

The Mediating Role of Passion for Work on the Relationship between Task Significance and Performance

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ABSTRACT

This study examines harmonious and obsessive passions as underlying psychological processes influencing the effects of task significance on performance. Using self-determination theory to account for the mediation effect, we argue that the relationship between task significance and employee performance is indirect, and harmonious and obsessive passion play a significant role as mediators. The data were collected from healthcare workers at an Indonesian government organization (N = 434) and were analyzed using the Hayes PROCESS macro. The results showed that task significance was positively and significantly correlated with harmonious passion and obsessive passion. Harmonious passion was positively and significantly correlated with performance, but obsessive passion was not correlated with performance. Furthermore, harmonious passion fully mediated the effect of task significance on performance, but obsessive passion did not mediate this relationship. The theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed.

Keywords: Harmonious passion, obsessive passion, performance, task significance

INTRODUCTION

Since the Jaminan Kesehatan Nasional [National Health Insurance Program] was enacted in Indonesia in early 2014, healthcare workers have been in high demand (Yasmi, 2014). Healthcare workers' performance includes maintaining service quality and efficiency to meet customer expectations. The program has entailed an increase in current healthcare workers' job demands that has negatively influenced

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 9 May 2018

Accepted: 10 April 2019

Published: 13 September 2019

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their performance (Janssen, 2001). For organizations, individual performance is an important component of organizational effectiveness, both to realize profit and to deliver services (Sonnetag & Frese, 2002). Performance is also important to individuals themselves, because performing at a high level and accomplishing tasks is a source of intrinsic reward and satisfaction (Lawler & Porter, 1967; Sonnetag & Frese, 2002), which in turn motivates them to improve their performance (Judge et al., 2001).

Performance can be affected by multiple factors, including situational and individual factors. Situational factors include job design (Christini & Pozzoli, 2010), the social support of co-workers (AbuAlRub, 2004), leadership (Breevaart et al., 2014), and job-demand resources (Gilboa et al., 2008). Individual factors include passion (Astakhova & Porter, 2015; Burke et al., 2015; Ho et al., 2011; Yahui & Jian, 2015) and job characteristics (Allan et al., 2016; Hackman & Oldham, 1976).

Job characteristics comprising task significance, task identity, task feedback, task variety, and autonomy, are important for enhancing individuals' intrinsic motivation to do their job and to improve their job performance (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). In the current study, we focus particularly on task significance, since this job characteristic is important in today's economy, especially for healthcare workers, who are aware that their work benefits other people (Grant, 2008). Grant (2008) contended that task significance deserved to be studied in its own terms. Task significance refers how a

job influences the lives or work of others, whether inside or outside an organization (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Thus, individuals who feel that their job impacts upon other people will be encouraged to spend time and energy doing the job, which will enhance their job performance.

However, Humphrey et al. (2007) in their meta-analytical study of 259 studies on the relationship between task significance and job performance found that the corrected correlation between the two variables was relatively low ($r = 0.16$). Moreover, a low correlation coefficient between task significance and job performance was further identified by Allan et al. (2016) and Hackman and Oldham (1976) ($r = 0.11$ and $r = 0.12$, respectively). Low correlation coefficients indicate that other variables are serving as the underlying mechanism for the relationship between task significance and performance. Indeed, previous studies found that meaningfulness, perceived social worth (perceptions of being valuable in the social environment), and social impact mediated the relationship between task significance and performance (Allan et al., 2016; Grant, 2008).

In this study, we investigate passion as an underlying mechanism mediating task significance and job performance. Passion is defined as a strong tendency to invest energy in an activity or work that one prefers, due to the fulfillment of values while spending time on the activity (Vallerand, 2015; Vallerand et al., 2003). Jobs that have a significant impact on others are considered valuable as they permit employees to love their work and

encourage them to invest energy and time to maintain a high performance (Franco et al., 2004). Studies have found that passion for one's work affects performance (Astakhova & Porter, 2015; Burke et al., 2015; Ho et al., 2011).

In Vallerand et al.'s (2003) dualistic model of passion (DMP), passion is categorized as either harmonious or obsessive. The distinction between harmonious passion and obsessive passion is based on *self-determination theory* (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Vallerand et al., 2003). Self-determination theory is concerned with the fulfillment of one's basic psychological needs, including the need for autonomy (desire to feel capable of managing one's own actions and behaviors), competence (desire to feel effective and able to master challenges), and relatedness (desire for relatedness with others) (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Whether these basic psychological needs are fulfilled depends on how an activity is internalized into one's identity. The distinction between harmonious and obsessive passions can also be explained by autonomous and controlled motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Vallerand et al., 2003). Harmonious passion is produced by autonomous motivation when one internalizes the preferred activity into one's self identity and freely perceives the activity as important and meaningful without feeling compelled to conduct the activity. Thus, the preferred activity exists in harmony with other aspects of one's individual life (Vallerand et al., 2003). Therefore, the fulfillment of all three basic

psychological needs leads to harmonious passion. In contrast, obsessive passion derives from controlled motivation, an external motivational urge that pushes employees to accomplish their tasks. Its internalization is derived from intrapersonal pressures stemming from sources such as self-esteem, and/or interpersonal pressures such as social acceptance and reward; thus, these lead to conflicts between work and other aspects of life (Vallerand et al., 2010). In this case, the fulfillment of two of the three basic psychological needs, particularly the need to demonstrate competence and experience relatedness, leads to obsessive passion.

Based on the above explanations, jobs involving a significant impact on others may induce employees to experience either harmonious or obsessive passion for their work, depending on how they internalize their job. Those who regard the job as meaningful and important may perform the job well due to intrinsic motivation (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) which fulfills their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This enables employees to identify with their work and self-endorse their actions (Deci & Ryan, 2008). In this regard, employees tend to possess an autonomous motivation or a harmonious passion (Vallerand et al., 2003) for their work. Meanwhile, important and meaningful jobs that affect others may impose pressure on the individual. When one is motivated to perform the job but controlled by factors such as approval motives, ego-involvements, or avoidance of shame (Deci

& Ryan, 2008), these internal and external factors put pressure on individuals to invest in their work excessively to increase their self-esteem (Gagné & Deci, 2005). In this case, employees fulfill their needs for competence and relatedness, but not their need for autonomy, and this process derives from obsessive passion. Thus, we predict the following:

Hypothesis 1a: Task significance is positively associated with harmonious passion.

Hypothesis 1b: Task significance is positively associated with obsessive passion.

Regardless of whether employee possess autonomous or controlled motivations, both types of motivation energize and direct employees' behavior (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Similarly, Vallerand et al. (2007) contended that passion was the main source of energy that drove individuals to persist through difficult periods in their activities and even helped them achieve their optimal performance level. Hence, individuals possessing harmonious passion will be intrinsically motivated to focus on their tasks, which in turn will lead to high performance. As predicted by self-determination theory, an intrinsically motivated individual experiences their work as a reward in itself that fulfills their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Similarly, obsessive passion may also motivate performance. According to self-determination theory, although external

rewards may diminish the effects of intrinsic motivation, they can still boost performance in the short-term because obsessive passion fulfills the need for competence and relatedness (Deci et al., 1999). Previous studies have found obsessive passion is positively correlated with job satisfaction (Burke et al., 2015) and performance (Yahui & Jian, 2015). This supports Vallerand et al.'s (2007) assumption that passion is the main source of energy for doing one's job. Based on this, further hypotheses for this study are proposed as follows:

Hypothesis 2a: Harmonious passion is positively related to job performance.

Hypothesis 2b: Obsessive passion is positively related to job performance.

Drawing on self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), we argue that harmonious and obsessive passion mediate the relationship between task significance and job performance. When individuals perceive tasks as significant, they occupy themselves with these jobs or activities and fulfill their three basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In these conditions, individuals possess an autonomous motivation to perform their job, which leads to high performance. Conversely, when individuals perceive work tasks as significant but they are inherently controlled by internal and/or external factors, only two of the basic psychological needs are fulfilled, particularly for competence and relatedness. In this case, individuals will experience controlled motivation or obsessive passion, which still leads to high

performance because high performance is needed to enhance these individuals' self-esteem. Individuals driven by obsessive passion are compelled to pursue success and avoid failure (Vallerand et al. 2007). Based on these arguments and the results of previous studies, further study hypotheses are proposed as follows:

Hypothesis 3a: Harmonious passion will mediate the effect of task significance on job performance.

Hypothesis 3b: Obsessive passion will mediate the effect of task significance on job performance.

Hypothesis 3c: Harmonious and obsessive passion will mediate the effect of task significance on job performance.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants and Procedure

In 2017, the government office that supervised 22 community health centers and 1 regional public hospital in Mandailing Natal district, North Sumatera Province, Indonesia was approached to obtain access to the human resources department records and collect performance data from 576 eligible healthcare workers. All participants were civil servant/government employees. Questionnaires enquiring into demographic data, task significance, harmonious passion, and obsessive passion were sent to all 576 employees in a closed envelope through their institution. An envelope was attached to the questionnaire so that participants could complete their questionnaires and return them in a closed cardboard box

that we provided at every institution. To link the data retrieved by self-report with performance data from the organization's records, participants were asked to give their identities, but they were assured that their data would be kept confidential and would be used for research purposes only. Participants were also assured that they could withdraw from participating at any time. The participants completed the questionnaires in approximately fifteen minutes.

The number of questionnaires returned was 499 (response rate 86.63%). 65 responses were excluded from further analyses, because the participants did not complete the biodata needed to match their responses with the job performance data. Therefore, the final sample consisted of 434 participants. The mean age of the participants was 37.73 years ($SD = 6.42$) and 388 (89.4%) were female. In all, 149 participants (34.3%) had 5 to 10 years of work experience as government employees. Participants' positions included 208 (47.9%) midwives, 136 (31.3%) nurses, and 35 (8.1%) doctors; 310 were diploma graduates (71.4%), 92 (21.4%) were university graduates, 3 participants (0.7%) had postgraduate qualifications and the other 29 (6.7%) were high school graduates.

Measures

The original measures were in English. The translate-back translation procedure as suggested by Beaton et al. (2000) was employed. After the questionnaire was completed, a pilot study was conducted on

131 civil servants from various departments in Semarang, Central Java Province, Indonesia. The pilot study used a more diverse population of civil servants than the actual study, ranging from administrative local government employees to healthcare employees. However, they were civil servants or government employees with some similar trainings during their employment years. The pilot study was conducted to determine whether the participants would understand the survey instructions and statements and to measure the validity and reliability of the instrument. According to Kline (1999), an alpha coefficient of $\alpha \geq 0.70$ is considered good. The alpha coefficients for task significance and harmonious passion in the pilot study were acceptable ($\alpha = 0.78$ and $\alpha = 0.76$, respectively), but obsessive passion did not meet the standard ($\alpha = 0.67$). Several items were added and modified before conducting the research. The reliability coefficients of each variable used in our study are given below.

Task significance was measured using the four-item Work Design Questionnaire developed by Morgeson & Humphrey (2006). The task significance scale was measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never and 5 = very often). An example item follows: "The results of my work are likely to significantly affect the lives of other people." The coefficient alpha for this measure was considered good ($\alpha = 0.82$).

Harmonious passion and obsessive passion were measured using the DMP, which was developed by Vallerand et al. (2003). Responses were given to all items on

a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree). A sample item for harmonious passion was "This work is in harmony with other activities in my life." A sample item for obsessive passion was "This activity is the only thing that really turns me on." The alpha coefficients for harmonious and obsessive passion were acceptable ($\alpha = 0.76$ and $\alpha = 0.76$, respectively).

Performance was measured using the objective measurement data for performance appraisal collected from the human resources department of the Department of Health of the Mandailing Natal District in North Sumatra, Indonesia. This department supervises 26 community health centers and two government hospitals. The performance assessment of the civil servants includes job goals and work behavior. An assessment of employee job goals is conducted by comparing the realization of work with work targets, which include the following aspects: (a) quantity, (b) quality, (c) time, and (d) cost. An assessment of work behavior includes the following aspects: (a) service orientation, (b) integrity, (c) commitment, (d) discipline, (e) cooperation, and (d) leadership. The performance data for this study were obtained through a combination of employee job goals (60%) and work behavior assessments (40%). The performance data used in this research were collected during the year 2016.

Control Variables. Tenure and age were controlled in this study. Ng and Feldman (2010) found that longer-term employees demonstrated a better in-role performance. Performance outcomes also vary due to the employee's age (Waldman & Avolio, 1986).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

To establish the construct validity of task significance and work passions, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The results of the CFAs are reported in Table 1. The proposed three-factor model (including task significance, harmonious passion, and obsessive passion as latent variables) were compared with two theoretically plausible alternative models, including a *one-factor model* where all indicators were allowed to load onto one latent variable, and a *two-factor model*, where indicators of task significance were allowed to load onto one latent variable, and indicators of harmonious and obsessive passion were loaded onto one latent variable.

Goodness-of-fit indices are recommended by Hu and Bentler (1999), and those most frequently reported in CFA studies include: the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), the standardized root mean residual (SRMR), the comparative fit index (CFI), and the goodness-of-fit index (GFI). RMSEA should be equal to or less than 0.06, CFI should be greater than 0.90, GFI should be greater

than 0.90, whereas an SRMR below 0.08 indicates a good fit (Hair et al., 2010; Hu & Bentler, 1999). The results indicated that the *one-factor model* provided a worse fit, and the *two-factor model* provided a better fit than the *one-factor model*, but a *three-factor model* fit the data significantly better than the other two models. Task significance, harmonious passion, and obsessive passion were the three distinct components of the three-factor model.

Table 2 presents means, standard deviations, correlations, and coefficient alphas for the study variables. The results of the correlation analyses showed that age and job tenure were significantly correlated with job performance ($r = 0.30, p < 0.001$; $r = 0.28, p < 0.001$, respectively). Task significance was not significantly correlated with job performance ($r = 0.04, p = 0.367$) but was positively correlated with harmonious passion and obsessive passion ($r = 0.31, p < 0.001$; $r = 0.22, p < 0.001$). Harmonious passion was positively correlated with job performance ($r = 0.10, p = 0.030$), but obsessive passion was not significantly correlated with job performance ($r = 0.09, p = 0.050$).

Table 1
Results of confirmatory factor analysis ($N = 434$)

Model	Latent variables	df	χ^2	CFI	GFI	RMSEA	SRMR	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf
Hypothesized model	Task significance, HP, OP	62	227.06	0.93	0.93	0.07	0.05		
One-factor model	General factor	65	1360.02	0.59	0.67	0.21	0.16	1132.96	3
Two-factor model	Passion, Task significance	64	705.20	0.77	0.80	0.15	0.11	478.14	2

Notes: **HP** (Harmonious Passion), **OP** (Obsessive Passion), **CFI** = Comparative Fit Index, **GFI** = Goodness-of-Fit Index, **RMSEA** = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation, **SRMR** = Standard Root Mean Square Residual

Table 2
Means, standard deviations, and correlations between study variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Age	37.73	6.42					
2. Tenure	11.34	7,07	0.79**				
3. Task significance	3.59	0.68	0.03	0.04	(0.82)		
4. HP	5.77	0.66	-0.01	-0.06	0.31**	(0.76)	
5. OP	3.47	1.26	0.05	0.06	0.22**	0.24**	(0.76)
6. Performance	85.58	3.75	0.30**	0.28**	0.04	0.10*	0.09

Notes: N = 434. Performance data were obtained from objective performance appraisals. **Age** and **job tenure** were measured in years; **Task** (task significance) was measured on a 5-point scale; and **HP** (harmonious passion) and **OP** (obsessive passion) were measured on a 7-point scale. Coefficient alpha reliabilities are presented on the diagonal. **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05.

The hypotheses were analyzed using mediation template 6 of Hayes’ PROCESS macro on SPSS software, with two mediators examined based on the relationship between task significance and performance. The confidence intervals were produced using a bias-corrected method with 1,000 bootstrap samples. As age and tenure were previously correlated with performance (Ng & Feldman, 2010; Waldman & Avolio, 1986), we included these variables as covariates in our model.

Hypothesis 1a stated that task significance would be positively related to harmonious passion. The results showed that task significance was positively related to harmonious passion ($a_1 = 0.29$, $SE = 0.042$, $95\% CI [0.2036, 0.3708]$, supporting Hypothesis 1a. Hypothesis 1b stated that task significance would be positively related to obsessive passion, and results showed that task significance was positively related to obsessive passion ($a_2 = 0.18$, $SE = 0.0780$, $95\% CI [0.0317, 0.3383]$); therefore, Hypothesis 1b was also supported. Hypothesis 2a proposed that harmonious

passion would be positively related to job performance, and Hypothesis 2b proposed that obsessive passion would also be positively related to job performance. Our results supported Hypothesis 2a but not Hypothesis 2b ($b_1 = 0.11$, $SE = 0.0513$, $95\% CI [0.0048, 0.2067]$; $b_2 = 0.04$, $SE = 0.0501$, $95\% CI [-0.0625, 0.1345]$, respectively). Hypothesis 3a stated that harmonious passion would mediate the relationship between task significance and job performance. According to the results shown in Figure 1, the total effect of task significance on performance (before harmonious passion and obsessive passion were involved as mediators) was not significant ($c_{total\ effect} = 0.0307$, $SE = 0.0458$, $95\% CI [-0.0593, 0.1208]$), and after harmonious and obsessive passions were involved as mediators, the direct effect of task significance on performance remained nonsignificant ($c_{direct\ effect} = -0.0100$, $SE = 0.04$, $p > 0.05$). As shown in Figure 1, the indirect effect of task significance on job performance through harmonious passion was significant ($indirect\ effect_1 = 0.0327$,

$SE = 0.0173$, 95% $CI [0.0012, 0.0696]$), supporting Hypothesis 3a. Hypothesis 3b proposed that the indirect effect of task significance on job performance through obsessive passion would be significant, but the results did not support this hypothesis (indirect effect₂ = 0.0039, $SE = 0.0066$, 95% $CI [-0.0073, 0.0194]$). Finally, Hypothesis

3c which proposed that harmonious and obsessive passion together mediated the relationship between task significance and performance was not supported, because the indirect effect of harmonious and obsessive passion was not significant (Indirect effect₃ = 0.0041, $SE = 0.0062$, 95% $CI [-0.0076, 0.0170]$).

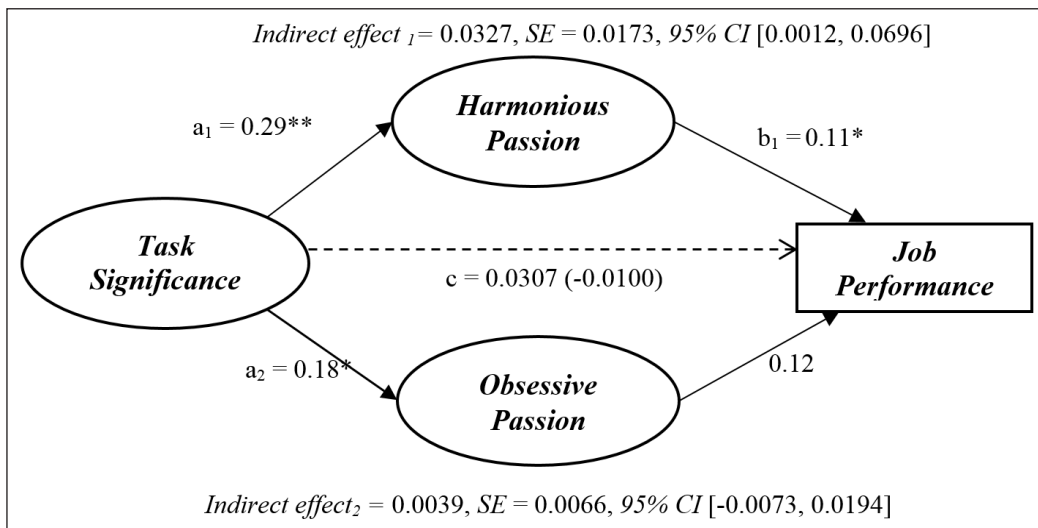


Figure 1. The mediating effects of harmonious and obsessive passion on the relationship between task significance and job performance

Notes. Direct effects are shown in brackets. Indirect effect₃ = 0.0041, $SE = 0.0062$, 95% $CI [-0.0076, 0.0170]$

This study investigated the underlying mechanisms mediating task significance and job performance among healthcare workers in a government organization in Indonesia. The results showed that harmonious passion mediates the relationship between task significance and performance, but obsessive passion does not.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to examine the mediating effects of passion on the relationship between task significance and individual work

performance. The current study found that the link between task significance and both types of passion was significant, suggesting that work that is perceived to be significant to other people induces experiences of both harmonious and obsessive passion during task performance. It was found that task significance enhances harmonious passion because individuals experience the fulfillment of their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. We found also that task

significance enhances obsessive passion when individuals experience the fulfillment of only two of the three basic psychological needs, namely competence and relatedness, even when they are experiencing pressures that impede their need for autonomy.

Our findings indicate also that harmonious passion positively predicts job performance, because it enables employees to accomplish tasks independently, allowing them to focus more effectively thus enhancing their job performance (Trepanier et al., 2014). However, obsessive passion was not related to job performance, and this result contradicted our hypothesis. Our results support previous findings that obsessive passion is unrelated to job performance (Astakhova & Porter, 2015; Burke et al., 2015; Ho et al., 2011). This implies a depletion of energy due to pressure to do the job, which is in conflict with other activities in an individual's life, and in turn negatively affects their job performance (Vallerand, 2015).

Thus, according to our findings, task significance was not related to performance. This contrasts with previous studies which have found a correlation between task significance and performance (Allan et al., 2016; Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Humphrey et al., 2007). We argue the uniqueness of this result in the literature may be related to our sample of public healthcare employees, whose workplaces are characterized by a rigid hierarchy and formal bureaucracy (Rainey, 2009). Complex bureaucratic systems may lessen the intrinsic value of task significance, reducing its impact on job performance.

Our study found that harmonious passion mediates the relationship between task significance and job performance. According to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), when individuals perceive their job has an impact on others, they internalize the activity as part of their identity but can still manage to control the activity so that the job remains in harmony with other aspects of their life. This leads to the satisfaction of their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The fulfillment of the three basic psychological needs will intrinsically motivate individuals to invest time and energy in the job that leads to high job performance.

One advantage of this study was its use of objective performance data from organizational records, which reduced the possibility of common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). However, this study had a few limitations that future researchers must consider. One is that our study captured a short period of the link between task significance and work passion only, and did not examine the relationship longitudinally. As Ethier and Deauz (1994) argued, the process of identity formation from passion is not static and may change over time. Therefore, subsequent research related to task significance, passion, and performance must be conducted using studies with longitudinal designs. Another limitation is that the study sample was generally homogenous, as it was confined to governmental employees, which may affect its generalizability. In future research, this study should be replicated with employees in other industries or private organizations,

and with other professions, because passion may be dependent on the characteristics of organizations and professions.

Practical Implications

This study has some practical implications for organizations. The present findings offer some insights into how to promote and maintain optimal employee functioning. As task significance facilitates harmonious passion and obsessive passion, interventions could target this job characteristic. For instance, it is important to identify which activities enable employees to see their work as significant and meaningful. Organizations should provide opportunities for employees to experience tasks responsibly by allowing them to craft their own job, which would meet their needs for autonomy and competence, and would offer employees flexibility with determining, planning, and performing tasks, and experiencing mastery while completing the task.

Another way would be to facilitate sharing sessions for employees with supervisors or co-workers about experiences related to the significance of their work. This would enhance employees' meaningful perceptions of the work they do. Organizations could also facilitate sharing sessions between employees and clients, patients, or other beneficiaries of their work, to share experiences related to the work they have done, where beneficiaries can share the impact employees' work has had on their lives. This is important, as employee motivation programs are rarely conducted in government organizations.

CONCLUSIONS

Drawing on self-determination theory, our results demonstrated that harmonious passion mediated the relationship between task significance and performance. The internalization of task significance can lead to the fulfillment of all three basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When these needs are fulfilled, they result in harmonious passion because individuals are motivated to do the job when they can freely manage activities, which in turn enhances their performance. In contrast, obsessive passion does not mediate the relationship between task significance and performance because the internalization of task significance fails to fulfill one of the three basic psychological needs. When the need for autonomy remains unfulfilled, the individual is controlled by other factors, resulting in obsessive passion, which does not enhance work performance. These results confirm previous findings on the indirect relationship between task significance and performance, and contribute to the literature by demonstrating harmonious passion is an underlying mechanism mediating the relationship between task significance and performance. However, these findings cannot be generalized to other populations because our sample was specific to government employees. Thus, we will consider replicating the findings with other populations.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This study was supported by Hibah PITTA 2017 funded by the Universitas Indonesia No: 710/UN2.R3.1/HKP.05.00/2017.

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