Transformational Leadership, HRM practices and burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic: The role of personal stress, anxiety, and workplace loneliness

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ABSTRACT

The present research investigates the crucial role of "Transformational Leadership (TFL)" on employees' "anxiety", "personal stress", and "workplace loneliness", and finally on employees' "burnout". Moreover, this survey investigates the moderating role of "HRM practices" in the relationship between TFL and burnout. For the needs of the research, "Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM)" was conducted on a sample of 459 Greek "customer-contact employees" based on thirteen hotels during the "COVID-19 pandemic". First, the findings uncover the dynamic of TFL in reducing all three stressors, namely "personal financial stress"; "anxiety"; and "workplace loneliness", thus prohibiting employees' "burnout". Moreover, the study underscores the moderating role of "HRM practices" in strengthening the negative relationship between TFL and "burnout". Overall, the findings provide additional evidence on the process through which "HRM practices" interact with "TFL", "job stressors", and employees' "burnout", a vital knowledge for HRM professionals and hotels' managers.

Keywords: Anxiety; Burnout; HRM practices; Stress; Transformational Leadership; Workplace loneliness;

1. Introduction

"COVID-19 pandemic" has changed the world rapidly, creating long-lasting effects on the global economy and every aspect of human life. The high numbers of infections and deaths led people to experience many psychological problems including "stress", "anxiety", "depression", and fear. Many restrictions have been taken place during the "COVID-19" crisis, such as international and domestic travel bans, proving very disruptive to tourism and hospitality industries (e.g., Bajrami et al., 2021; Goh and Baum, 2021). Based on United Nations World Tourism Organisation statistics (UNWTO, 2021), from April 2020 up to May 2021 one billion fewer international tourist arrivals have been recorded, a loss of 1.3 trillion US$ in total export revenues from international tourism have been reported, whereas 100 to 120 million direct tourism jobs are found at risk. Thus, due to the limited number of bookings in a "lockdown-restricted economy", tourism businesses experienced unprecedented financial losses that forced most of them to shut down operations and lay off workers.

Taking the previous discussion into account, the aforementioned conditions have exerted pressure to hotels in order to reconsider their service practices so as to increase "hygiene control measures", and to offer a relatively safe environment for both their customers and employees (Goh and Baum, 2021). Indeed, many hotels have adopted the "working-from-home" or "telecommuting" as an operational strategy in order to adapt in this reality and to sustain their performance. The "working-from-home" influences employees both positively (e.g., high level of job autonomy and emotional support), as well as negatively (e.g., high-level of "work-home" interference; Chi et al., 2021). Nevertheless, a great part of the workers in the hospitality industry have lost their jobs, whereas another part of them has been negatively affected in terms of mental health. In this vein, they feel anxiety and income instability since most of them are employed with "non-standard and contingent arrangements" that include "self-employment", "subcontracting", and "casual work" (Martins et al., 2020). Overall, it goes without saying that

the COVID-19 pandemic strongly affected the hospitality industry, by generating poor working conditions to hotels' employees and exposing them to dangerous conditions of affection (e.g., Goh and Baum, 2021; Wong et al., 2021). In particular, hotel employees experienced intensive negative feelings related to work that include anxiety, frustration, and increased stress (e.g., Bajrami et al., 2021; Mao et al., 2020; Martins et al., 2020; Salem et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2021) leading ultimately to "burnout" (e.g., Abbas et al., 2014; Yan et al., 2021).

All in all, the recent developments regarding the pandemic underscore the importance of keeping the hospitality industry sustainable during and after the COVID-19 crisis (Mao et al., 2020). Thus, researchers have already shifted their interests towards providing anti-pandemic strategies (Hao *et al.,* 2020; Jiang and Wen, 2020). Indeed, the amount of COVID-19 research in the hospitality research has started to increase over the past year (e.g., Agarwal, 2021; He et al., 2020). Of these published studies, however, only one (Zhang et al., 2020) focuses on the valuable contribution of "leadership" on employee outcomes, whereas none examines the Human Resource Management (HRM) effects in attenuating the negative COVID-19 impact on employees' health.

In general, one important topic in the generic HRM literature concerns the effects of its policies and practices on firm performance. Although the interaction among HRM and organizational performance has been examined by various researchers across the years with the goal of deciphering the "black-box" (e.g., Messersmith, et al., 2011; Ogbonnaya and Messersmith, 2019; van de Voorde and Beijer, 2015), the vital contribution of "transformational leadership" to employee outcomes (Koutsimani et al., 2019) and "burnout" (Breevart et al., 2014; Nielsen and Daniels, 2012) has been neglected. Indeed, the relevant research has started to increase recently (e.g., Han et al., 2017; Hildenbrand et al., 2018). Moreover, an additional drawback concerns the focus of previous research in the manufacturing sector, neglecting the services industries in general and the hospitality industry in particular, with few exceptions

(e.g., Garg and Dhar, 2016; Tuan, 2018). Of utmost importance, however, the devastating consequences of the "COVID-19" pandemic is more prevalent in the hospitality industry which has absorbed the most impact, since it depends on human mobility (Salem et al., 2021).

Considering the previous limitations and the need to explore possible avenues of mitigating the COVID-19 consequences on hotel employees, this study develops a comprehensive framework and investigates the crucial role of "Transformational Leadership (TFL)" on employees' burnout through the mediating role of two "job stressors" (i.e. personal financial stress; anxiety) and one psychological well-being indicator (i.e. workplace loneliness). In parallel, this research framework examines the moderating role of "HRM practices" in the "TFL – burnout" relationship. The latter can be regarded as extremely crucial. Indeed, research in hospitality has mainly examined the contribution of "HRM practices" as antecedents of "employee behavior", whereas their moderating role has been largely neglected (Tuan, 2018, p. 136). Hence, the present study makes an additional step and investigates the process through which "HRM practices" interact with TFL, "job stressors", and employees' burnout in order to shed additional light in the motivational process that stimulates positive "employee behaviors". To achieve the research objective, the "Job-Demands Resources (JD-R)" (Demerouti et al., 2001) and the "Conservation of Resources (COR)" (Hobfoll, 2001) theories have been taken into consideration, by applying "Partial Least Squares (PLS)—Structural Equation Modelling (SEM)" on a dataset of 459 "frontline" hotel employees located across 13 hotels in Greece, during the "COVID-19" pandemic.

In summary, this study contributes to the hospitality management literature with reference to the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic and its negative impacts on employees' mental health and behaviour by providing practical and theoretical implications to hotel managers and practitioners. Further, it advances the HRM literature in the hospitality industry by investigating whether TFL can limit the experience of "job stressors" and burnout during crises, as well as

by highlighting the vital role that the HRM practices have to play in the aforementioned causal relationships.

2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development

2.1 Transformational Leadership (TFL) and burnout

Leadership is "the process of influencing a group of individuals to achieve a vision or desired outcomes" (De Jong and Den Hartog 2007, p. 44). Overall, leadership can impact directly and indirectly employees' performance and also, it can better predict the success or failure of an organization (Wen et al., 2019).

The notion of leadership has been examined by various approaches that provide different definitions and implications to the matter of effectiveness of leaders along with their role in the changing complex business environment (Tal and Gordon, 2016). Overall, two types of leadership have been distinguished, namely "transactional" and "transformational" (Burns, 1978). "Transactional Leadership" involves an exchange relationship between leaders and followers, encompassing contingent reward and management-by-exception (Rafferty and Griffin, 2004). This type of "leadership" focus on satisfying the followers' extrinsic needs (Zheng et al., 2017). In contrast, "Transformational Leadership" (TFL) is characterized by improving employee's development, process-oriented, commitment based on "trust" and "expectations" (Wen et al., 2019), and focuses on meeting the higher-order intrinsic needs of their followers (Zheng et al., 2017). Based on these characteristics, TFL has been linked with beneficial employee outcomes that include "happiness"; "psychical health"; "psychological well-being" (e.g., Kelloway et al., 2012) thus resulting to increased job performance (e.g., Braun et al., 2013).

Moving a step further, certain previous studies have already revealed that effective TFL successfully lead organizations out of crises (Bowers et al., 2017; Garcia, 2006; Ma & Yang,

2020; Zhang et al., 2012). Indeed, Zhang et al. (2012) studied the effect of TFL on leadership effectiveness in a sample of 526 hospital employees-executives during the 5.12 earthquake that struck China on 12 May 2008. They found that TFL can assist organizations to improve organizational performance and enhance team cohesion during a crisis. Recently, the study of Ma and Yang (2020) illustrated the positive role of TFL on crisis management performance under different epidemic crisis perceptions. Nevertheless, despite the aforementioned positive outcomes, research examining the impact of TFL on "burnout" remains scant (Breevart et al., 2014). Thus, in responding to these limitations, this study adopts TFL as it can be considered more appropriate to tackle with the issue of burnout in the hospitality industry during the "COVID-19 pandemic".

"Burnout" refers to "a loss of enthusiasm for work, negative feelings and cynical attitudes and low sense of personal accomplishment" (Maslach and Leiter, 2008), and has been defined as a "psychological syndrome that involves losing concern for the people with whom one is working and is commonly associated with workers in caring professions" (Maslach, 1982). Overall, "burnout" is comprised of two main dimensions, namely "emotional exhaustion" (i.e. "a consequence of intensive physical, affective and cognitive strain") and "disengagement from work" (i.e. "distancing oneself from one's work"; Demerouti et al., 2010, pp. 210-211). To better understand "burnout" two main theories can be extremely beneficial, namely "Job-Demands Theory" (JD-R; Demerouti et al., 2001) and "Conservation of Resources (COR; Hobfoll, 2001)".

Considering the "JD-R" model, every work context can be characterized by "job demands" and "job resources". In detail, job demands refer to those "physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical and/or psychological effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and/or psychological costs" (e.g., high work pressure and exhaustion). Job resources, on the other hand, refer to those "physical,

psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that are functional in achieving work goals, reduce job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs, and stimulate personal growth and development" (Demerouti et al., 2001, p. 501). Hence, excessive amount of job demands lead to "emotional exhaustion"; "depletion of energy"; increased levels of "job stress" (i.e. the "health impairment process" of the JD-R) and "burnout" (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Maslach et al., 2001), whereas job resources are needed in order to counteract the excessive job demands (i.e. the "motivational process") and to lead to employees' personal growth, "organizational commitment" and "work engagement" (Bakker et al., 2003; Breevart and Bakker, 2018, p. 346; Demerouti et al., 2001). Similar to the JD-R model, the COR theory not only highlights the importance of resources in counteracting with the relevant job demands an individual faces, but also underscores the crucial role that the work context plays in providing the necessary job resources to employees (e.g., Haldesleben et al., 2014). Hence, it goes without saying that the role of "supervisors" and "transformational leaders" is of utmost importance towards this goal. Indeed, Ten Brummelhuis and Bakker (2012) in their study classify two types of resources, namely "contextual" and "personal". Based on this classification, the "praise from the supervisor", which can be classified as a "contextual" resource, has the ability to increase job performance through its impact on employees' "personal resources" via the positive emotions it can create.

Taking the previous discussion into consideration, it is evident that TFL can be regarded as a "structural, contextual resource" (Hildenbrand et al., 2018, p. 7) that could play an important role in reducing burnout. Indeed, the primary focus of transformational leaders lies on providing employees with the necessary resources in order to cover their individual needs, and to make them acknowledge their purpose on their work as a higher mission. Indeed, TFL enhances employee's ability to address smoothly all sorts of circumstances as transformational leaders support and empower employees. Thus, employees maintain the optimum level of mental health

through inspirational motivation and retain their confidence (Diebig et al., 2017), resulting to increased employee well-being (e.g., Arnold et al., 2007). For instance, Hildenbrand et al. (2018) revealed an overall negative effect between TFL and burnout, highlighting the moderating role of employees' thriving at work. Nevertheless, the "TFL-burnout" relationship has been overlooked, with few exceptions (e.g., Gill et al., 2006; Hildenbrand et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2019). Hence, there is still no consensus on the actual positive and / or negative effect on burnout (see Nielsen and Daniels, 2012; Skakon et al., 2010), a gap that the present study aims to overcome. Given that "burnout" most commonly takes place when "an organization exercises excessive demands and does not supply employees with the resources needed to meet these demands" (Asensio-Martínez et al., 2019), COVID-19 crisis makes this phenomenon more prevalent in those organizations that involve interactions with people (Sun et al., 2017; Yıldırım et al., 2021), as is the case in the hospitality sector. Considering the preceding discussion, the following hypothesis is presented:

Hypothesis 1: TFL negatively impacts hotel employees' burnout.

As is stated in the introduction of this study, an additional goal is to examine the actual processes through which the "TFL – burnout" relationship takes place (Hildenbrand et al., 2018, p. 4). In doing so, and considering the COVID-19 impact in the hospitality sector, this study introduces two "job stressors" (i.e. personal financial stress; anxiety) and one psychological well-being indicator (i.e. workplace loneliness) as mediating variables.

2.2 TFL, personal financial stress, and burnout

Across the HRM and the Organizational Psychology literature, the role of stress in work has been widely discussed. In summary, "stress" is conceptualized as "an individual's reactions to

work environment characteristics that appear threatening to him or her" (Gill et al., 2006, p. 471) and can be viewed as one of the most serious occupational hazards in the modern industrialized world that cause health diseases (Harms et al., 2017). The main theories that have been used in explaining the impact of "stress" on employees' well-being concern mostly the "JD-R" and the "COR" ones, that were presented previously. Specifically, "job demands" lead to several negative outcomes that include "burnout" and "turnover" (Demerouti et al., 2001). In order to mitigate these negative effects, employees need to equip themselves with the relevant "job resources" (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). At this point, it is crucial to refer to "personal resources". These resources can be highly beneficial in overcoming workplace stress and could include "self-efficacy"; "self-esteem"; and "optimism" (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). Indeed, these "personal resources" are extremely useful for those employees who come directly in contact with customers, such as salespeople (Peasley et al., 2020, p. 59) and customer-contact hotel employees. Nevertheless, despite the fact that "personal demands" can be regarded as "workplace / job demands", this theory has not been developed across the "JD-R" literature. Specifically, the job demands that studies usually investigate include "role conflict"; "role overload"; "role ambiguity"; "work pressure"; "work family conflict", etc. (Heffernan and Dundon, 2016; Kilroy et al., 2016; Oppenauer and van de Voorde, 2018; van de Voorde et al., 2016). However, research has not placed attention to "personal demands" which can have equally devastating consequences as "job demands". Indeed, the personal demands that an individual might face at home (i.e. family to work demands) will most likely influence his / her well-being, productivity and overall performance (Peasley et al., 2020, p. 60; see also Amstad et al., 2011). Hence, this study responds to this limitation in the "JD-R" literature and follows the Peasley et al. (2020) study in integrating personal financial stress as a personal demand in the JD-R framework.

APA (2018) identifies three common personal "stressors", namely "health"; "relationship"; and "financial" stress. Taking into consideration the hospitality industry, it is evident that hotel employees are subjected to dynamic, and in many instances unexpected peaks during their everyday working activities. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused devastating consequences to the hospitality industry causing income instability (Martins et al., 2020). Hence, of the three "personal stress" dimensions, this study examines the effects of "personal financial stress".

"Personal financial stress" has been defined as "a state that develops when personal finances become a problem for the individual, or between individuals, to the point that one has a strong sense of owing too much, or feeling overwhelmed by debt" (Peasley et al., 2020, p. 62), and has been linked with reduced well-being (Agrigoroaei et al., 2017), and productivity (e.g., Kim and Garman, 2004). Thus, it is evident that this form of "stress" should be mitigated in order to prevent low levels of performance and other serious health related issues. In doing so, TFL seems promising (Amarjit et al., 2010; see also Salem, 2015). Overall, transformational leaders can be characterized as "symbols" who are engaged with the organization's goals, urging in turn their employees to mimic their behavior (Bakker and Xanthopoulou, 2013). As a result, employees feel supported by their organizations and motivated to develop their skills, leading to higher levels of "work engagement" (Kopperud *et al.*, 2013); increased "productivity" (Bakker and Schaufeli, 2015), and better "health" (Demerouti et al., 2001). In a nutshell, transformational leaders articulate and develop a vision, which in turn provides employees with positive expectations and optimism about the future (e.g., Buil et al., 2019). Towards this goal, the combination of TFL with HRM practices can be really helpful (Tuan, 2018, p. 136). For instance, a "performance management" system based on "contingent compensation" creates value to employees since they feel that their attitudes are appreciated and recognized (Zacharatos et al., 2005). In the present situation, such a compensation system could increase

employees' income and thus reduce their personal financial stress. In addition, "employment security" can be critical in today's turbulent environment. Considering the present situation, this specific HRM practice and the offering of a stable employment not only benefits employees' productivity but also increases their loyalty to their organization (e.g. Macky and Boxall, 2007) thus reducing their fear of losing their job, causing additional stress. Similarly, "employee autonomy" increases employees' work engagement and attaches employees to their organization intellectually and emotionally (Zacharatos et al., 2005). Although in the present study HRM practices are examined as a moderating variable, research underscores the vital role of managers towards effectively implementing such HRM practices (e.g., Katou et al., 2014). In summary, it is expected that transformational leaders will be able to provide the necessary resources to employees in order to mitigate their fear of losing their jobs (and income) and to overcome their personal financial stress.

Hypothesis 2a: TFL reduces hotel employees' personal financial stress.

On the other hand, although research examining the impact of personal financial stress on employees' burnout is scant, it seems logical to expect a positive relationship. Indeed, financial problems lead to conflicts between partners which can lead to several negative outcomes. For instance, increased levels of financial stress results in poor sleep quality (Hall et al., 2008) and reduced well-being (Agrigoroaei et al., 2017). Considering Greece, the case is even worse. To begin with, the country has already suffered from an unprecedented debt crisis over the past years. Indeed, the "Memorandum of Understanding" resulted in extremely low wages, not to mention the inclusion of "flexible work schedules" where "part – time" employees have become the new standard (Kloutsiniotis and Mihail, 2020a, p. 566). Added to that, and considering the COVID-19 crisis, it is evident that the pandemic has created a turbulent working environment

especially in the hospitality industry, causing reduced hotel reservations and losses of jobs (Bajrami et al., 2021; Salem et al., 2021). Hence, the personal financial stress that a family might face will almost certainly affect the workplace. Indeed, research has already linked financial stress with reduced productivity (e.g., Kim and Garman, 2004) and turnover (e.g., Kim et al., 2006). Of significant importance to the present research, two studies have showed a high correlation between financial stress and burnout (Peasley et al., 2020; Porter et al., 2018), causing ultimately reduced salesperson performance (Peasley et al., 2020). Combined, it is expected that the demands of personal financial stress will not only have a positive effect on employees' burnout, but will also mediate the direct impact of TFL on burnout.

Hypothesis 2b: Personal financial stress positively impacts hotel employees' burnout.

Hypothesis 2c: Personal financial stress will mediate the TFL – burnout relationship.

2.3 TFL, anxiety, and burnout

"Anxiety" is regarded as a result of job stress (Chapa and del Carmen Triana, 2015, p. 1694), and is defined as a "complex emotional states of tension, worry, or depression, causing physiological and behavioural responses, which belong to a person's intrinsic and subjective nervous emotions such as fear of the unknown or unfamiliarity with places and tasks" (Wang et al., 2014, p. 87). In summary, anxiety has been regarded as an indicator of psychological well-being (Nielsen et al., 2019, p. 138), and usually takes the form of a response to what individuals perceive as threats (Bhui et al., 2012) and / or relatively dangerous (Antoniou et al., 2003). In general, anxiety can be expressed via a plethora of outcomes that include - among others - headaches; substance consumption; family and social relationship conflicts; and depression (Endler and Kocovski, 2001; see also Chapa and del Carmen Triana, 2015, p. 1697).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, employees may feel anxious to deal with their frustration, persistent suppression of emotions, and reduced creativity (He et al., 2020). Thus, they experience "anxiety" and tension. In this vein, the impact and the type of leadership in order to deal with employees' anxiety is of increased importance (Nielsen et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the actual mechanism through which TFL impacts negative indicators of well-being remains underexamined (Berger et al., 2019, p. 4), with few exceptions (e.g., Nielsen et al., 2019). Overall, there are reasons to believe that TFL has the ability to reduce "anxiety". For instance, and considering the JD-R model, leaders are able to provide the necessary job resources to their subordinates in order to overcome the job demands they are facing in their work activities (Diebig et al., 2017; Hentrich et al., 2017; Schaufeli, 2015). In summary, the key role that transformational leadership could play focuses on reducing the so-called "power asymmetry" between supervisors and subordinates. Indeed, in the case that TFL is not present, supervisors' high expectations might lead employees to internalize their emotions due to fear (Bono et al., 2007), and asymmetry of power (Nielsen et al., 2019, p. 138), leading to increased anxiety and job stress (Grandey, 2003). On the other hand, transformational leaders create an environment based on trust. Hence, by exhibiting a clear vision and by being supportive, these leaders are able to overcome any work pressures stemming from the need to achieve "short-term financial outcomes" and focus towards benefiting employees' well-being (Kelloway et al., 2012). In other words, transformational leaders place particular emphasis in elevating their subordinates' self-interest, make them feel confident and reduce any perceptions of "power asymmetry" (Goertzen, 2012). Hence, employees are able to express their worries and any kind of frustration stemming from their job. All in all, TFL is characterized by "empathy"; "compassion"; "support"; and "guidance". All these attributes influence employees' well-being, that provides - in turn - the necessary resources to employees so as to cope with any hurdles they face on their job (Kelloway et al., 2012). As a result, TFL is able to limit employees' anxiety by creating

a more predictable and pleasant working climate (Nielsen et al., 2019). Therefore, the following hypothesis is expected:

Hypothesis 3a: TFL reduces hotel employees' anxiety.

Although the effects of work-related anxiety can be detrimental to employees' productivity and well-being and has been regarded as challenging to overcome clinically (Muchalla & Linden, 2009), research examining its effects on burnout is still unclear and scant (Koutsimani et al., 2019 pp. 3-4). Overall, it has been argued that anxiety leads individuals to demonstrate negative thinking, which induces nervousness or reduced self-confidence (Vickers and Williams, 2007) in performing a job. Such behaviors can easily lead to job stress, and burnout. For instance, Vasilopoulos (2012) showed a strong and positive correlation between levels of anxiety and burnout, a finding supported by Ding et al. (2014). This finding has also been supported by the early study of Turnipseed (1998), who showed that the interaction between the daily job demands that an individual experiences along with his / her personality creates high levels of anxiety that lead ultimately to burnout. Taking the COVID-19 pandemic along with the Greek hospitality context in consideration, it is expected that anxiety will increase hotel employees' burnout. In addition, anxiety is expected to play a mediating role in the TFL – burnout relationship.

Hypothesis 3b: Anxiety positively impacts hotel employees' burnout.
Hypothesis 3c: Anxiety will mediate the TFL – burnout relationship.

2.4 TFL, workplace loneliness, and burnout

 "Workplace loneliness" is perceived as a "painful feeling situationally emerged by a lack of desired social relationships in a work environment" (Wright et al., 2006), and has been defined as "employees' subjective affective evaluations of, and feelings about, whether their affiliation needs are being met by the people they work with and the organizations they work for" (Ozcelik and Barsade, 2018, p. 2345). During the COVID-19 crisis, "workplace loneliness" is one of the most significant factors that influences employees' mental health (Kniffin et al., 2021; Kotera et al., 2021). Indeed, employees who experience loneliness in the workplace may feel incapable and unwelcome, and generate negative evaluations including low self-esteem and self-efficacy towards themselves (e.g., Peng et al., 2017), thus reducing their well-being (Erdil and Ertosun, 2011) and performance (Lam and Lau, 2012). Of significant importance, employees feeling lonely at work experience an impact on their attitudinal and behavioral outcomes (Heinrich and Gullone, 2006). Hence, workplace loneliness has been considered as crucially important for further research (Anana and Mishrab, 2019 p. 5), as there has been little investigation regarding the processes and outcomes that take place (Ozcelik and Barsade, 2018, p. 2343). Indeed, workplace loneliness has been characterized by scholars as a "modern epidemic in need of treatment" (Ozcelik and Barsade, 2018, p. 2343). Towards this goal, this study perceives that transformational leadership could play a crucial role in mitigating the negative effects of workplace loneliness.

TFL can deal with "workplace loneliness" through the compassion and empowerment of leaders (Mauno et al., 2016; Peng et al., 2017). Specifically, supervisor support has been regarded as an essential resource towards mitigating any negative work experiences that employees might experience (Chang et al., 2012). As has been stated in the previous sub-sections, TFL operates via creating greater "trust" and focuses on meeting the higher-order intrinsic needs of employees (Wen et al., 2019; Zheng et al., 2017). Hence, employees are able

to maintain their confidence, thus resulting to increased well-being (Diebig et al., 2017; Arnold et al., 2017). This process can be further clarified by Lawler's (2001, p. 321) "social exchange" theory, which explains "how and when emotions produced by social exchange generate stronger or weaker ties to relations, groups, or networks". In summary, based on this theory, the social exchange relationships between individuals create positive or negative feelings that influence how individuals will evaluate their relationships with their colleagues. On the other hand, however, individuals have the tendency to generalize their feelings with reference to the larger group to which they belong (i.e. the organization). As a result, in the unfortunate case that the feelings experienced are negative, employees might feel greater feelings of loneliness, resulting to weaker attachment to the organization. On the contrary, positive feelings will lead to greater attachment to the group and the organization, leading to greater exchange of affective and helping resources (Ozcelik and Barsade, 2018. p. 2347, 2348; see also Lawler, 2006). All in all, it is expected that employees experiencing workplace loneliness will be influenced positively by their transformational leaders, will be willing to accept work role assignments and retain their "trust" to them (Peng et al., 2017).

Hypothesis 4a: TFL reduces hotel employees' workplace loneliness.

Moving a step further, research suggests that burnout can be an outcome of workplace loneliness (Ananda and Mishrab, 2019). Indeed, lonely employees are characterized by "low willingness towards social skills" (Lam and Lau, 2012) and have the tendency to translate any information they receive from the organization as something negative that constitutes a threat (Cacioppo and Hawkley, 2009). As a result, employees feeling lonely at the workplace will most likely follow "avoidance coping strategies" (Roth and Cohen, 1986). In this case, they will try to reduce the stressors they experience in their job activities by avoiding contact (Carver

and Connor-Smith, 2010). In detail, although TFL provides the necessary resources and support to employees in order to cope with the negative work outcomes they experience (Chang et al., 2012), lonely employees tend to shift away from any meaningful relationships in their workplace (i.e. teammates and supervisors) thus leading to dissatisfaction, increased levels of stress and finally burnout (Ananda and Mishrab (2019 p. 2131, see also Soderstrom et al., 2000). Additionally, Murphy and Kuphsik (1992) suggested that lonely employees might be more anxious about breaking their exchange relationship with their supervisor, which is mainly caused by insecurity and fear of rejection. This process leads to "mental fatigue" resulting ultimately to burnout (Chi and Liang, 2013), a finding supported by the Ananda and Mishrab (2019) study. Taking the preceding discussion into consideration, the next hypotheses are proposed.

Hypothesis 4b: Workplace loneliness positively impacts hotel employees' burnout.

Hypothesis 4c: Workplace loneliness will mediate the TFL – burnout relationship.

*2.5 The moderating role of HRM practices*

Prior to continuing with the moderating role that HRM practices have to play in the TFL – burnout relationship, it should be underscored that the vast majority of research of the past decade promote the positive impact and usefulness of the "systems of HRM practices" to employees' well-being, known as "High Performance Work Systems" (HPWS; Huselid, 1995; Zacharatos et al., 2005). The initial goal of the present research was to examine the moderating role that HPWS has to play in the proposed relationship, a finding that has been investigated and supported by previous research (e.g., Fan et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2013). However, considering the pandemic, it seems unlikely that hotels will implement all of the HRM practices that constitute a HPWS. Hence, it was decided to emphasize the role that selected HRM

practices have to play (as a sub-system) in the current situation, and to examine their effectiveness in moderating the proposed relationship. However, to avoid confusion by using the term "HPWS" (see Kloutsiniotis and Mihail, 2020c), it was decided to refer specifically to "HRM practices".

In general, the HRM literature suggests that HRM "practices" and "processes" lead to beneficial outcomes for both the employees and the organization (e.g., Macky and Boxall, 2007). Specifically, an interaction effect that is developed between "HRM practices" and leadership shapes "employee attitudes and behaviors" (e.g., Dhar, 2015; Tuan, 2018). For instance, HRM practices have the ability to moderate the "social exchange" relationship between employees and transformational leaders (Zhang and Chen, 2013). Indeed, employees view HRM as a sign of "fairness", "recognition", and "empowerment", which is interpreted as the organization's commitment to their "well-being" (Gong et al., 2010). As a result, employees reciprocate with enhanced "trust" towards their employers, leading to beneficial "attitudes and behaviors" (Wei et al., 2010) and ultimately to lower levels of "burnout" (Babakus et al., 2017). Considering that HRM practices and managers' leadership behavior are two essential ingredients of the so-called "talent management architecture", this study follows Tuan's (2018 p. 136) argument and suggests that both "HRM practices" and TFL should form a strong system towards forging a robust "social-exchange" relationship. Through this process, employees develop positive "affective and behavioral responses", and dedicate themselves to serving the customers by exhibiting "extra role customer service behaviors" (Tuan, 2018, p. 136). Hence, the final hypothesis anticipates these "HRM practices" to moderate the interaction between "TFL" and "burnout".

Hypothesis 5: HRM practices moderate the negative relationship between TFL and hotel employees' burnout.

Figure 1 depicts the conceptual framework
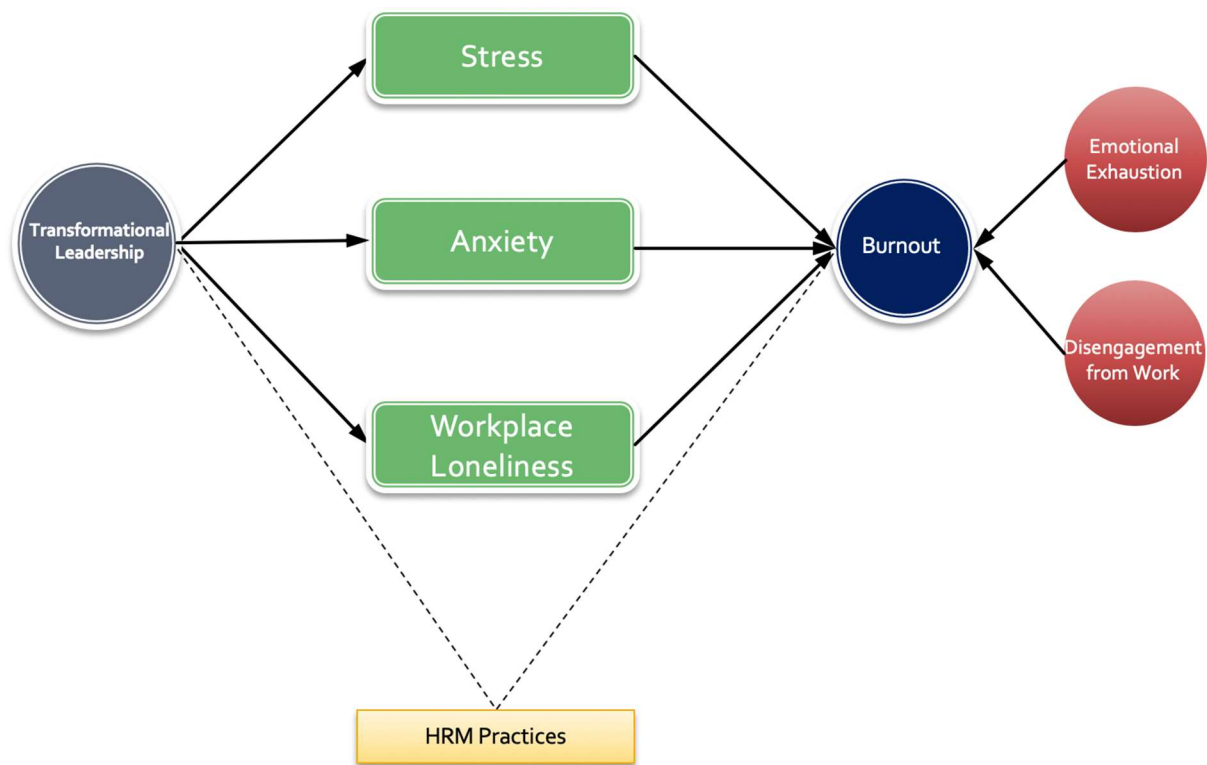
Figure 1 "The conceptual model"

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample information and analytical procedure followed

This survey took place from 4th September 2020 to 15th October 2020, following a "convenient sampling process". During this period, the hotel industry had to face the unprecedented consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic which led to the suspension of many tourist accommodation. As a result, many hotels across the country ceased their business activities. Nevertheless, the research team managed to come in contact with hotels that continued offering their services. In the first stages of the study the research team approached the hotels' HR managers in order to secure their cooperation and to get informed about the practices that are being used nowadays in the Greek Hotel Industry. Moreover, taking into consideration the

pandemic, the use of the electronic questionnaire was deemed as the most appropriate method for the current research.

Overall, 900 questionnaires were sent out to 13 four- or five-stars hotels, whereas 459 were returned (51% "response rate"). Concerning the synthesis of the sample, four hotels were in Halkidiki, four hotels in Crete, three hotels in Rhodes and two in Corfu. The big four- or five-stars hotels have been selected due to the fact that they dispose a developed human resources (HR) department. With regard to demographics, 46.2% of the sample were male and 53.8% were female, while the "average age" was 34 years ("*SD*"=*8.528*). Moreover, 38.1% held a Bachelor's Degree, 18.3% were postgraduates, 26.1% of the respondents had other qualifications, whereas 17.4% were high school graduates. Furthermore, 94.1% were working fulltime. In addition, 30.3% were "front office" employees; 22.7% worked as "food and beverage service staff"; 10.5% worked in the "management department"; 10.7% in the "food production"; 9.2% in the "administrative department"; 5.2% in "housekeeping"; 5.0% were "employees with general duties" (not specified job position); 3.7% in "engineering/maintenance department"; 2.6% in the "facilities management department"; and finally, the 0.2% were working as beach assistants.

3.2. Measures

Employees responded on a "five - point Likert scale" ("1 = totally disagree", "5 = totally agree"), whereas "Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)" (Table 1) was performed ("principal axis factoring"; "promax rotation"; "cutoff value = 0.50").

3.2.1. "Transformational Leadership (TFL)"

"Transformational Leadership" was measured by using 6 items of the "seven-item scale" of Carless et al. (2000). Sample item includes "My manager communicates a clear and positive vision of the future". "Cronbach's alpha = 0.906".

3.2.2. "Personal Financial Stress"

"Personal Financial Stress" was measured by three items of the Turner et al. (1995) scale. Sample item includes "I am currently experiencing financial problems". "Cronbach's alpha = 0.679".

3.2.3. "Anxiety"

"Anxiety" was measured by three items of the Warr's (1990) "anxiety-comfort scale". Sample item includes "Thinking of the past few weeks, how much of the time has your job made you feel tense?". "Cronbach's alpha = 0.876".

3.2.4. "Workplace loneliness"

"Workplace loneliness" was measured using the short version of the "R-UCLA loneliness scale" (Russell et al., 1980). Specifically, two of the four items used. Sample item includes "At work, people are around me but not with me". "Cronbach's alpha = 0.651".

3.2.5. "Burnout"

"Burnout" was measured based on the "Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI)" (Demerouti et al., 2010) scale. Specifically, "emotional exhaustion" was measured by using four items, including "There are days where I feel tired before I arrive at work". "Cronbach's alpha" was 0.834. Similarly, "disengagement" was measured by using three items, including "I always find

new and interesting aspects in my work" (R). (R) means reversed item. "Cronbach's alpha" was 0.771.

3.2.6. *"HRM practices"*

"HRM practices" included four HRM practices that are of crucial importance to the hotel industry that operate under the COVID-19 pandemic. These HRM practices include "Training and Development" ("α = 0.854"), based Sun et al., 2007); "Participation in Decision-Making" ("α = 0.713", based on the study of Delery and Doty, 1996); "Employee Autonomy" ("α = 0.763", based on the work of Barling et al., 2003); and finally "Information Sharing" ("α = 0.816", based on the work of Boselie et al., 2001).

3.3. Control variables

The study was controlled for "gender" ("male or female"), and "education" ("1 = High school graduate", "2 = Bachelor's degree", "3 = Master's degree or doctorate", "4 = other"). Considering that the majority of employees had a "fulltime contract", "type of employment" was not used as a "control variable". In the same vein, all of the hotels were ranked as "4- and 4- star". Hence, hotels were not controlled for their "stars ranking" either.

3.4. Strategy of Analysis, *"common method bias"* and evaluation of *"full measurement model"*

For the needs of the research, "Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)" was applied in "AMOS 20". The "10-factor model" showed acceptable "model fit indices" ("x^2/df = 2.523"; "RMSEA = 0.058"; "CFI = 0.905"; "TLI = 0.901"; "SRMR = 0.055").

In addition to the "procedural remedies" of Podsakoff et al. (2003), a number of steps were taken into consideration in order to mitigate the "Common Method Variance (CMV)" issue. To begin with, a number of "confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs)" took place, as has been

indicated by researchers (e.g., van de Voorde et al., 2016). In specific, the "10-factor measurement model" was compared to other similar models where (1) "stress", "anxiety", "workplace loneliness" and the two dimensions of "burnout" were included in "two discrete single factors" ("x^2/df = 4.025"; "RMSEA = 0.090"; "CFI = 0.828"; "TLI = 0.807"; "SRMR = 0.065"), (2) "HR practices" were aggregated into a "single factor" ("x^2/df = 5.280"; "RMSEA = 0.095"; "CFI = 0.532"; "TLI = 0.787"; "SRMR = 0.067"), (3) all variables calculated as a "single factor" ("x^2/df = 9.201"; "RMSEA = 0.111"; "CFI = 0.505"; "TLI = 0.652"; "SRMR = 0.11"). Overall, the "full 10-factor measurement model" showed the best "model fit". Finally, CMV was further controlled via the "Common Latent Factor (CLF)", as well as via the "Harman's single factor" tests. Both methods revealed no indication of "method bias".

3.5. Method of Analysis

The present research was conducted through "Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM)" via "SmartPLS 3.2" (Ringle et al., 2014). All in all, "PLS-SEM" is attracting researchers' interest during the past few years (e.g., Ubeda-Garcia et al., 2017; Kloutsiniotis and Mihail, 2020b) due to its benefit to incorporate "hierarchical component models", including "formative" and "reflective" constructs. Regarding the specific survey "HRM practices" and "Burnout" were calculated as "reflective-formative higher-order components" (Figure 2), using the "repeated indicators approach with (formative) measurement mode B"; Becker et al., 2012, p. 361) along with "two-step approach" (Hair et al., 2014, pp. 230-233).
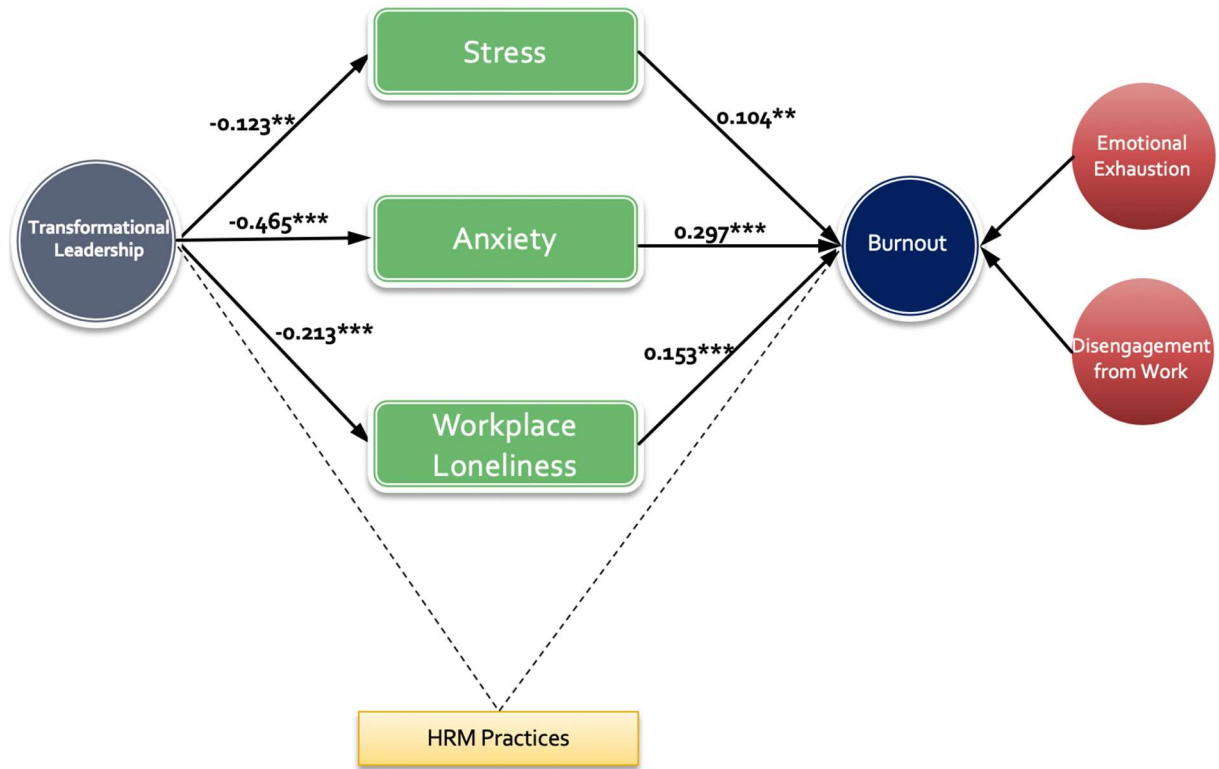
Figure 2 The "Two-Step Approach conceptual framework"

"*indicates significant paths:"

"*p<0.05"

"**p<0.01"

"***p<0.001"

"ns = not significant"

3.6. Evaluation of the "measurement model"

As discussed previously, the conceptual model incorporates both "reflective and formative indicators". "Reflective indicators" were evaluated based on "individual indicator reliability", "Composite Reliability (CR)", and "Average Variance Extracted (AVE)", as stated in the Hair et al. (2014, p. 95) study. Based on "Table 1", all values meet the required thresholds. Hence, "convergent validity" was established.

To continue with, "Discriminant validity" was validated through the "Fornell-Lacker", and the "Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio" (HTMT < 0.85), as suggested by Henseler et al. (2015).

Last but not least, regarding the "formative indicators" (i.e. "HPWS" and "burnout"), no sign of "multicollinearity" was present as was indicated by the "Variance Inflation Factors (VIF)" (Cenfetelli & Bassellier, 2009). Indeed, "VIF loadings" did not exceed the "3.33 threshold". Thus, "construct reliability" was also achieved.

Dimension	Items	Loadings	Mean	SDs	CR	AVE
Transformational Leadership (TFL) Carless et al. (2000)	"My manager communicates a clear and positive vision of the future"	0.789	2.93	1.270	0.927	0.681
	"My manager treats staff as individuals, supports and encourages their development"	0.832	3.12	1.295		
	"My manager gives encouragement and recognition to staff"	0.843	3.32	1.299		
	"My manager fosters trust, involvement and cooperation among team members"	0.801	3.11	1.279		
	"My manager encourages thinking about problems in new ways and questions assumptions"	0.840	3.33	1.301		
	"My manager is clear about his/her values and practices what he/she preaches"	0.844	3.34	1.318		
	"Cronbach's α"	**0.906**				
Financial Stress Turner et al. (1995)	"I am currently experiencing financial problems"	0.776	2.44	0.950	0.803	0.576
	"I have frequent disagreements with those close to me over how to spend money"	0.694	1.97	1.252		
	"I have too much debt / I owe too much money"	0.804	1.70	1.073		
	"Cronbach's α"	**0.679**				
Anxiety Warr (1990)	"Thinking of the past few weeks, how much of the time has your job made you feel each of the following?"	0.913	2.21	1.258	0.924	0.801
	"Tense"	0.914	2.34	1.285		
	"Uneasy"	0.857	2.09	1.222		
	"Worried"					
	"Cronbach's α"	**0.876**				

Workplace Loneliness Russell et al. (1980)	"No one really knows me well at work"	0.773	2.50	1.176		
	"At work, people are around me but not with me"	0.920	2.41	1.197	0.837	0.721
	"Cronbach's α"	**0.651**				

Burnout

Emotional Exhaustion Demerouti et al. (2010)	"There are days when I feel tired before I arrive at work"	0.765	3.20	1.400		
	"After work, I tend to need more time than in the past in order to relax and feel better"	0.860	3.19	1.339		
	"During my work, I often feel emotionally drained"	0.777	3.02	1.242	0.884	0.604
	"After my work, I have enough energy for my leisure activities (R)"	0.804	3.19	1.189		
	"Cronbach's α"	**0.834**				
Disengagement Demerouti et al. (2010)	"I always find new and interesting aspects in my work (R)"	0.841	2.46	1.149		
	"I find my work to be a positive challenge (R)"	0.857	2.26	1.203		
	"I feel more and more engaged in my work (R)"	0.787	2.64	1.202	0.868	0.687
	"Cronbach's α"	**0.771**				

HRM Practices

Based on Bettencourt et al. (2001)

Training and Development Sun et al. (2007)	"Extensive training programs are provided for individuals in customer contact or front-line jobs"	0.939	3.63	1.169		
	"Employees in customer contact jobs will normally go through training programs every few years"	0.929	3.67	1.143	0.932	0.872
	"Cronbach's α"	**0.854**				
	"Employees in this job are often asked by their supervisor to participate in decisions"	0.809	3.47	1.230	0.839	0.636

Construct	Item	Loading	Mean	SD	CR	AVE
Participation in Decision-Making Delery and Doty (1996)	"Employees are provided the opportunity to suggest improvements in the way things are done"	0.836	3.68	1.154		
	"Superiors keep open communications with employees in this job"	0.744	3.99	1.037		
	"Cronbach's α"	**0.713**				
Employee Autonomy Barling et al. (2003)	"In general, how much influence or input do you have about"	0.777	4.00	1.032		
	"The type of work you do"	0.684	3.98	1.010	0.862	0.556
	"How you start and finish work"	0.659	3.73	1.110		
	"The pace at which you do your job"	0.782				
	"Cronbach's α"	**0.763**				
Information Sharing Boselie et al. (2001)	"I am well informed on the vision and mission of the company"	0.746	3.89	1.090		
	"I am well informed on the future plans of the company"	0.826	3.37	1.268		
	"I am well informed on the business results of the company"	0.802	3.38	1.242	0.887	0.610
	"I am well informed on the activities of other establishments and units of the company"	0.773	3.81	1.140		
	"Cronbach's α"	**0.840**				

Table 1. "Properties of the measurement model"

"Item loadings are based on Exploratory Factor Analysis for all measures used in this study" ("principal axis factoring; promax rotation") with a "cutoff value = 0.50")

"SDs: Standard Deviation"; "CR: Composite Reliability"; "AVE: Average Variance Extracted"

4. Results

"Table 2" depicts the "means", "standard deviations", "reliabilities" and "bivariate correlations".

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. TFL	3.20	1.07	**(0.906)**					
2. Stress	2.04	0.82	-0.111*	**(0.679)**				
3. Anxiety	2.22	1.13	-0.465**	0.312**	**(0.876)**			
4. Workplace Loneliness	2.45	1.02	-0.215**	0.114*	0.310**	**(0.651)**		
5. Burnout	2.85	0.84	-0.380**	0.248**	0.475**	0.299**	**(0.793)**	
6. HRM Practices	3.72	0.69	0.603**	-0.215**	-0.388**	-0.235**	-0.374**	**(0.844)**

Table 2. "Means, SDs and correlations (Cronbach's α is in parentheses)"

N=448.

"SD, standard deviation"

*"*p<0.05"*

*"**p<0.01"*

*"***p<0.001"*

"ns = not significant"

The "structural model" (figure 2) was analyzed via the "bootstrapping procedure". "Table 3" depicts the "path coefficients" ("significance levels" in parentheses).

In summary, Table 3 shows that "Transformational Leadership" is negatively related to burnout ("β = -0.408, p < 0.001"), thus supporting Hypothesis 1. Moreover, TFL reduces "personal financial stress" ("β = -0.123, p < 0.01"), "anxiety" ("β = -0.465, p < 0.001"), and "workplace loneliness" ("β = -0.213, p < 0.001"). In turn, both "job stressors", namely "personal financial stress" ("β = 0.104, p < 0.01"); "anxiety" ("β = 0.297, p < 0.01"); and the psychological well-being indicator "workplace loneliness" ("β = 0.153, p < 0.01") show a positive relationship with burnout. Hence, hypotheses 2a,b, 3a,b and 4a,b, are supported.

"Hypotheses"	"Path Coefficients"	"T-Statistics"	"Hypothesis Support"
TFL ➜ Burnout (without mediators)	-0.408	9.738***	H1 supported
TFL ➜ Burnout (with mediators)	-0.207	ns	--
TFL ➜ Personal Financial Stress	-0.123	2.201**	H2a supported
TFL ➜ Anxiety	-0.465	11.346***	H3a supported
TFL ➜ Workplace Loneliness	-0.213	4.050***	H4a supported
Personal Financial Stress ➜ Burnout	0.104	2.234**	H2b supported
Anxiety ➜ Burnout	0.297	5.464***	H3b supported
Workplace Loneliness ➜ Burnout	0.153	3.223***	H4b supported
Mediation hypotheses and corresponding paths			
TFL ➜ Personal Financial Stress ➜ Burnout	-0.010	ns	H2c not supported --
TFL ➜ Anxiety ➜ Burnout	-0.121	4.075***	H3c supported *Partial Mediation*
TFL ➜ Workplace Loneliness ➜ Burnout	-0.029	2.500**	H4c supported *Partial Mediation*

Table 3. "Summary of Path Coefficients and Significance levels"

"*indicates significant paths:"

"*p<0.05"

"**p<0.01"

"***p<0.001"

"ns = not significant"

Moreover, hypotheses 2c, 3c, and 4c suggested that "personal financial stress"; "anxiety" and "workplace loneliness" will mediate the relationship between TFL and burnout. As suggested by Zhao et al. (2010, p. 204) and is shown on "Table 3", the "indirect effects" between "TFL" and "burnout" through "anxiety" ("$\alpha\beta$ = -0.121, p < 0.01") and "workplace loneliness" ("$\alpha\beta$ =

-0.029, p < 0.01") were statistically significant. Hence, hypotheses 3(c) and 4(c) are accepted. Nevertheless, the "indirect relationship" between "TFL – stress – burnout" was not statistically significant. Hence hypothesis 2(c) is not accepted.

Lastly, "hypothesis 5" proposed that "HRM practices" will play a moderating role in the "TFL – burnout" relationship. Taking into consideration that the "HRM practices" and "Burnout" were calculated as "reflective-formative higher-order components", the moderating effect was calculated by following the "two-stage" approach through SmartPLS (Henseler and Wynne, 2010). All in all, the analysis showed that the moderating effect is statistically significant ("β = -0.142, p < 0.001"), thus supporting hypothesis 5. The "simple slope analysis" is presented in "figure 3". The next section discusses further the relevant findings.
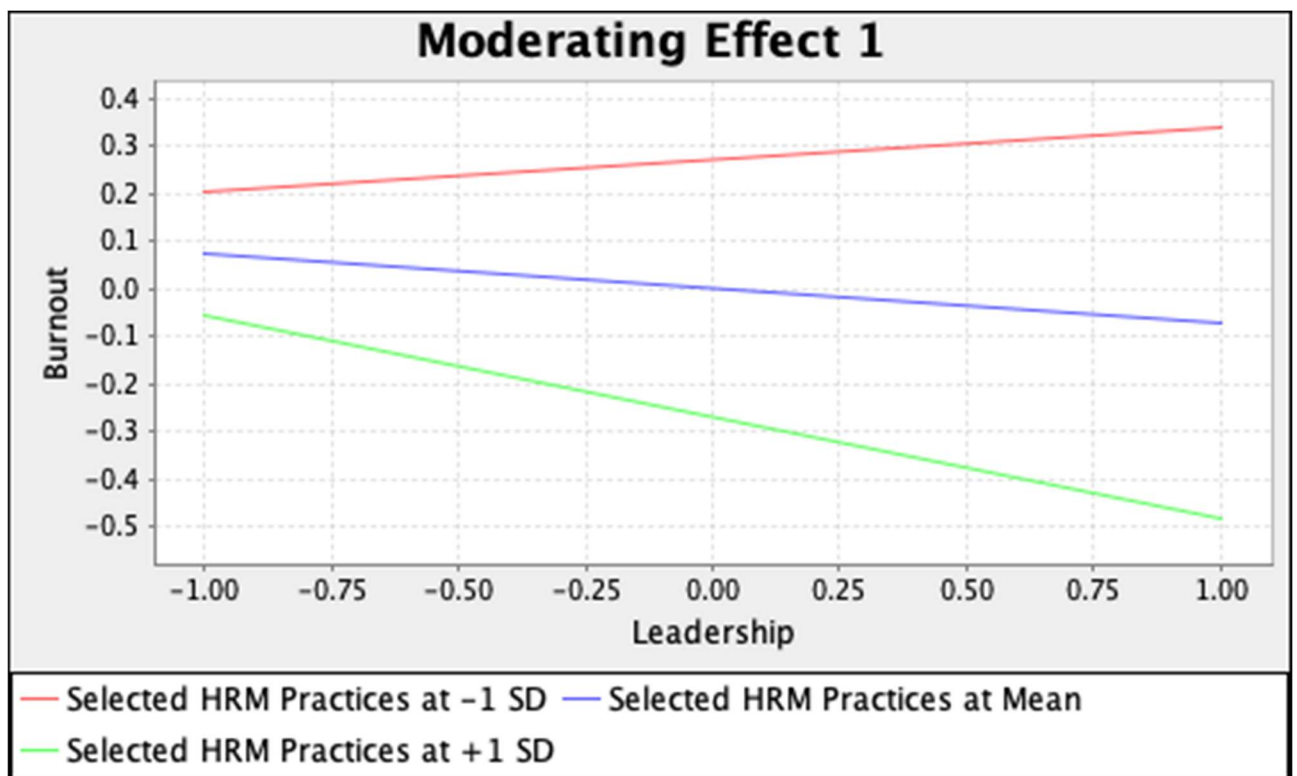

Figure 3 The "Simple Slope Analysis" of the moderating effect

5. Discussion and conclusions

This research tries to approach the most commonly examined topics around "transformational leadership" and HRM in an effort to explain "the mechanisms that lead HR policies and practices to influence unit-level performance" (Nyberg *et al.*, 2014, p. 318). Moreover, it investigates these crucial issues in the Tourism industry, as has been suggested by previous researchers (García-Lillo *et al.*, 2018, p. 1753, 1754). In summary, the findings provide some useful insights, taking into consideration the specific period (i.e. COVID-19 pandemic) in which this study took place.

To begin with, the study's findings provide additional evidence regarding the "Black-Box" (Messersmith et al., 2011) and clarify the mechanism through which "TFL" impacts employees' burnout. Specifically, the findings show that TFL has the dynamic to reduce both stressors (i.e. "personal financial stress"; "anxiety") and the psychological well-being indicator (i.e. "workplace loneliness"). Furthermore, similar to the "health impairment process" of the "Job Demands-Resources (JD-R)" (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007) framework, all three "stressors" are positively related to burnout. Hence, the findings show that these stressful work conditions have indeed the potential to harm employees, causing "depletion of energy" and "burnout" (Schaufeli and Becker, 2004). Combined, however, the findings highlight the usefulness of a successful leadership style and HRM in general in helping employees to overcome the negative effects that they might experience under these stressful conditions. Indeed, the main philosophy behind HRM lies on its ability to enhance employees' "Trust" towards their managers (e.g., Miao et al., 2014), helping additionally towards creating a "Social Climate" (Walumbwa et al., 2018). In turn, both "Trust" and "Social Climate" impact directly employees' "Work Engagement" (e.g., Breevaart et al., 2015; Kloutsiniotis and Mihail, 2020b; Walumbwa et al., 2018). As a result, work engaged employees' respond by showing increased "Productivity" (e.g., Bakker and Schaufeli, 2015).

Furthermore, of significant importance, Table 3 clearly shows that of the three mediating variables, "anxiety" is the most important, followed by "workplace loneliness" and "personal financial stress". Specifically, the most significant indirect effect is attributed to "anxiety", whereas "stress" does not mediate the "TFL – burnout" relationship. Indeed, the findings seem to follow the general consensus. Under these stressful conditions in the Greek context, "anxiety" is the most important stressor. Specifically, the COVID-19 pandemic causes a huge amount of anxiety to all employees, and most importantly to those who work in the hospitality industry. Put differently, employees are already anxious regarding the vitality of their jobs, whereas in many cases many of them already seek employment in other "safer" industries. Hence, the findings clearly show the detrimental effect that "anxiety" has on employees' burnout. As a result, management should be aware that a successful transformational leadership might be the remedy.

Last but not least, in line with the initial predictions, "HRM practices" do indeed moderate the relationship between TFL and burnout. Specifically, taking into consideration Figure 3, it is evident that "HRM practices" have the tendency to reduce employees' burnout, a relationship which is enhanced when these HRM practices are increased. However, the most crucial finding is depicted in Figure 3 when HRM practices are not implemented (red line). In this unfortunate case, increasing leadership seem to increase burnout. This finding is of significant importance and seems to validate the "dark-side" of HRM. According to this negative approach, HRM might impact negatively "employee well-being". Indeed, excessive HRM might lead to "work intensification", and increase employees' "feelings of being exploited" (Kroon et al., 2009, p. 510), thus reducing "health well-being" (Oppenauer and van de Voorde, 2018, p. 312). Although recent research has started to investigate the "negative effects of HRM" (e.g., van de Voorde et al., 2016; Ogbonnaya and Messersmith, 2019), this research is still in its infancy whereas others highlight the possible curvilinear relationships that might exist (Han et al.,

2017). Nevertheless, studies examining the moderating role of "HRM practices" in the hospitality sector are extremely limited, with only few exceptions (e.g., Dhar, 2015; Tuan, 2018). Although the study of Tuan (2018) validated the moderating role of systems of HRM practices (i.e. HPWS) in the relationship between "paternalistic leadership" and employees' "work engagement", this research took place in the Chinese Hospitality industry, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, this topic highlights avenues for further research in different contexts and countries in order to shed additional light on the relevant mechanisms.

6. Practical Implications

The study offers several practical implications which can lead to positive performance-related outcomes in hospitality industry. To begin with, it goes without saying that the appropriate "leadership style" (i.e. TFL) can reduce job stressors, which – in turn – could have devastating consequences for employees' burnout. Hence, hotels should focus on employing the most suitable and qualified people for these job positions, since employees have the tendency to mimic their leaders' behaviors (Bakker and Xanthopoulou, 2013). As a result, a successful leadership style can remedy the stressful work conditions that employees' experience under the "COVID-19 pandemic", thus attenuating "burnout". At this point, the positive relationship between both job stressors (i.e. personal financial stress; anxiety), psychological well-being indicator (i.e. workplace loneliness) and burnout should be underscored. Indeed, under the present situation, "anxiety", "stress" and "workplace loneliness" will always be present. Hence, management's inability to cope with these "stressors" could cause increased levels of burnout with negative effects for both employees and the hotel.

Moreover, the findings clearly show the positive contribution that "HRM practices" can play in reducing burnout. Indeed, hotels' management should be aware that HRM practices can offer an alternate way of helping towards reducing employees' "emotional exhaustion" and "disengagement from work". At the same time, it is crucial to take into consideration the

combined effects of TFL along with the use of these HRM practices. Specifically, HRM practices are usually interpreted by employees as a sign of "investment", "fairness", and "recognition" by the organization (e.g., Bartram et al., 2012, p. 1575). Hence, HRM practices can be really helpful when combined with a successful leadership style. In the unfortunate case, however, that HRM practices are absent, employees might feel that their work is not recognized, thus leading to increased levels of burnout.

The preceding discussion highlights the necessity to follow a successful leadership style along with the adoption of the HRM practices. However, this is not feasible without the crucial role of the frontline managers. Indeed, frontline managers are responsible not only for managing effectively employees, but also for implementing the relevant HRM practices that are imposed by the organization (Yang and Arthur, 2019). Across the HRM literature, this discussion has been described as the "content vs process" (e.g. Katou et al., 2014). Specifically, the "content" refers to the actual set of HRM practices and policies that an organization implements and follows in order to achieve its strategic goals (Boselie et al., 2005), whereas the "HRM process" highlights the actual process through which these practices are communicated to the employees (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004; Li et al., 2011). In the present case, it goes without saying that the "HRM process" is of utmost importance for frontline managers in order to make sure that the relevant policies and practices are communicated effectively to the hotel employees. In order for this to happen, training programs are essential. Indeed, through the appropriate training, frontline managers will be able to acquire a sound and deep knowledge of the HR practices that the organization adopts, along with the appropriate way of implementing them to employees (Bos-Nehles et al., 2013). Moreover, front-line managers will be able to distinguish the appropriate leadership style that should be followed (e.g., "transformational" vs "transactional") along with the shortcomings that each style is accompanied with.

Moving a step further, and considering the study's findings along with the implications that the overall HRM literature suggests, it is evident that training can also be really helpful towards improving the strength of the "HRM system" (Katou, 2013; Katou et al., 2014). Indeed, employees have the tendency to interpret and react differently to the messages (i..e. policies and HRM practices) that they receive from the organization (Nishii et al., 2008). In order for organizations to avoid this shortcoming, employees should develop the same perceptions regarding the implemented policies and practices, as these were intended by the organization. Towards this goal, the hotel organizations could also develop a "communication process" that implements the three main pillars of the "HRM system" as described by Bowen and Ostroff (2004), namely "Distinctiveness"; "Consistency"; and "Consensus". Hence, the role of frontline managers is extremely crucial in creating a "strong organizational climate" (Gerhart, 2005; Nishii and Wright, 2008; see also Bowen and Ostroff, 2004). In summary, management should place additional efforts towards creating a work environment based on high levels of "trust" (e.g., Innocenti et al., 2011), along with a strong organizational climate based on "justice" and exceptional "services" (see Kloutsiniotis and Mihail, 2020b). Indeed, such a work climate can be of significant importance to employees' "well-being", thus increasing their productivity and their "service-oriented Organizational Citizenship Behaviors (OCB)" (Luu, 2019). Combined, high quality of services will be achieved (e.g. Takeuchi et al., 2007). Indeed, recent research in the tourism and hospitality sector acknowledges the positive effects that a successful organizational climate has on employees' productivity. For instance, Kloutsiniotis and Mihail (2020b) highlighted the role of a "service and justice climate" in strengthening employees' work engagement and service-oriented OCB, whereas Yang et al. (2021) underscored the significance of a "procedural justice climate" in strengthening the "HPWS – collective OCB" relationship.

Furthermore, the study's findings respond in a way to the limited literature of the "conflicting outcomes" perspective of HRM, which suggests that HRM might impact negatively "employee well-being" (e.g., Oppenauer and van de Voorde, 2018). Indeed, the study's findings show that TFL and HRM practices operate in cooperation. Hence, management should be aware that for a maximum result, a successful leadership style should operate in combination with the implementation of HRM practices. Put simply, HRM practices could act as the stepping stone towards mitigating hotel employees' burnout.

Last but not least, although the vast majority of studies during the past two decades highlight the usefulness of HRM in improving employees' "well-being", "productivity" and "organizational performance", many organizations still consider the HRM as a "cost center rather than an investment center" (Yang et al., 2021, p. 9). Although the HRM research in the hospitality industry is limited (Kloutsiniotis and Mihail, 2020c), the present study clearly shows that HRM has the ability to attenuate the levels of stressors that hotel employees experience due to the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to diminished levels of burnout. Similar positive evidence were documented by the recent studies of Kloutsiniotis and Mihail (2020b) and Yang et al. (2021). Hence, hotel organizations should acknowledge the HRM as a source of "sustainable competitive advantage" (Datta et al., 2005; Jiang and Messersmith, 2018) and try to differentiate themselves from the competition by providing outstanding customer services. All in all, hotel organizations could allocate their resources and invest in the HRM department (Yang et al., 2021, p. 9). This investment could be used to implement not only training programs, but also sophisticated HRM systems, such as HPWS.

Combined, hospitality public and private stakeholders, who have the role of tourism policy makers should invest in building a culture that favors the HRM development along with the adoption of a TFL perspective in management within their hotels, resulting in increase of their capability to cope with "job stressors" and employee's burnout, especially during the COVID-

19 restrictions period. Towards that goal, they have to increase the level of top management knowledge about the actual value of the HRM practices and their potential of improving their firms' readiness to tackle employees' problems. Furthermore, by cultivating the TFL style, hotel managers will be in position to provide their employees with the necessary resources in order to cover their individual needs, and to make them acknowledge their purpose on their work as a higher mission, especially during crises. Finally, the proposed research framework could be used to examine the impact of TFL and HRM practices towards the diminishing of burnout in other sectors of the tourism industry, such as tourism intermediaries (agencies and tour operators), transportation, airlines, etc.

7. Limitations and Future Research

In the present research, there are some limitations. To begin with, this survey is "cross-sectional" in its design. Hence, the issues of "Common Method Variance (CMV)" and "reverse causality" might be present. Regarding CMV, the "Harman's single factor test" that was conducted did not show any evidence of CMV. The issue of "reverse causality", on the other hand, is even more complex. Specifically, the HRM literature suggests that "curvilinear relationships" might be present (e.g., Han et al., 2019). For instance, in the present study, HRM practices seem to be really helpful towards reducing burnout. After a certain point, however, the excessive use of HRM practices might increase the levels of "stress" that employees experience (Ho and Kuvaas, 2019) leading to higher levels of burnout. In an effort to overcome these issues, longitudinal studies can be highly beneficial. To the best of our knowledge, longitudinal studies are scant across the HRM literature, not to mention studies that focus on the tourism industry which are "cross-sectional" in their majority. Hence, "longitudinal research designs" might be a promising avenue for future research with the ultimate goal of

shedding additional insights into the HRM – organizational performance causal relationship (see Kloutsiniotis and Mihail, 2020c).

In line with the previous limitations, as was also stated in the previous sub-section, employees understand and respond to the HRM practices and policies they experience "idiosyncratically" (Guzzo and Nooman, 1994). Hence, this issue suggests that the findings should be treated with caution. For instance, employees' feelings of "stress"; "anxiety"; and "workplace loneliness"; might be influenced by the actual resources and "human capital" that employees already possess (e.g., "knowledge", "skills", "abilities"; Han et al., 2019, pp. 7-8). In a similar vein, these employees will probably report lower levels of burnout. Considering that this limitation might stand as a barrier towards creating a "strong organizational climate" and "HRM system", future research should include employees' "idiosyncrasies" as control variables in order to examine these effects on a deeper level.

Furthermore, the sample consisted of front-line customer contact employees only. At this point, two main issues come to the surface. To begin with, organizations do not employ the same HRM practices across all employee groups (Zhang et al., 2013, p. 3199). Secondly, front-line employees interpret differently the relevant HRM practices they experience ("actual HRM practices") as compared to managers' perceptions ("intended HRM practices"; Boxall and Macky, 2009). As a result, it is crucial for future studies to adopt a "multi-level" research design using "multiple respondents of HRM practices" (Kloutsiniotis and Mihail, 2020a, p. 576) in order to shed additional light on this issue.

Finally, the sample used for this study was based on Greek hotel front-line employees, across four and five stars hotels located in the biggest resorts of Greece, namely Halkidiki, Crete, Rhodes, and Corfu. Thus, the Greek sample might act as a barrier towards generalizations across contexts and countries. Given that cultural differences exist in terms of leadership style

and HRM practices, the conduction of a "cross-cultural" study would be of high research interest with regard to the hospitality management.

8. Conclusion

By applying the "Job-Demands" and the "Conservation of Resources" theories, this study advances a COVID-19 research framework and highlights the usefulness of TFL in mitigating hotel employees' burnout via reducing two job stressors (i.e. personal financial stress; anxiety) and one psychological well-being indicator (i.e. workplace loneliness). In parallel, this study found that HRM practices can enforce the impact of TFL on burnout. All in all, the study's implications provide useful insights to hotel managers and practitioners, and highlight avenues for further research.

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