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Does employee voice tackle the negative impact of stress caused by COVID-19 on organisational commitment? An investigation of schoolteachers in Pakistan

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to examine the effect of stress on organisational commitment of schoolteachers during the pandemic period, and the mediation role of employee voice and moderation role of perceived organisation support were also investigated. The data was collected from 360 schoolteachers and SEM technique was used to test the relationships. The results showed that stress suffered by schoolteachers was negatively associated with organisational commitment. Furthermore, employee voice mediates this negative relationship, and the presence of perceived organisational support plays a moderating role between stress caused by COVID-19 and employee voice. Thus, we concluded that employee voice and perceived organisational support played a crucial role in reducing the negative effect of stress caused due to COVID-19 on organisational commitment.

Keywords: COVID-19; stress; conservation of resources theory; employee voice; commitment; organisational support; schoolteachers; Pakistan.

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1 Introduction

Pandemic due to COVID-19, caused a huge disruption in almost all walks of life and severely affected working of sectors where the vulnerability was high, for example educational institutions, travel and tourism healthcare facilities, etc. COVID-19, also known as coronavirus, is a viral and infectious disease with a high mortality rate (Chen and Eyoum, 2021). On 11 March 2020, World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a pandemic (Jebril, 2020). There was huge loss of life and human suffering due to the pandemic and the health systems worldwide were on the verge of collapse. Governments responded by closing down entire economic sectors to lower the spread of the virus and to reduce the casualties. COVID-19 pandemic changed the normal working life and a new normal was created. New normal meant working remotely from home worldwide (Levin et al., 2020). It caused disruption to business operations, working

routines and patterns across the globe (Yuan et al., 2021). The most vulnerable sectors were those which were relying on close face to face interactions with coworkers and public, e.g., the educational institutions, travel, tourism and the healthcare facilities. Almost all schools in many parts of the world were closed for any face-to-face learning activity.

Educational institutions in Pakistan were also closed on 13 March 2020, for any face-to-face learning activity and were asked to shift to virtual learning platforms. Ministry of Education announced the launch of an initiative ‘tele-schooling’, in collaboration of Information and Broadcasting Ministry (Noor et al., 2020). Teachers had to change their pedagogy from face to face to online teaching methods for which they had no resources, e.g., no training, no school support for access to broadband, computers or laptops or any other digital resource. This disruption to face to face teaching, examinations, and social interaction along with the daily threat of catching the virus and losing a loved one had a negative effect on quality of the teaching delivered online (Schleicher, 2020). As a result, teachers faced an increased level of stress and anxiety (Klapproth et al., 2020). Fear of death due to COVID-19 multiplied the effect of stress the employees endured (Chen and Eyoun, 2021). According to a UNESCO report the quality of teachers in Pakistan is low. Teachers working in public and private sector schools belong to a low-income group with very limited training and development opportunities. Thus, online teaching created a lot of challenges for teachers in Pakistan. Factors such as lack of training, limited access to online teaching technology, constant fear of losing one’s livelihood due to prolonged school closures contributed towards increased stress levels among the teachers, in particular among those affiliated with the private schools.

Most of the existing COVID-19 studies focus on the clinical and psychological features of the stress. Recent literature has examined the effects of COVID-19 on work attitudes, motivation, efficiency, policies, turnover intentions, and other related areas (Terzić et al., 2021). When it comes to schoolteachers and stressful events such as pandemic, there are three clear gaps in literature. First, there is lack of empirical research on how to promote schoolteacher’s organisational commitment in major crisis situation such as pandemic. Second, although employee voice is supposed to reduce the negative effect of stress on organisational commitment; few researchers have explored the mediation effect of employee voice from exchange perspective. Third the moderation role of perceived organisation support (POS) has not been examined. We assume that support to teachers from school management greatly enhances the teacher commitment to the school. Thus, there is a need to expand and modernise the construct of organisational commitment by investigating the influence of COVID-19 on its antecedents (Chauhan et al., 2022). Therefore, the COVID-19 serves as a motivation for this study with a purpose to:

- explore the effect of stress on schoolteacher’s organisation commitment during the crises of COVID-19
- explore the mediation role of employee voice between stress caused by COVID-19 and organisational commitment
- investigate the moderation role of perceived organisation support between stress caused by COVID-19 and employee voice.

2 Conservation of resources theory

Conferring upon the conservation of resources (COR) theory, it is assumed that individuals conserve and dispose off their resources to fulfil job demands (Hobfoll, 2001). It is important to note that in organisations, employees need various types of resources to become competitive and to perform their jobs well (Kim et al., 2017). The absence of requisite resources causes stress in employees. Hobfoll (2011) suggests that stress occurs primarily in three instances; loss of the existing resources, threat of loss of the existing resources and inability to access the new resources. According to this theory, loss of resources is more stressful than the gain of new resources. When an employee loses resources, it is likely for them to feel emotionally exhausted and stressed. As a result, employees use coping mechanisms to preserve resources. These mechanisms include disengagement with work and reduction in organisational commitment (Thanacoody et al., 2014).

According to the transactional model of stress, one's response to an event is shaped through one's perception of a stressful event. It is suggested that people are more likely to pay attention and alter their behaviour if the stressful event is relevant. An individual outcome depends upon the individual's perception of the strength of a stressful event (Liu et al., 2021). When confronted with a stressful event, in this case COVID-19, which drained teachers' personal resources and threatened their jobs, schools that provided them with support and a mechanism to raise their concerns, i.e., employee voice were in a position to reduce the negative impact of stress on employee's organisation commitment.

2.1 Organisational commitment and stress (COVID-19)

Organisational commitment is the individual's relative strength of identification and involvement in a particular organisation (Garg and Dhar, 2014). It is very important concept as it is the reason for an organisation's continuous existence (Ateş and İhtiyaroğlu, 2019; Tajdini and Tajeddini, 2018). The effectiveness and efficiency of an individual's working depends upon many individual and environmental factors. Positive situations and circumstances impact positively and vice versa negative situations and circumstances lead to a decrease in individual's effectiveness and efficiency. One of such factors with detrimental effect on the individual's work behaviour and task requirements is stress (Ateş and İhtiyaroğlu, 2019).

According to previous research there are several factors which act as an antecedent of organisational commitment and stress (Reichers, 1984). For the first time stress was used as a concept by Selye (1980, p.6), stress is a state of tension which bothers the individual both psychologically and physiologically (Ateş and İhtiyaroğlu, 2019). Employees lost their resources due to the conditions imposed by COVID-19 which created a lot of stress and according to previous research stress reduces the commitment of employees. Here it is important to clarify the nature of this relationship theoretically.

Much research done on the relationship between stress and organisational commitment posits stress is a factor which negatively impacts the individual and organisation (Ateş and İhtiyaroğlu, 2019). Extant literature argues that stress leads to negative outcomes as it obstructs the productivity of an individual by affecting the physical and mental health. One of the negative consequences of stress is reduced organisational commitment. Stress makes the task realisation difficult and may result in diminishing the commitment. So, it is anticipated that organisational commitment of the

individuals suffering from stress is less (Garg and Dhar, 2014). In a recent study, Sanchez and Hinlayagan (2023) concluded that organisational commitment of tourism workers is negatively related with stress. Drawing on the conservation of resources theory and the arguments related to the effect of the stress on the organisational commitment, we hypothesise that stress diminishes the organisational commitment of school teachers as follows:

H1 There is a negative relationship between stress due to COVID-19 and organisational commitment of school teachers

2.2 Employee voice as mediator

Voice is very important for an employee to stay committed with the organisation as it buffers the effect of stress (Feldman and Ng, 2012). Stress can both positively and negatively impact the employee voice. According to COR theory, people may use less voice due to stress in order to save resources, but it is also possible that people may use more voice to get more resources to deal with the stress (Feldman and Ng, 2012). As COVID-19 is a challenging and traumatic stressor, there are some conditions concerning relationship of challenge stressors and voice. In this case of high challenge stressors people have more motivation to raise voice, but they do not have many resources which leads to low voice behaviour (Chen et al., 2015).

Exchange theory plays an important part in this active relationship between employee voice and organisational commitment. As employee voice is an antecedent of organisational commitment, a direct relationship exists between the two. Research suggests that where employees have a say in the decision making or the employees have a voice there is high level of organisational commitment and vice versa (Rees et al., 2013).

Many research studies have stated that stress leads to many negative outcomes like physical and mental health problems, which reduce organisational commitment (Chigeda et al., 2022; Garg and Dhar, 2014). The stress level observed during the pandemic is very high which affects employee ability to use voice (Chen et al., 2015). This low level of employee voice negatively effects the organisational commitment as voice is considered as an antecedent of organisational commitment. It means that if employees feel that they can voice their concerns or can influence the decision, then they are more committed to their organisation and help achieve its goal. Stress due to COVID-19 negatively impacts on the employee voice and decreases the voice of employees which in turn decreases the employee commitment. As employee voice is a major driver of organisational commitment, its presence would mediate the relationship between stress due to COVID-19 and organisational commitment.

Taking from above theoretical support and given the negative effects of stress it can be stated that, due to stress from COVID-19, availability of employee voice mechanism can enhance employee organisational commitment; therefore, we hypothesise our second hypothesis as follows:

H2 Employee voice mediates the relationship between the stress due to COVID-19 and organisational commitment.

2.3 *Perceived organisation support as moderator*

Perceived organisational support refers to the beliefs of employees concerning the degree to which organisation cares about their wellbeing and values their input (Loi et al., 2014). According to literature, social support is considered a significant moderator between stress and physical and mental health. Perceived organisational support has a positive impact on the health of employees. Irrespective of how many or how much intense the stressor is, POS has the ability to reduce the stress and the reactions to stressors as well (Jain et al., 2013). Thus, it is plausible that POS indicates that support will be available to the employees to deal with the stressors (Loi et al., 2014).

Voice is a constructive communication of employee to suggest solution to problems in order to improve the organisation. Voice can be promotive as well as prohibitive but both forms of voice should be encouraged as they are beneficial for the organisation. POS can enhance the use of voice by employees. POS makes the employee feel that the organisation acknowledge their efforts and care for them. They trust that whenever they will need the support their organisation will be willing to help (Loi et al., 2014). Existing literature supports the assertion that perceived organisational support is positively related to employee voice (Tucker et al., 2008).

Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) explains how management behaviour informs employee perceptions of organisational support and, in turn, effects employee behaviour (Tucker et al., 2008). According to social exchange theory high POS make the employees perceive that they have maintained social exchange relationship with their organisation or employer. Employees feel the need to repay the organisation due to the norm of reciprocity. So, using voice is the perfect way to fulfil this obligation because it helps in the betterment of organisation in the future (Loi et al., 2014). Chen et al. (2022) concluded that POS significantly enhance the prohibitive voice of knowledgeable talents.

POS moderates the relationship between turnover intention and bullying. It also moderates the relationship between stress and turnover intention (Jain et al., 2013). Thus, similarly it is assumed that perceived organisational support (POS) moderates the relationship between stress due to COVID-19 and employee voice. It was understood that stress due to COVID-19 reduced the employee voice because employees do not have the resource, but if the employee perceives that he or she has support from the organisation and that the organisation will always provide help to the employee in time of need then this can act as a resource for the employee to raise voice. This means that negative relationship between stress due to COVID-19 and employee voice can be weakened due to the presence of perceived organisational support. Hence, it is concluded from the above theoretical and literature evidence that perceived organisational support moderates the relationship between stress due to COVID-19 and employee voice. Therefore, we hypothesise our third hypothesis as follows:

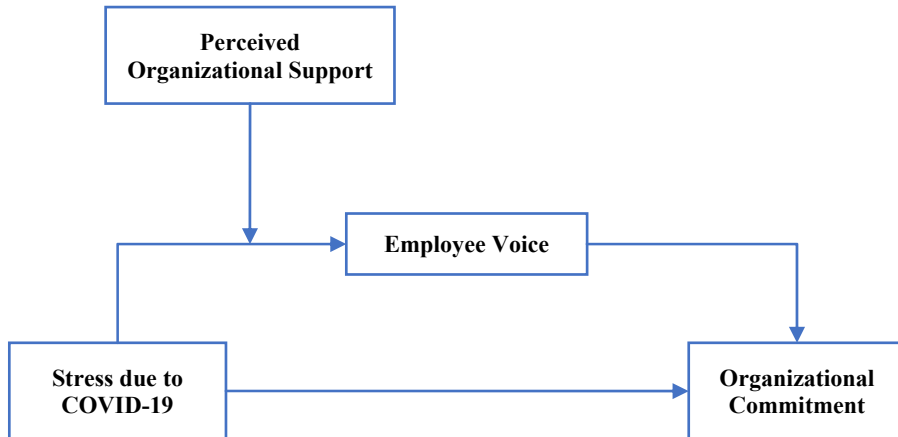
H3 Perceived organisational support moderates the relationship between the stress due to COVID-19 and employee voice such that the relationship weakens when there is perceived organisational support.

POS weakens the mediating effect of EV on the relationship among stress due to COVID-19 and organisational commitment which can be represented by a moderated mediation model. Perceived organisational support will help the employees to deal with the stress and exhibit more voice and commitment. Accordingly, the negative relationship between stress due to COVID-19 and employee voice should be weakened such that if

POS is present, it will reduce the negative effect of stress on EV and employee voice will be increased which will increase the organisational commitment. Therefore, we hypothesise our last hypothesis as follows:

H4 Perceived organisational support moderates the mediating effect of employee voice on the relationship between stress due to COVID-19 and organisational commitment, such that the mediating effect is weaker when there is perceived organisational support.

Figure 1 Research model (see online version for colours)



3 Method

3.1 Participants and procedure

Teachers at private schools experienced high level of stress because of sudden changes imposed in educational sector due to pandemic (Baloran and Hernan, 2020). Therefore, we drew our sample from teachers working in private schools in Federal capital territory of Pakistan. Using a convenience sampling technique, those teachers who themselves or their near ones had suffered from COVID-19 were invited to participate in the survey. In order to cater for the common method bias data was collected at two different points in time. It is a recommended method to separate the IV and DV temporarily by creating a short time lag between the measurements (Podsakoff et al., 2003). At time T1 data related to stress due to COVID-19 and organisational commitment and at time T2 data related to employee voice and perceived organisational support was collected. Data were collected in person in the months of September and October 2021, some 360 teachers responded to our call.

3.2 Measures

All measures were adopted from the previous studies and a five-point Likert scale was used to measure all the constructs of the study.

Stress due to COVID-19 was measured by the *perceived stress scale (due to COVID-19)* developed by Cohen et al. (1994). The sample items was, ‘In the last six months, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?’

To measure the *organisational commitment*, we used a six-item scale developed by Mowday et al.’s (1979) adopted from (Farndale et al., 2011). All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale. The sample item was, ‘externally, I say this is a great organisation to work for’.

To measure employee voice, we used a six-item scale developed by Van Dyne and LePine (1998) adopted from (Rees et al., 2013). The sample item was ‘I speak up and encourage others in my group to get involved in issues’.

Perceived organisational support was measured using an eight-item scale developed by Eisenberger et al.’s (1986). Respondents were asked to give their responses on 5-point Likert-type scale to indicate how much the organisation support them (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). A sample item was ‘the organisation values my contribution to its well-being’.

Table 1 Measurement of variables

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Items</i>	
Perceived stress scale (due to COVID-19)	10	Cohen et al. (1994)
Organisational commitment	6	Farndale et al. (2011)
Employee voice	6	Rees et al. (2013)
Perceived organisational support	8	Eisenberger et al. (1986)

4 Empirical results

Descriptive statistics of all the study variables are reported in Table 2. Partial least square structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) is better to use for handling data which is non-normal and has small sample size so, we have used PLS-SEM to analyse our data. Moreover, this technique is prediction oriented which is better suited for testing the existing theories in an exploratory way (Iqbal et al., 2021). Analysis was conducted firstly by testing the reliability and validity of the instruments and secondly, testing of proposed hypothesis was done through SEM analysis.

Table 2 Descriptive statistics

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. deviation</i>
PSS	3.6480	0.12309
OC	2.3083	0.10907
EV	2.4967	0.63921
POS	2.3413	0.40417

First step of PLS-SEM is measurement model assessment which is carried out to ensure the use of indicators with good reliability, composite reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity in structural path. As part of the measurement model evaluation, items with factor loadings less than 0.600 were removed from the analysis (Gefen and

Straub, 2005). Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR) was used to measure reliability of the constructs. The CRs and Cronbach's alpha of each construct of this study were higher than the recommended value or threshold (i.e., 0.700) (Wasko and Faraj, 2005). After the reliability of constructs was established, we examined the convergent validity by measuring the values of Average Variance Extracted (AVE). All the values of AVE are 0.500 or above, which is the acceptable value or threshold (Iqbal et al., 2021). The results for reliability and validity along with the factor loadings for the items are presented in Table 3. Fornell-Larcker criterion was used to assess discriminant validity, the table shows that square-root of AVE for the construct was greater than the correlation of inter-construct (see Table 4). To assess discriminant validity, heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations was used, and the values were below the threshold of 0.90. Hence, discriminant validity is established (see Table 5).

Table 3 Loadings, reliability and validity

	<i>Loadings</i>	<i>Cronbach's alpha</i>	<i>Composite reliability</i>	<i>AVE</i>
EV1	0.694	0.744	0.840	0.569
EV4	0.784			
EV5	0.700			
EV6	0.830			
OC1	0.706	0.750	0.842	0.572
OC2	0.780			
OC3	0.771			
OC4	0.766			
POS1	0.876	0.777	0.860	0.610
POS4	0.878			
POS6	0.714			
POS7	0.624			
PSS4	0.984	0.966	0.973	0.880
PSS6	0.906			
PSS7	0.934			
PSS8	0.984			
PSS9	0.878			

Note: EV – employee voice, OC – organisational commitment, POS – perceived organisational support, PSS – perceived stress scale (due to COVID-19).

Table 4 Fornell-Larcker criterion

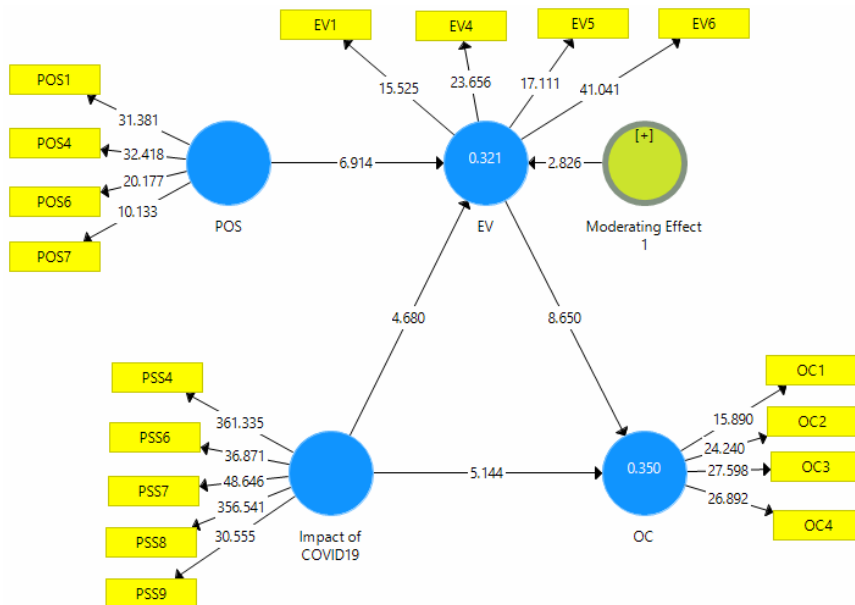
	<i>EV</i>	<i>Stress due to COVID-19</i>	<i>OC</i>	<i>POS</i>
EV	<i>0.754</i>			
Stress due to COVID-19	–0.340	<i>0.938</i>		
OC	0.546	–0.399	<i>0.756</i>	
POS	0.495	–0.257	0.442	<i>0.781</i>

Note: Diagonal values (italic) represent square-root of AVE.

Table 5 HTMT ratio

	<i>EV</i>	<i>Stress due to COVID-19</i>	<i>OC</i>	<i>POS</i>
EV				
Stress due to COVID-19	0.398			
OC	0.729	0.467		
POS	0.649	0.293	0.577	

Note: EV – employee voice, OC – organisational commitment, POS – perceived organisational support.

Figure 2 Structural model (see online version for colours)

Second step is the structural path model which evaluates the relationship among the constructs of study (path coefficients) and their significance statistically. General guidelines for evaluating the structural model are followed. Accordingly, to generate t-values and p-values, bootstrapping method using 5,000 resamples was applied to test the hypothesis and path coefficients (Iqbal et al., 2021). The paths hypothesised in the research framework are reflected by the structural model. R^2 , Q^2 , and significance of paths assess the structural model. The strength of each structural path is determined by R^2 value for the dependent variable, which is used to determine the goodness of the model. The value for R^2 should be equal to or over 0.1. The results shows that all R^2 values are over 0.1 (see Table 6). Hence, the predictive capability is established. Predictive relevance of the endogenous constructs is established by the value of Q^2 . The model has predictive relevance if the value of Q^2 is above 0. The results show that there is significance in the prediction of the constructs (see Table 7).

95% confidence intervals are also generated in this study's 5,000 resamples as shown in Table 6. A significant relationship is indicated by a confidence interval different from

zero. Further, hypothesis was tested to determine the significance of the relationship to assess the goodness of fit.

H1 predicted that stress due to COVID-19 is negatively related to organisational commitment. Findings (see Table 6) tells that stress due to COVID-19 has a significant negative impact on OC ($\beta = -0.242$, $t = 5.227$, $p < 0.001$). Hence, H1 is supported.

H2 suggested that employee voice mediates the relationship between stress due to COVID-19 and organisational commitment. To assess the mediating role of EV (employee voice) Findings of the mediation analysis (see Table 8) revealed significant ($p < 0.05$) mediating role of EV which verifies this hypothesis: (H4: $\beta = -0.106$, $t = 3.997$, $p = 0.000$).

Our H3 suggested that POS moderates the relationship between stress due to COVID-19 and employee voice. Findings of moderation analysis confirm this hypothesis: ($\beta = 0.166$, $t = 2.836$, $p = 0.005$). Finally, H4 proposes that POS moderates the relationship between stress due to COVID-19 and organisational commitment. The results of this moderation analysis confirms a significant moderating role of POS on the said relationship through the mediation of employee voice ($\beta = 0.370$, $t = 6.814$, $p = 0.000$). Hence, H4 is supported.

Table 6 Results of structural model evaluation

	<i>B</i>	<i>STDEV</i>	<i>T statistics</i>	<i>P values</i>	<i>2.50%</i>	<i>97.50%</i>
Stress due to COVID-19 → OC	-0.242	0.046	5.227	0.000	-0.330	-0.147
	<i>R</i> ²	<i>Q</i> ²				
EV	0.321	0.174				
OC	0.350	0.197				

Note: EV – employee voice, OC – organisational commitment, POS – perceived organisational support.

Table 7 Mediation results

	<i>Total effect</i>	<i>T value</i>	<i>Sig</i>	<i>Direct effect</i>	<i>Sig</i>
Stress due to COVID-19 – OC	-0.348	7.436	0.000	-0.242	0.000
	<i>Effect</i>	<i>T value</i>	<i>Sig</i>		
Stress due to COVID-19 – EV – OC	-0.106	3.997	0.000		

Note: EV – employee voice, OC – organisational commitment.

Table 8 Moderation results

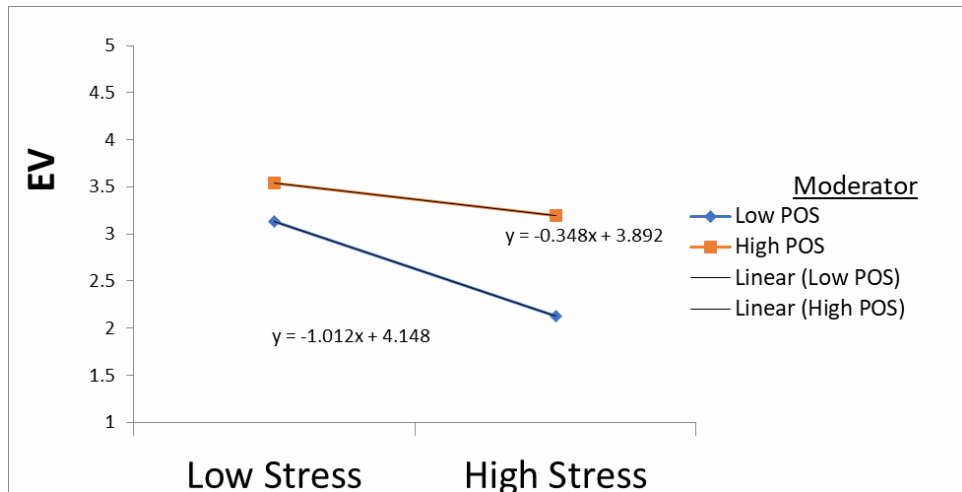
	<i>B</i>	<i>STDEV</i>	<i>T statistics</i>	<i>P values</i>
Moderating effect 1 (POS * stress) → EV	-0.166	0.059	2.836	0.005
POS → EV	0.370	0.054	6.814	0.000

Note: EV – employee voice, POS – perceived organisational support, moderating effect 1 – moderating effect of POS between stress due to COVID-19 and EV.

Figure 3 clearly shows that the POS dampens the negative relationship between stress and the employee voice and suggests that when the POS is high the effect of the stress is less negative as compared to when the POS is low. The slope of relationship between the

stress and EV is very steep (when the POS is low – blue line), as compared to when the POS is high (brown line).

Figure 3 Graph for interaction effect (see online version for colours)



5 Discussion

We investigated whether a mechanism such as employee voice can tackle the negative impact of stress cause by COVID-19 on organisational commitment and how perceived organisational support moderates this relationship. Results from a sample of private school teachers provided a strong support to our research model. Stress due to COVID-19 was related to low level of employee voice, which was associated with low level of organisational commitment. Moreover, the negative relationship between stress due to COVID-19 and employee voice was weekend with the presence of perceived organisational support. Our findings are consistent with the COR theory. Findings of this study contribute to the existing literature and have important implications for educational institutions especially schools.

6 Theoretical and practical implications

First, this research contributes to the small body of literature which measures the impact of stress due to COVID-19 on organisational commitment, which is mostly revolving around the hospitality and health care sector. This research enhances the literature as to measure these effects in educational sector as well. Findings of this study add towards better understanding of perceived organisational support in private schools, and specifically POS directed towards the improvement of organisational commitment through employee voice. There are several implications for the private school authorities. Our results depict that employees must be facilitated with the opportunity to raise voice and organisational support while dealing with the stressful events such as COVID-19 to increase their organisational commitment. The study shows that though COVID-19 is

affecting the behaviour and commitment of employees, but it can be controlled and reduced effectively by providing them organisational support.

Second, this research highlights the crucial role that management of schools can play to improve the employee voice and their commitment. The results clearly show that stress caused in teachers due to COVID-19 is a major factor that leads to low employee commitment in private school teachers. If employee commitment in private schools is deteriorating when a stressful event occurs then it would be more appropriate for the school management to provide them with support and employee voice. Our findings support the existing literature which revealed that depletion in resources has a negative effect on the organisation commitment (Thanacoody et al., 2014). So, school's management should take measures to reduce the stress of teachers which would improve their voice and commitment. Schools should consider stress management programs, providing support, clarification of assigned tasks and provision of enough resources that could help in completion of tasks. Such initiatives could improve the coping mechanism of employees in dealing with the stress of COVID-19 as this pandemic differs markedly due to its prolonged and ongoing nature.

Results showed that teachers were using their own coping mechanisms like low employee voice and reduced commitment. To deal with the stress, this mechanism is adopted because the schools were not providing the needed support. In such case, coordinators and school heads could redesign the tasks, increase communication, and provide sessions to make it easy for teachers to adapt the changes imposed by COVID-19. Such initiatives will reflect the organisational support.

Findings of this study are aligned with COR theory that suggest the importance of giving employee voice and perceived organisational support to achieve higher commitment. Exchange theory also supports the results of this study, when the schools give value, support, and voice to their teachers, they show better behaviour in exchange and become more committed to their organisations.

7 Limitations and future directions

Despite its strengths, the study has several limitations worth noting. First, this study relies on cross-sectional data. Future research can use longitudinal research design that might generate different outcomes. Second, our study measured the impact of stress due to COVID-19 on organisational commitment, future research could measure the impact of stress due to COVID-19 on other variables like disengagement, satisfaction, turnover intentions etc. Future research could also measure the effect of other mediators and moderators (e.g., leadership, incentives, fewer job opportunities). Last, future research could gather data and information from a variety of sectors other than the education sector to see whether the impact of stress due to COVID-19 and role of POS differs due to the environment of organisation.

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