

Does Nepotism Affect Employee Job Performance? A Case Study of Frontline Staff in the Aviation Industry

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ABSTRACT

Despite a growing body of research on nepotism, the specific relationship between nepotism and employees' in-role and extra-role performance—along with its underlying mechanisms—remains relatively underexplored. Drawing on Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory, this study identified a key cognitive mediator linking perceived nepotism to both forms of job performance. Empirical data were collected from frontline aviation staff, and the proposed model was tested using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The findings reveal that nepotism significantly increases perceptions of employment job uncertainty, which in turn negatively impacts both in-role and extra-role performance. These results contribute to the nepotism literature by identifying a cognitive mechanism through which nepotistic practices undermine employee behavior. The study also offers practical implications for organizations seeking to improve service quality by addressing perceived favoritism and its psychological and behavioral consequences.

KEYWORDS: Nepotism, in-role performance, extra-role performance, conservation of resources theory

1. Introduction

Nepotism—defined as favoritism based on personal, familial, or close relationships—is a widespread phenomenon in organizations, especially in cultures that emphasize collectivism (Vveinhardt & Bendaraviciene, 2022). Although nepotism is frequently conflated with related concepts such as favoritism, it constitutes a more narrowly defined type of relational bias. Specifically, nepotism refers to preferential treatment grounded in kinship or close personal relationships, particularly those involving family members. By contrast, favoritism captures a wider spectrum of preferential practices that may extend beyond family ties to include friends or acquaintances (Abubakar et al., 2017). As a form of personnel bias, nepotism affects decisions regarding recruitment, promotion, and performance evaluation, not on the basis of objective merit, but through informal or relational networks (Akuffo & Kivipõld, 2019; Lokaj, 2015). While sometimes justified as a way to maintain harmony or reinforce loyalty, nepotism is largely recognized as a detrimental practice that undermines fairness, organizational culture, and job performance (Lokaj, 2015).

For frontline employees, job performance is critical to service quality and, ultimately, to organizational survival (Tam & Hoang, 2025). Although previous studies have explored interpersonal factors that negatively impact service performance—such as workplace incivility, bullying, and customer mistreatment (Baranik et al., 2017; Shin & Hur, 2020; Wu et al., 2020)—few have examined whether, and how, nepotism influences frontline employees' job performance. Given the direct customer-facing roles of these employees, understanding

the impact of internal organizational dynamics like favoritism is essential to maintaining both employee well-being and service effectiveness. Drawing on Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, this study addresses this gap by proposing job insecurity (JOI) as a key psychological mechanism that mediates the relationship between perceived nepotism and employees' job performance. By focusing on this cognitive pathway, the research offers new insights into how organizational injustice can indirectly impair service delivery through resource-related stress responses.

Moreover, given that in collectivist cultures such as Vietnam, social relationships are often valued more highly than individual performance (Hofstede, 2001), the likelihood of favoritism in human resource management increases—particularly in the public sector, such as airports—where procedural transparency is typically weaker and personnel decisions are more vulnerable to informal or non-meritocratic influences. According to Chassamboulli & Gomes (2020), the public sector is a particularly sensitive environment in which nepotism threatens not only internal fairness but also the quality of services delivered to the public. Although nepotism has been widely linked to negative employee outcomes—including reduced organizational commitment and increased turnover intentions—most existing studies have centered on family-owned businesses or small private enterprises. As a result, there remains a significant research gap concerning the effects of nepotism within public service organizations operating in collectivist cultural contexts (Rasheed et al., 2025).

This study focuses on check-in staff as respondents, representing a critical segment of frontline personnel in public

service. It makes several important contributions to the literature on organizational favoritism and employee performance. First, while most existing research on nepotism has focused on private or family-owned enterprises, this study addresses a significant contextual gap by examining nepotism within the public sector—specifically in Vietnam, where collectivist cultural values strongly influence organizational decision-making and where nepotistic practices are more pronounced (Hofstede, 2001; Iqbal & Ahmad, 2020). Second, whereas prior studies have primarily investigated how interpersonal workplace dynamics (e.g., incivility, mistreatment) predict formal or task-related performance outcomes (Tam, 2025), this research broadens the behavioral scope by examining both in-role and extra-role performance, offering a more comprehensive view of how nepotism impacts employee behavior. Third, while limited research has explored the underlying mechanisms linking nepotism and job performance, this study empirically tests JOI as a mediating variable, shedding light on the cognitive-emotional processes through which perceived favoritism translates into reduced work performance.

2. Theoretical Background and Hypothesis Development

2.1. Nepotism and Employees' Job Performance

Nepotism is widely recognized as an unethical organizational practice whereby leaders prioritize personal interests over the collective goals of the organization (Safina, 2015). Such favoritism fosters conditions ripe for conflicts of interest and serves as a breeding ground for organizational injustice and corruption, which lead to lower employees' job performance (Akuffo & Kivipõld, 2019). In this study, job performance is conceptualized as customer-directed in-role and extra-role performance, reflecting behaviors that directly influence service delivery outcomes (Rai et al., 2018).

In-role performance refers to work behaviors that fall within the formal job responsibilities as outlined in an employee's job. For frontline employees, these include behaviors such as responding to customer requests promptly, providing accurate information, and ensuring consistency in service delivery—behaviors that are central to an employee's core responsibilities and often serve as key indicators in formal performance evaluations (Bettencourt & Brown, 2003). Meanwhile, extra-role performance encompasses discretionary behaviors that go beyond formal job requirements but contribute meaningfully to the organization. Examples include initiating service improvements, proactively assisting clients or colleagues, or representing the organization positively in external interactions (Rai et al., 2018). Although not contractually required, these behaviors enhance overall service quality and organizational functioning (Bettencourt & Brown, 2003). The relationship between nepotism and both in-role and extra-role performance can be theorized using COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989).

According to COR theory, individuals strive to obtain, retain, and protect resources (e.g., recognition, social standing) (Shin & Hur, 2020). Perceptions of nepotism may signal to non-favored employees that their access to resources is threatened or unfairly restricted, prompting stress and resource depletion

(Westover, 2025). For example, when promotions, recognition, or desirable assignments are systematically allocated to favored individuals, non-favored employees may perceive a loss of valued resources—such as career advancement opportunities, status, and organizational support—thereby triggering stress and resource depletion (Akuffo & Kivipõld, 2019). When resources are threatened or depleted, individuals are motivated to conserve their remaining resources by withdrawing their task performance (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 1989). Previous studies have also indicated that unfair treatment can significantly lower employees' job performance (e.g., Colquitt et al., 2001; Shen et al., 2014). Given this, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Nepotism negatively impacts customer-directed in-role performance.

H2: Nepotism negatively impacts customer-directed extra-role performance

2.2. Nepotism, JOI, and Employees' Job Performance

JOI is defined as a cognitive appraisal reflecting an employee's perceived threat to the continuity and stability of their job (Sverke et al., 2002). JOI does not solely reflect actual job loss, but rather employees' subjective evaluation of potential future uncertainty and loss of employment-related resources. Negative work events—such as perceived unfair treatment, favoritism, or organizational unpredictability—can trigger JOI by signaling a heightened risk of resource loss (e.g., career advancement opportunities) and reduced control over one's job future (Shin et al., 2021; Shin & Hur, 2020).

Besides, in nepotistic work environments, employees who do not belong to the "inner circle" are more likely to perceive organizational injustice, which may lead to feelings of exclusion, lack of recognition, and diminished trust in the organization (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This perceived marginalization undermines employees' sense of belonging and control, as they may believe that fair evaluation and access to critical resources or information are no longer guaranteed (Arasli et al., 2006; Lokaj, 2015). Consequently, employees may experience social rejection, reduced self-worth, and limited influence over their career trajectories (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), which further erodes confidence in their future within the organization. Over time, this accumulation of perceived resource loss and reduced control intensifies employees' JOI (Arasli et al., 2006; Lokaj, 2015).

Moreover, JOI functions as a key psychological mechanism through which negative work events (i.e., perceived nepotism) translate into behavioral outcomes, particularly reductions in job performance (Shin & Hur, 2020). According to COR theory, resource depletion caused by JOI reduces employees' ability and willingness to exert effort in job-related tasks. Thus, when employees experience resource loss due to JOI, they are more likely to conserve their remaining resources by reducing effort, ultimately resulting in lower job performance (Schreurs et al., 2012; Shin et al., 2021). Previous research has shown that unfairness indirectly lowers employees' job performance (e.g., Jiang & Lavaysse, 2018). Thus, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H3: JOI mediates the relationship between perceived nepotism

and employees' in-role performance.

H4: JOI mediates the relationship between perceived nepotism and employees' extra-role performance.

3. Methods

Data were collected from frontline employees working in the aviation sector, specifically check-in staff, using a structured self-administered questionnaire. A convenience sampling approach was employed due to accessibility constraints. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality.

All measurement scales used in this study were adopted from established, validated sources. Participants responded using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). To assess nepotism, an eight-item scale was adopted from Elbaz et al. (2018) based on the original scale by Büte (2011). One sample item states, "I am always careful when speaking to family or relatives of company executives". JOI was assessed using a four-item scale by Vander Elst et al. (2014). An example item is "Chances are I will soon lose my job." In-role and extra-role performance was measured using a three-item scale for each from Netemeyer & Maxham (2007), using the same 5-point agreement scale. A sample item for in-role performance is: "I meet formal performance requirements when serving passengers" and "I go above and beyond the 'call of duty' when serving passengers," respectively.

To assess potential common method variance (CMV), Harman's single-factor test was conducted following the approach of Podsakoff & Organ (1986). Specifically, an exploratory factor analysis was performed in which all measurement items were loaded onto a single factor to examine whether a dominant factor would emerge. The underlying assumption is that if CMV is present, a single factor would account for the majority of the variance among the variables. In this study, the analysis of all 18 indicators showed that the first factor accounted for less than 50% of the total variance, which is below the recommended threshold, suggesting that common method variance is unlikely to pose a serious concern.

4. Data analysis and results

4.1. Descriptive statistics

A total of 220 respondents participated in the survey. In terms of gender, females represented a majority with 142 participants (64.5%), while males accounted for 78 (35.5%). Most respondents were between 25 and 35 years old (59.5%), followed by those under 25 (23.2%), 35–45 (15.0%), and over 45 (2.3%). Regarding work experience, 36.8% had 3–5 years of experience, 32.7% had more than 5 years, 19.1% had 1–3 years, and 11.4% had less than one year. In terms of marital status, the majority were single (67.3%), while 32.7% were married.

4.2. Evaluation of the Measurement Model and Structural Model

PLS-SEM was employed as the analytical technique due to its suitability for predictive and theory development research, particularly when examining complex models involving mediation relationships. In addition, PLS-SEM is appropriate for studies with relatively small to medium sample sizes and

does not require strict assumptions of data normality (Sarstedt et al., 2017). The sample size of 220 is considered adequate for PLS-SEM analysis based on model complexity and recommended statistical guidelines (Sarstedt et al., 2017).

Measurement Model

The measurement model was evaluated to assess the reliability and validity of the constructs employed in the study. As shown in Table 1, reliability was assessed using both Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR). All constructs demonstrated strong internal consistency, with Cronbach's Alpha values ranging from 0.805 to 0.892, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Sarstedt et al., 2017). Similarly, the Composite Reliability values ranged from 0.874 to 0.927, further confirming adequate reliability (Sarstedt et al., 2017). Convergent validity was examined through item loadings and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). Hair et al. (1998) advocated that in a sample size of between 200–250, a factor loading of 0.4 is required for significance. In this study, most item loadings exceeded the value of 0.50. Besides, the AVE values for all constructs were above the 0.50 cutoff, ranging from 0.577 to 0.811, confirming satisfactory convergent validity (Hair et al., 1998).

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell-Larecker criterion. The square root of each construct's AVE exceeded its correlations with other constructs, indicating that each construct shared more variance with its indicators than with other latent variables (Sarstedt et al., 2017). Specifically, the square roots of AVE of constructs were all greater than their inter-construct correlations. Overall, these results provide strong evidence that the measurement model demonstrates adequate internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity, supporting the appropriateness of the measurement scales for subsequent structural model analysis.

Table 1: Measurement Model Assessment: Factor Loadings (λ), Reliability, and Validity Indicators

| Construct | Item Code | Loading (λ) | Cronbach's Alpha (α) | CR | AVE |
|-----------|-----------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|--------------|--------------|
| NEP | NEP1 | 0.758 | 0.892 | 0.913 | 0.577 |
| | NEP2 | 0.557 | | | |
| | NEP3 | 0.617 | | | |
| | NEP4 | 0.905 | | | |
| | NEP5 | 0.887 | | | |
| | NEP6 | 0.900 | | | |
| | NEP7 | 0.757 | | | |
| | NEP8 | 0.602 | | | |
| JOI | INS1 | 0.848 | 0.805 | 0.874 | 0.640 |
| | INS2 | 0.573 | | | |
| | INS3 | 0.861 | | | |
| | INS4 | 0.877 | | | |
| INP | IN1 | 0.823 | 0.889 | 0.927 | 0.811 |
| | IN2 | 0.952 | | | |
| | IN3 | 0.921 | | | |
| EXP | EXP1 | 0.892 | 0.868 | 0.914 | 0.779 |
| | EXP2 | 0.820 | | | |
| | EXP3 | 0.933 | | | |

Note: Factor loadings > 0.50; Cronbach's alpha > 0.70; Composite reliability (CR) > 0.70; and average variance extracted (AVE) > 0.50 indicate acceptable reliability and validity (Hair et al., 2017). Nep: Nepotism; JOI: JOI; INP: In-role performance; EXP: extra-role performance

Structural Model Assessment

Hypothesis H1 predicted a negative relationship between nepotism and in-role performance. As shown in Table

2, this hypothesis was not statistically supported ($p = 0.105$), and the 95% confidence interval $[-0.304, 0.027]$ included zero, indicating that nepotism does not directly impair core task performance in a statistically meaningful way. In contrast, Hypothesis H2 was supported, demonstrating that nepotism has a significant negative effect on extra-role performance ($\beta = -0.176$, $p = 0.022$), with the 95% confidence interval $[-0.324, -0.024]$ excluding zero.

Furthermore, Hypothesis H3 was supported, revealing that JOI significantly mediates the relationship between nepotism and in-role performance ($\beta = -0.106$, $p = 0.028$), with a confidence interval of $[-0.209, -0.018]$. This suggests that although nepotism does not directly reduce in-role performance, it does so indirectly by increasing employees' sense of JOI.

Finally, Hypothesis H4 was also supported, indicating that JOI mediates the relationship between nepotism and extra-role performance ($\beta = -0.108$, $p = 0.024$), with a 95% confidence interval of $[-0.210, -0.022]$. This finding confirms that the negative impact of nepotism on voluntary performance behaviors operates through heightened JOI.

Table 2: Hypothesis Testing Results

| Hypothesis | β | p-value | 95% Confidence Interval |
|---|---------|---------|-------------------------|
| H1. Nep \rightarrow INP | -0.137 | 0.105 | $[-0.304, 0.027]$ |
| H2. Nep \rightarrow EXP | -0.176* | 0.022 | $[-0.324, -0.024]$ |
| H3. Nep \rightarrow JOI \rightarrow INP | -0.106* | 0.028 | $[-0.209, -0.018]$ |
| H4. Nep \rightarrow JOI \rightarrow EXP | -0.108* | 0.024 | $[-0.210, -0.022]$ |

* $p < 5\%$; ** $p < 1\%$; *** $p < 0.1\%$

5. Conclusion, discussion, limitation and further research

5.1. Discussion

Grounded in the COR theory, this study examined the effects of perceived nepotism on employees' customer-directed in-role and extra-role performance, with JOI serving as a mediating mechanism. The findings offer several important insights. First, the results reveal that nepotism significantly increases employees' perceptions of JOI. In turn, this heightened sense of insecurity leads to declines in both in-role and extra-role performance. These results underscore the indirect impact of nepotism on employee behavior through psychological processes. While prior research has largely focused on overt retaliation or counterproductive behaviors, limited attention has been paid to the underlying cognitive pathway—particularly JOI—through which perceived favoritism affects performance (Lim et al., 2023). In particular, when employees perceive nepotism in the workplace, they are more likely to experience heightened JOI, as such practices signal unfairness and uncertainty regarding career prospects. This sense of insecurity can, in turn, deplete their psychological resources and undermine both their in-role and extra-role performance. By identifying JOI as a key mechanism, this study extends the literature by providing a more nuanced explanation of how nepotism translates into behavioral outcomes. The results are consistent with previous research highlighting the mediating role of JOI in linking workplace injustice to negative employee outcomes (e.g. Jiang & Lavaysse, 2018).

Second, while the direct effect of nepotism on in-role

performance was not statistically significant, nepotism did exert a significant direct negative impact on extra-role performance. This suggests that discretionary behaviors—such as voluntarily assisting passengers or engaging in service-enhancing initiatives—are especially sensitive to perceptions of workplace unfairness and favoritism. One possible explanation is that in-role performance is explicitly embedded in the organization's formal reward and evaluation system, whereas extra-role performance is not formally recognized or rewarded (Riketta, 2002). Therefore, even under high levels of perceived nepotism, frontline employees are likely to maintain their required task performance to meet job expectations while reducing discretionary effort. However, when JOI is elevated, this pattern may intensify, as employees experience greater resource depletion and uncertainty. Under such conditions, individuals are more likely to conserve remaining resources by further withdrawing from both extra-role and in-role performance. This pattern is consistent with prior research showing that increased work demands or stressors tend to both directly and indirectly reduce extra-role performance while having a weaker or non-significant direct effect on in-role performance (i.e., Tam & Trang, 2024).

Moreover, the results provide empirical support for COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), which posits that individuals are motivated to protect their valued resources, and that the threat or loss of such resources (e.g., job security) prompts conservation-oriented behaviors. In this study, nepotism functioned as a workplace stressor that threatened employees' sense of fairness and inclusion. This triggered a cognitive response in the form of JOI and led to behavioral withdrawal—manifested in reduced in-role and extra-role performance to protect their resources.

Finally, this study extends the nepotism literature by examining its effects in a high-stress service context within a developing country, specifically among airport frontline employees. Despite theoretical expectations that collectivist cultures may be more tolerant of favoritism, empirical evidence in such settings remains limited (Lim et al., 2023). This gap is particularly relevant in the aviation sector, where consistent employee performance and service quality are critical for operational effectiveness (Tam & Trang, 2024). By investigating how perceived nepotism influences employee attitudes and performance in this context, the study addresses an important gap in the literature.

5.2. Managerial Implications

The findings of this study yield several important managerial implications for enhancing employee commitment and performance, particularly in organizational contexts where perceptions of favoritism may exist.

First, managers should prioritize the development and enforcement of transparent and fair human resource policies, especially in areas such as recruitment, performance evaluation, rewards, and promotions (Elbaz et al., 2018). The implementation of standardized and well-communicated procedures can mitigate perceived bias and strengthen employees' confidence in management (Khatri et al., 2006).

Second, middle managers and direct supervisors should receive

formal training to recognize and manage both explicit and implicit bias in leadership behavior. Enhancing their awareness of unconscious favoritism enables them to make more equitable decisions and foster a work environment perceived as fair and inclusive (Ferdman & Deane, 2014).

Third, organizations must actively monitor and manage JOI among employees, particularly in service roles where emotional and interpersonal demands are high (Shoss, 2017). Since this study shows that perceptions of nepotism elevate JOI—which in turn reduces both in-role and extra-role performance—managers should proactively communicate organizational stability, clarify career progression opportunities, and provide supportive feedback (Karatepe, 2015). These actions can buffer employees from insecurity-related stress and sustain their motivation and service quality.

5.3. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite offering meaningful contributions, this study is subject to several limitations. First, its cross-sectional design restricts the ability to establish causal relationships between nepotism, JOI, and job performance. To better understand the directionality and development of these relationships over time, future research should consider adopting a longitudinal approach. Second, the use of self-reported data may have introduced common method bias, even though steps were taken to reduce it through rigorous instrument design. To enhance validity, subsequent studies could incorporate multi-source data, such as supervisors for assess employees' job performance. Third, the study was limited to a specific occupational and organizational context—check-in staff at a domestic airport terminal. While this sample is relevant for examining frontline service work, the findings may not be generalizable to other sectors or cultural environments. Future research should replicate and extend this model in varied organizational settings and cultural contexts to test its broader applicability. Specifically, future studies could compare nepotism dynamics across public and private sector contexts to better understand how institutional environments shape employee responses. Finally, although this study provides valuable insights into the proposed relationships, examining potential moderators—such as perceived employability, supervisor support, or union presence—may provide further insight into boundary conditions of the proposed model.

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