis 5: *Supervisor mentoring moderates the effect of Job content plateau on*

employee Psychological Withdrawal behavior via loss of obligation such that the indirect effect will be weakened in case of high mentoring from supervisor than low.

Figure 1

Research Model



3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

Job content plateau and its impact on employee job performance (withdrawal behavior) via lack of obligation will be investigated in the context of the study's aims and research approach. The mediating effect of mentoring on the relationship between lack of obligation and employee outcomes is also investigated. This is a quantitative study with three-time lagged data will be collected at three different intervals.

The current study is time-lagged; therefore, it will gather data at three different times in time (time 1, time 2, and time 3) spaced out by around three months. Personal and professional connections will be used to disseminate the surveys to relevant individuals in the banking, telecommunications, and academic institutions.

3.2. Population, Sampling, and Data Collection

Using a quantitative approach, this study finds out how the Independent Variable effect on Dependent Variable in the presence of a mediator and moderator. Participant observation data was analysed using a deductive and explanatory method to determine

the causal forces at play in each circumstance.

Data was collected from the primary source population of government employees in Punjab, Pakistan, using a convenience sample method and a closed-ended questionnaire. In time 1, demographic and job content plateau were tapped, and the response rate was 85.2% while in time 2 mediator was tapped and the response rate was 62.7%. In time 3 withdrawal behavior and mentoring were tapped. The final response rate for this study was 37.1%, with 723 questionnaires sent out to employees working in public and private sector organizations in three-time lags separated by a 30-day interval.

3.3. Measures

Since most schools of higher learning only offer instruction in English, it has become the de facto working language. Most survey takers have at least a bachelor's degree, making them capable of reading and answering questions in English (Abbas et al., 2014; Butt et al., 2005; Raja et al., 2004).

A self-administered questionnaire is used in this study. There will be a 5-point Likert scale used to gauge how respondents feel about each question on the survey (with 1 representing "strongly disagree" and 5 representing "strongly agree").

Milliman (1992) suggests using a 6-item scale with a high internal consistency ($\alpha = .87$) to evaluate job content plateau. To measure the loss of obligation, we will modify a 7-item scale developed by Eisenberger et al., (2001). This scale was found to have an alpha reliability of 0.90. The five-item scale for measuring employees' psychological withdrawal (Rusbult et al., 1988) has an alpha reliability of 0.91. A three-item scale created by (Castro & Williams, 2004) will be used to evaluate mentoring with alpha reliability was 0.78. Age, gender, and educational attainment were therefore utilized as control variables in this study (Burke & McKeen, 1997; Hofstetter & Cohen, 2014; Ragins & Cotton, 1999).

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

There were 723 questionnaires sent out, and 268 were fully functional and usable. The majority of the respondents were male 195 (72.8%) and female ratio was 73 (27.2%). 53% of respondents belonged to the age range of 30-35 years, 27.2% of participants hold

the age range of 36-40 years, and 19.8% of the participants belong to the age range of 41-45 years. Education-wise 2.6% of respondents hold “intermediate or below”, 23.9% hold “bachelors”, 51.9% hold “masters” and “MS/M. Phil” education while 11.6% hold PhD or above education. 29.6% respondents of this having “0-5year experience”, 45.4% had “6-10 years”, 11.6% had “11-15 years”, 9% having “16-20years” and 3.5% had more than 20 years of working experience. 20.1% of employees at entry level, 59.7% working at a middle level while 20.1% at senior level employees.

4.1. Validity Result

Internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity are the three cornerstones of a research model as shown in table 4.1. The diagonal values in Fornell-Larker Criterion are above the threshold value suggested by (Hair et al., 2016). While HTMT values also meet the threshold value proposed by (Henseler et al., 2015). All Convergent values are in the range of 0.903 to 0.927. The average variance extracted values are above 0.5.

Table 4.1

Discriminant Validity

	Fornell-Larker Criterion			
	JCP	LO	M	PSWB
JCP	0.753			
LO	-0.113	0.779		
M	-0.205	0.391	0.784	
PSWB	-0.214	0.346	0.525	0.783
	HTMT			
	JCP	LO	M	PSWB
JCP				
LO	0.133			
M	0.188	0.415		
PSWB	0.162	0.384	0.561	
	Alpha	rho_A	CR	AVE
JCP	0.872	0.881	0.903	0.608
LO	0.896	0.907	0.918	0.615
M	0.777	0.787	0.784	0.566
PSWB	0.909	0.911	0.927	0.612

Table 4.2*Descriptive statistics and Correlation*

	Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1	JCP	3.16	.89	(.87)	.37**	-.10**	.34**
2	LO	3.14	.97		(.90)	-.15**	.50**
3	M	3.09	.95			(.78)	-.11**
4	PWB	3.15	.93				(.91)

Note: N=268, Bold values are alpha reliability, JCP= Job Content Plateau; LO= Loss of obligation; M= Mentoring; PWB= Psychological Withdrawal behavior

There is a connection between all variables, as shown by the results and values of the correlations shown in Table 4.2. Consistent with prior research of Kim et al. (2021) which proposed that due to job autonomy, the withdrawal behavior of employees become decreased also plateau reduced towards the organization, the results imply that JCP is positively connected with LO ($r=.37$, $p<0.01$), lending support to the hypothesis 2. In addition, JCP has a negative correlation with CM ($r=-.10$, $p<0.01$), but a strong positive correlation with PWB ($r=.34$, $p<0.01$) which ultimately supports hypothesis 1. Which is consistent with past findings which show that due to unfairness within organization plateau individuals show poor job performance (De Clercq et al., 2020).

Table 4.3*Direct Effect of Job Content Plateau*

	Path		Coefficient	SE	t	P
H 1	JCP	→ PWB	.35**	.06	5.89	.000
H 2	JCP	→ LO	.39**	.06	6.42	.000

JCP= Job Content Plateau; LO= Loss of obligation; PWB= Psychological Withdrawal behavior,

In table 4.3, the result revealed that JCP has a significant relationship with PWB and proves hypothesis 1, while JCP also shows significant relation with LO and proves hypothesis 2.

Table 4.4*Indirect Effect of JCP on PWB through LO*

Indirect Path		95% Bias Confidence Interval			
		Indirect effect	Boot SE	LL	UL
JCP	→ LO → PWB	.17	.04	.09	.24
<i>N= 268, JCP= Job Content Plateau; LO= Loss of obligation; M= Mentoring; PWB= Psychological Withdrawal behavior</i>					

The results of the mediation study are presented in Table 4.4 according to the values of LO on the link between JCP and PWB, which reveals that mediation was identified ($\beta=.17$, $SE=.04$, $LL=.09$, $UL=.24$) and gives support for hypothesis 3.

Table 4.5.*Moderation Analysis*

Moderator: Mentoring					
		ΔR^2	β	S.E	t
H 4	Constant		-	.50	-4.52
			2.26		
	LO → PWP		1.73	.15	11.7
	M → PWP		1.26	.15	8.30
	LO x M → PWP		-.41	.05	-8.92
	ΔR^2 due to interaction term	.17*			
Conditional Effects at $M \pm 1$ SD (Slope Test)					
		Effec t	S. E	LL95 %CI	UL95 %CI
	CM Low -1 SD (-.77)	.91	.07	.78	1.05
	CM Medium M (.00)	.37	.05	.27	.46
	CM High +1 SD (.77)	.09	.06	.03	.21

N= 268, JCP= Job Content Plateau; LO= Loss of obligation; M= Mentoring; PWB= Psychological Withdrawal behavior

The findings of the moderation are provided in Table 4.5, and they show that the interaction of M and LO has a significant influence on PWB ($B = -.41$, $p 0.01$). These findings give data that supports Hypothesis 4, which is also consistent with previous findings where the authors proposed that felt obligation increases the performance of mentors (Maynard-Patrick & Baugh, 2019). One of the papers founds that mentoring

shows a significant relationship between career plateau and quit behavior of employees (Salami, 2010). Figure 2 illustrates the moderating effect on the relationship in which mentoring dampens the relationship between loss of obligation and employees' psychological withdrawal behavior.

Figure 1

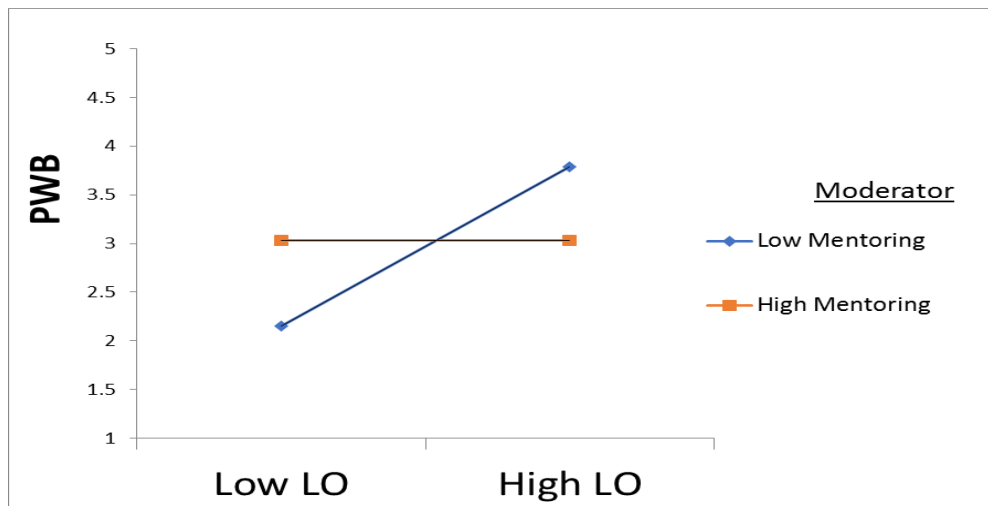


Table 4.6

Index of Moderated Mediation with PWB

Mediator (Loss of Obligation)	Index	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
Moderator (Mentoring)	-.16	0.03	-.22	-.11

N = 268, 95% 'Confidence Interval', LL 'Lower Limit', UL 'Upper Limit'
LO= Loss of obligation; M= Mentoring; PWB= Psychological Withdrawal behavior

Table 4.6 shows that the M values are (index = -.16, Boot SE = 0.03, LLCI = -.22, ULCI = -.11) because of the moderation mediation. This provides support for the moderation mediation hypothesis H5.

5. DISCUSSION

The goal of this work was to synthesize previous research on the connection between JCPs and their correlates using SET theory and to suggest avenues for future study.

This study confirms the work of other studies that found a favorable correlation between JCP and withdrawn behavior (Zeb et al., 2020). Another previous research

proposed that due to a plateau in organization employees indulged in frustration and feel less interest in work (Darling & Cunningham, 2023). One more past research consistent with these findings shows that due to unfairness within organization plateau individuals show poor job performance (De Clercq et al., 2020). Those who reached a career plateau may have lost motivation to continue working hard, which could account for the study's findings. They may have been unappreciated for the time and effort they put into their jobs inside the company, leading them to become dissatisfied with their employment situations.

Mentoring was found to significantly moderate the association between obligation and withdrawal behavior. These results are consistent with those found by other researchers (Ivey & Dupré, 2022). Another research that is also consistent with these current findings is where the authors proposed that felt obligation increases the performance of mentors (Maynard-Patrick & Baugh, 2019).

These results may be explained by the fact that reaching a professional ceiling coincides with the midlife transition when people often reflect on how they want to leave their mark on the world through their work, their families, or other contributions of subjective significance. The satisfaction of a worker who has reached a plateau can be restored by offering mentoring to those who are just starting in their careers. This inheritance encourages maturation and advances progress towards enrichment and self-actualization in later life. As a coping mechanism, mentoring others might help mitigate the damage that can come with reaching an occupational plateau.

5.1. Implications

The job market has become opaquer and more uncertain over time. To use SET theory as a foundation for our theoretical claims concerning the impact of the Job Content plateau on the performance of employees. We hypothesized that as people reached a plateau in their careers, they would feel less appreciated by the company, which would lead to a lack of loyalty and ultimately a decision to leave. So in the Pakistani context, this study is very fruitful for organizations if they implement policies regarding reducing the plateau situation and increasing the morale of employees. According to social exchange theory, if an organization builds a strong relationship between employer and

employees the trust level becomes increase and employees prefer to remain in the organization.

The result indicates that firms can manage plateaued employees by helping them adjust their beliefs and, consequently, their negative outlooks on the work they do. Organizations should re-evaluate their compensation systems in light of the evidence suggesting that aspiration for promotion exacerbates the plateau-outcome link. Especially in Pakistani culture where politics and favouritism are high, it is the need of the hour to eradicate this culture and treat employees equally.

Human resources experts also play an important role when they advise employees on their professional development. Employee assistance programs and career counselling services should be easily available. These findings can be used by managers and businesses to teach supervisors how to spot and avoid common types of stagnation.

5.2. Limitations and Future Directions

The mechanisms behind the dissimilar effects of JCP on outcomes could be investigated in future research. To start with, the paper relies on a self-reporting survey; hence, we cannot avoid addressing the problem of common method bias.

Furthermore, while many studies have looked at Job content plateau from various theoretical perspectives, there have been few attempts to unify these models under a single, overarching theory. Researchers often treat JCP as a stressor and apply stress theories to explain the detrimental effects of JCP on workers' attitudes, behaviors, and well-being in the workplace.

We recommend that academics think about a COR theory-like holistic theoretical framework. Additional research is needed to determine how monetary incentives for resource conservation or investment might influence employee mindsets and actions to reduce waste. Investigating the probable connections between career plateau and job crafting is one such avenue.

6. CONCLUSION

This study is the first in more than four decades of research on career plateaus to provide clear guidance to organizational researchers and practitioners about the possible

causes, consequences, and moderators of JCPs. Our research indicates that the costs associated with JCP outcomes could be substantial. However, there are ways to mitigate these impacts, such as providing a nurturing work environment and ensuring a good fit between the worker and the job. In the end, the study we conducted provides insight into future research avenues that can advance the theoretical understanding of career plateaus.

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