

Analysing crab syndrome through the perspective of life history theory

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Purpose: This research aims to explain the relationships among crab syndrome, stress caused by uncertainty and organisational commitment (affective-continuance-normative) and explores unknown aspects of crab syndrome. Crab syndrome is a metaphor that depicts how emotions and personality are shaped, focusing on competition for access to resources in which others are viewed as threats.

Design/methodology/approach: Research hypotheses were proposed and tested using structural equation modelling. Data were collected through an online questionnaire administered in the hospitality sector in Turkey.

Findings/results: The results indicate a positive significant relationship between stress caused by uncertainty and crab syndrome. Crab syndrome has a positive significant impact on affective and continuance commitment. It mediates the relationship between stress caused by uncertainty and organisational commitment (affective-continuance).

Practical implications: The theoretical framework draws on life history theory to address crab syndrome. Stress caused by uncertainty was a key factor affecting individual's behaviours. Crab syndrome and organisational commitment are outcomes of stress caused by uncertainty. The results show hospitality employees can support their businesses in taking a step forward in competition. In addition, this research contributes to the extension of the crab syndrome literature. The longitudinal effects of variables could not be assessed because the study was cross-sectional in design. However, it only included the hospitality sector, and the convenience sampling method was used.

Originality/value: This research expanded the existing crab syndrome literature and provided new contributions to research in the hospitality sector in the Turkish context.

Keywords: Crab syndrome; stress caused by uncertainty; organisational commitment; hospitality sector; life history theory.

Introduction

Most behaviours are fuelled by the drive for survival. This drive for survival transforms into a behavioural strategy as explained through life history theory (Werre, 2008). Life history theory postulates that organisms face trade-offs in their attempts to adjust to constraints in the environment, and the trade-offs result in behaviour patterns that can be observed in natural settings. People, for example, could trade off bearing or having children for being fully engaged in the work economy and ensuring survival, ultimately resulting in observed patterns of lower fertility. Life history theory, therefore, explains the allocation ratio of resources to be spent throughout life, enabling the sustainability of personal roles (Kaplan & Gangestad, 2005). According to this theory, environmental conditions dictate where and how much energy or resources will be allocated. Access to resources and the sharing ratio of resources could influence individuals' attitudes and behaviours either negatively (e.g., envy) or positively (e.g., commitment). In uncertain or challenging environmental conditions, a fast-life strategy could be adopted to increase the likelihood of survival and gain greater access to resources distributed among a large number of individuals (Ellis et al., 2009). Uncertainty in this context can be defined as the presence of numerous alternatives regarding the outcomes of a situation, with no clear prediction of which ones might occur. Uncertainty can be perceived as a risk in many situations, and the outcomes under unpredictable conditions may be seen as distressing and stress inducing. However, in some cases, it is possible to turn this uncertainty into an advantage. When conditions are more explicit and favourable, implementing a slow life strategy by sharing resources among fewer individuals allows for achieving higher well-being (Brumbach et al., 2009).

High levels of stress direct individuals towards a fast-life strategy and shape personality traits (Birkás et al., 2020), as may be evident in situations where racism or inequality are experienced. Jemal (2022) gives an explanation of racism or inequality as a 'historical, psychological, socio-political, and cultural phenomenon that shapes emotions and personality', which gives rise to crab (barrel) syndrome. This phenomenon is based on the idea that individuals step on each other to stand out and rise to access resources. It can be assumed that competition-oriented crab syndrome operates in line with a fast-life strategy. Üzümlü and Özdemir (2020) indicated that stress caused by uncertainty led to crab syndrome, but they did not provide empirical evidence.

There is limited research on the antecedents of crab syndrome. It is known that crab syndrome decreases as life satisfaction increases (Üzümlü et al., 2021), individuals with Type A personality traits are more prone to crab syndrome compared to those with Type B personality traits, and individuals displaying low self-esteem are affected by crab syndrome after the social comparison process (Üzümlü et al., 2022). It is emphasised that it is not inherent to the nature of crabs to be in a barrel (Jemal, 2022). Referring to a study conducted among African American women academicians, Williams and Packer-Williams (2019) stated that women academics might have chosen to exhibit aggressively competitive behaviour to eliminate their rivals and increase their chances of survival. This research sought to answer the question of why such an endeavour is preferred by examining it in environmental conditions and associating it with stress caused by uncertainty.

Limited information is available regarding the consequences of crab syndrome. It has been demonstrated that crab syndrome reduces innovative behaviour (Özkan et al., 2022) and is inversely related to the importance given to ethics and social responsibility (Üzümlü & Özkan, 2022). Rare examples have been presented that examine the impact of crab syndrome on leadership behaviours within the organisational context. It is known that when a supervisor is affected by crab syndrome, the person is prone to display abusive leadership behaviours (Üzümlü & Özkan, 2023a) and reduce relational energy and work effort (Üzümlü & Özkan, 2023b).

Jealousy is defined as one of the elements of crab syndrome (Üzümlü & Özdemir, 2020) and is characterised as a motivating force in response to potential loss (Barelds et al., 2017). Jealousy serves as an indicator of commitment as an effort to retain one's position or gain resources (Barelds & Dijkstra, 2007). In line with a fast-life strategy, the desire to exploit resources more effectively in the face of uncertainty can manifest itself as commitment. In this regard, organisational commitment is a psychological state that defines the employee's relationship with the organisation and the tendency to sustain this relationship (Hackney, 2012).

Since the sharing of resources creates competition (Miller, 2019), individuals unwilling to accept resource loss may become attached to their organisations (Yousef, 2017). This research seeks to answer whether organisational commitment could be a consequence of crab syndrome.

In this study, a model is presented to explain individual attitudes and behaviours in light of the fast-life strategy. The research demonstrates that employees' behaviours in the workplace are connected to their environments and personal characteristics (AL-Abrow et al., 2020). The crab syndrome (Jemal, 2022; Miller, 2019; Üzümlü et al., 2022), as elaborated upon in this study was considered an antecedent of stress caused by uncertainty. This study also presents organisational commitment as a consequence of crab syndrome. On the other hand, it sheds light on unknown aspects of competition-oriented crab syndrome, specifically in terms of whether it can lead to positive behaviours (Jemal, 2022; Miller, 2019; Özkan et al., 2022; Üzümlü et al., 2022). This research provides evidence of the mediating role of crab syndrome between stress caused by uncertainty and organisational commitment (affective-continuance). Enhancing the understanding of crab syndrome through the research model contributes to seeing its effects on organisational life and adds to the literature on the main concepts.

Conceptual framework and hypotheses

Stress caused by uncertainty and crab syndrome

Uncertainty refers to situations where the probabilities associated with at least one outcome are unknown and are perceived as stressful, distressing and threatening (Mosca et al., 2016). Uncertainty leads to reactions such as stress, anger, disappointment and helplessness (Williams & Mohammed, 2013). Concerns about the future are interpreted as coping or not coping with the stress, fear and anxiety it creates (Chen et al., 2021; Mekonnen & Mamman, 2004).

Rodents that experienced stress in the early stages of their life exhibited changes in behaviour during adulthood, and it has been reported that this behavioural change is transmitted from generation to generation (Jemal, 2022). Uncertainty can trigger crab syndrome in accessing scarce resources and can also influence interpersonal behaviours in organisations.

Individuals can develop different strategies to cope with uncertainty. The fast-life strategy may be preferred when access to resources is uncertain (McDonald et al., 2012). It is possible to argue that stress caused by uncertainty will bring forth a more competitive structure and will also affect interpersonal behaviours (Üzümlü & Özdemir, 2020).

Jemal (2022) argued that crab syndrome was a cognitive, emotional and behavioural process shaped by the perception of inequality or restricted access to resources. Crab syndrome signifies perceiving others' achievements as threats, feeling anxious about their successes and defining competition as a

threat; it is fuelled by psychological elements such as fear, anxiety and stress (Özdemir & Üzüm, 2019; Pegues, 2018; Soubhari & Kumar, 2014). A-type personality traits have been determined to be more susceptible to stress and show a stronger relationship with the crab syndrome compared to B-type personality traits, which are less affected by stress (Üzüm et al., 2022). Therefore, it is assumed that stress caused by uncertainty is positively associated with crab syndrome. In this context, the developed hypothesis is presented as follows:

H1: Stress caused by uncertainty is positively related to crab syndrome.

Crab syndrome and organisational commitment

In conditions where uncertainty creates stress, anxiety and concern (Chen et al., 2021), a fast-life strategy is preferred. This strategy anticipates the sharing of the same amount of resources among a large number of individuals (Griskevicius et al., 2011). Resources distributed among many individuals create a sense of inequality and lead to competition (Jemal, 2022). When there is no competition (a decrease in the number of competitors), one obtains a larger share of limited resources, thereby increasing the quality of life (Üzüm et al., 2021). Actions based on motivation to eliminate competition when facing a scarcity of resources signify crab syndrome (Miller, 2019). When access to these resources is achieved, preserving them is necessary. Displaying organisational commitment as an eagerness to benefit from organisational resources is possible (Hackney, 2012).

Organisational commitment encompasses aspects such as preserving organisational values, embracing the organisation's goals and continuing to work for the organisation (Chigeda et al., 2022). Affective commitment involves the voluntary participation of employees in organisational activities by identifying with the organisation (Johnson & Chang, 2006). Continuance commitment signifies contemplating the potential loss of resources and other costs associated with leaving the organisation (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001). Normative commitment is the sense of obligation that an employee feels to remain with the organisation (Allen & Meyer, 1996).

Özdemir and Üzüm (2019) stated that crab syndrome involves self-confidence. Self-confidence is used as a defence mechanism to prevent resource loss, and jealousy is used to preserve self-esteem (DeSteno et al., 2006). Barelds et al. (2017) also indicated that jealousy is reactive and is triggered by the fear of losing. Additionally, it was argued that jealousy is an indicator of commitment (Barelds & Dijkstra, 2007).

The fast-life strategy preferred with stress caused by uncertainty focuses on eliminating competitors to obtain a larger share of limited resources, and the desire for access to organisational resources is thought to be dependent on resources. Crab syndrome suggests a mindset of wanting to consolidate resources without competitors. Therefore, it is

claimed that people with crab syndrome will exhibit organisational commitment. However, there is a possibility of showing continuance commitment because of the fear of losing access to resources (Yousef, 2017). In this context, crab syndrome is assumed to be positively associated with organisational commitment. The hypotheses designed to investigate the impact of crab syndrome on affective, continuance and normative commitment are as follows:

H2a: Crab syndrome is positively related to affective commitment.

H2b: Crab syndrome is positively related to continuance commitment.

H2c: Crab syndrome is positively related to normative commitment.

The mediating role of crab syndrome

It has been observed that uncertainty leads to stress, anxiety, worry and depression (Chen et al., 2021; Gilbert & Basran, 2019). Life history theory predicts that when a fast-life strategy is chosen to cope with uncertainty, resources to be distributed among a large number of individuals become limited (Griskevicius et al., 2011). This situation reduces the per capita amount of resources and creates a competitive environment. In terms of its characteristics, the fast-life strategy can be seen as an aggressive way to avoid uncertainty (McDonald et al., 2012).

Similarly, organisations' choice of a fast-life strategy depends on shareable energy resources, the amount of resources and competition among individuals (Ellis et al., 2009). It is noted that organisational commitment, as a positive emotion, has a negative relationship with environmental uncertainty (Buky Folami et al., 2014). The anxiety about accessing resources is said to create organisational commitment (Yousef, 2017). According to the fast-life strategy associated with uncertainty, an increase in the frequency of behaviours inclined to protect individual interests is expected as the level of avoidance of uncertainty rises. Uncertain environments create conditions where individuals want to consolidate resources and drive them towards seeking power (Gilbert & Basran, 2019).

The stress, anxiety and desire for control over resources against the probability of resource loss stem from the motivation of people with crab syndrome to gain more access to resources in relation to others and protecting what already had been obtained (Jemal, 2022; Miller, 2019). Therefore, it is believed that the intention to retain the acquired resources is associated with commitment (Barelds et al., 2017). Similarly, stress caused by uncertainty may support the motivation to retain organisational resources (commitment). Uncertain environments lead to stress and are known to cause behavioural changes (Jemal, 2022). Thus, it is claimed that behavioural changes will lead to crab syndrome, and it is assumed that stress caused by uncertainty will be related to organisational commitment (affective, continuance and normative) and that crab syndrome will mediate this relationship:

H3a: Crab syndrome mediates the relationship between stress caused by uncertainty and affective commitment.

H3b: Crab syndrome mediates the relationship between stress caused by uncertainty and continuance commitment.

H3c: Crab syndrome mediates the relationship between stress caused by uncertainty and normative commitment.

The research model, grounded in life history theory, is illustrated in Figure 1.

Methodology

Sample and data

The term crab syndrome among employees in the hospitality sector describes a situation where collaboration and positive group dynamics are lacking. In such a situation, negative competitive tendencies can be observed among employees in hospitality establishments. Instead of the collaboration necessary for the success of businesses, individuals may tend to prioritise their personal interests. In this context, using the convenience sampling method (Özkan et al., 2023a, 2023b; Srivastava & Singh, 2023), blue-collar workers employed in hotels in Kocaeli within the hospitality sector were included in the research sample to examine the relationship of crab syndrome with other variables. The hotels included in the sample were classified as 3, 4 and 5-star based on star ratings. The research aimed to provide a general perspective on the behaviours of hotel employees in the hospitality sector through sampling.

The research sample size was calculated using the G*Power software (Faul et al., 2007). A sample size of 138 was determined to achieve a statistical power of 95%, a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$ and an effect size of 0.15. In the research, 11 hotels were reached through personal connections, and face-to-face meetings were conducted with human resources managers to explain the purpose of the study and its compliance with ethical standards.

For data collection and hypothesis testing, the survey method was employed in the research. The survey presented to participants included items related to stress caused by uncertainty, crab syndrome, organisational commitment and demographic information. The research data were collected between June and October 2023. An online survey system was used for data collection as human resources managers

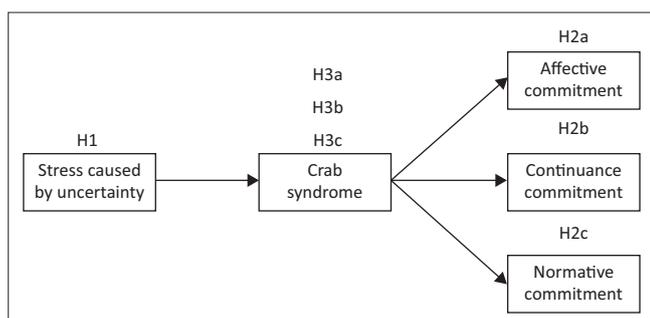


FIGURE 1: Research model.

indicated that this method would be more convenient to ensure uninterrupted hotel services because of customer density. Accordingly, the survey link was delivered to employees via WhatsApp through human resource managers (Özkan et al., 2023a). The sent link emphasised the voluntary nature of participation and assured respondents that their answers would be kept confidential. While 276 individuals participated in the research, responses from 19 participants were not considered in the evaluation because of tendencies towards repeated responses (incorrectly answering two control questions in the survey link). Thus, a total of 257 valid surveys were obtained. The summary of the sample is presented in Table 1.

Measures

The survey items (except crab syndrome) underwent a translation process from English to Turkish, adhering to Brislin's (1980) translation-back translation approach to ensure the accuracy and quality of the translation. The participants in the study responded to the survey questions by utilising a 5-point Likert scale, where a rating of 1 indicated 'strongly disagree' and a rating of 5 indicated 'strongly agree'. The variable 'stress caused by uncertainty' was assessed using a nine-item scale. An example item from the scale is 'Uncertainty prevents me from having a solid opinion'. A five-item scale was employed for the variable crab syndrome; however, one item was excluded from the measurement model because of its low factor loading. An example item is 'I want to be the only successful person in the organisation I work for'. For the organisational commitment variable, an 18-item scale was initially used, but five items were removed from the model because of low factor loadings, and the study continued with 13 items. An example of the dimension of affective commitment is 'I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organisation'. A sample item for the continuance commitment dimension is 'Right now, staying with my organisation is a matter of necessity as much as desire'. An exemplar for the dimension of normative commitment is 'I was taught to believe in the value of remaining loyal to one organisation'.

TABLE 1: Sample profile.

Characteristics	Item	Frequency	%	
Age (years)	18–25	99	38.5	
	26–34	77	23.4	
	35–40	32	12.5	
	41 or more	49	25.6	
Gender	Male	135	52.5	
	Female	122	47.5	
Marital status	Married	91	35.4	
	Single	166	64.6	
Qualification	High school	52	20.2	
	Vocational school	118	45.9	
	Bachelor's	67	26.1	
Postgraduate	Postgraduate	20	7.8	
	Work tenure (years)	1–5	58	22.6
		6–10	71	27.6
11–15		69	26.8	
16 or more		59	23.0	

Data analysis

This study's data were analysed using SPSS 25 and AMOS 21. Confirmatory factor analysis was performed to assess the measurement model and establish the validity of the scales. Cronbach's alpha values were computed to assess the scales' reliability. The study employed structural equation modelling in AMOS, utilising the bootstrapping method and maximum likelihood estimation to test the proposed hypotheses.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Kocaeli University Social Sciences and Humanities Ethics Committee (No. E.523448).

Results

Confirmatory factor analysis and common method variance

The Chi-square (χ^2) values for the five-factor, four-factor, three-factor, two-factor and one-factor models are 604.64, 1218.02, 1795.04, 2509.45 and 3552.31, respectively. The χ^2 value of the five-factor model was the lowest among the models examined, and its χ^2 /degrees of freedom (*df*) ratio was 2.13, the only ratio that fell below 3. The five-factor model yielded the following fit indices: comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.94, goodness of fit index (GFI) = 0.85, adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI) = 0.81, incremental fit index (IFI) = 0.94 and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.06. The CFI and IFI exhibited values exceeding 0.90, indicating a high level of fit. GFI and AGFI were close to 0.90, supporting the adequacy of the model. Furthermore, the RMSEA was less than 0.08, indicating a satisfactory fit (Ren et al., 2019). The findings indicate that the proposed measurement model exhibits the highest level of fit.

The data-collection process involved a single respondent filling every item, potentially resulting in common method variance and compromising the accuracy of the study (Zhao et al., 2022). Therefore, Harman's (1979) single-factor test was conducted to identify the presence of common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003). When forcing the number of factors to 1, the variance accounted for by a single-factor structure, in which all items are combined, is 28.43%. Given that this value does not indicate a dominant structure explaining more than 50% of the total variance, it is concluded that common method variance is not a significant concern (Podsakoff et al., 2012).

Reliability and validity

As shown in Table 2, Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values greater than 0.70 indicate that internal consistency reliability is achieved (Hair Jr. et al., 2018; Nunnally, 1978). Standardised factor loadings ≥ 0.50 , composite reliability coefficients ≥ 0.70 and average variance

TABLE 2: The indicators, reliability and validity of the constructs.

Construct	Item	Factor loading	Indicator source
Stress caused by uncertainty ^a	SCU1	0.81	Sexton and Dugas (2009)
	SCU2	0.81	-
	SCU3	0.60	-
	SCU4	0.86	-
	SCU5	0.80	-
	SCU6	0.83	-
	SCU7	0.80	-
	SCU8	0.80	-
	SCU9	0.81	-
Crab syndrome ^b	CS1	0.92	Üzüm and Özdemir (2020)
	CS2	0.88	-
	CS3	0.17†	-
	CS4	0.80	-
	CS5	0.67	-
Affective commitment ^c	AC1	0.92	Allen and Meyer (1990)
	AC2	0.96	-
	AC3	0.31†	-
	AC4	0.73	-
	AC5	0.40†	-
	AC6	0.25†	-
Continuance commitment ^d	CC1	0.28†	Allen and Meyer (1990)
	CC2	0.89	-
	CC3	0.90	-
	CC4	0.91	-
	CC5	0.84	-
	CC6	0.71	-
Normative commitment ^e	NC1	0.70	Allen and Meyer (1990)
	NC2	0.73	-
	NC3	0.16†	-
	NC4	0.79	-
	NC5	0.83	-
	NC6	0.73	-

Please see full reference list of this article: <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajbm.v55i1.4592> for more information.

α , Cronbach's alpha; CR, Composite reliability; AVE, Average variance extracted.

†, Excluded items due to low factor loading.

^a, $\alpha = 0.93$; CR = 0.93; AVE = 0.63

^b, $\alpha = 0.90$; CR = 0.89; AVE = 0.68

^c, $\alpha = 0.90$; CR = 0.91; AVE = 0.77

^d, $\alpha = 0.93$; CR = 0.93; AVE = 0.73

^e, $\alpha = 0.88$; CR = 0.87; AVE = 0.57

extracted values ≥ 0.50 (see Table 2) demonstrate convergent validity (Ren et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2023). According to confirmatory factor analysis results, the five-factor model in this study has significantly better fit values compared to the four-factor, three-factor, two-factor and one-factor models. Based on these findings, it can be stated that the five-factor structure in the current study exhibits discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Descriptive statistics

Table 3 presents the means, standard deviations and correlations for the study variables. This table shows a positive relationship between stress caused by uncertainty and crab syndrome ($r = 0.35$; $p < 0.01$). Crab syndrome exhibited positive correlations with affective commitment and continuance commitment ($r = 0.28$, $p < 0.01$; $r = 0.23$, $p < 0.01$, respectively) while demonstrating a negative correlation with normative commitment ($r = -0.13$; $p < 0.05$).

TABLE 3: Means, standard deviations and correlations ($n = 257$).

Construct	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. SCU	3.28	0.97	(0.79)	-	-	-	-
2. CS	1.91	0.85	0.35**	(0.82)	-	-	-
3. AC	2.34	0.94	0.30**	0.28**	(0.88)	-	-
4. CC	3.02	1.20	0.32**	0.23**	-0.01	(0.85)	-
5. NC	3.13	0.97	0.03	-0.13*	-0.39**	0.39**	(0.75)

SD, Standard deviation; SCU, Stress caused by uncertainty; CS, Crab syndrome; AC, Affective commitment; CC, Continuance commitment; NC, Normative commitment.

Values in parentheses are the square root of the AVE value of each construct.

*, $p < 0.05$; **, $p < 0.01$.

TABLE 4: Results of hypothesis testing.

Hyp.	Path	B	p	CI	Result
H1	SCU → CS	0.39	0.000***	(0.26/0.49)	Supported
H2a	CS → AC	0.33	0.000***	(0.17/0.48)	Supported
H2b	CS → CC	0.24	0.000***	(0.08/0.39)	Supported
H2c	CS → NC	-0.09	0.18	(-0.25/0.06)	Unsupported
H3a	SCU → CS → AC	0.13	0.05*	(0.06/0.21)	Supported
H3b	SCU → CS → CC	0.09	0.05*	(0.03/0.17)	Supported
H3c	SCU → CS → NC	-0.04	0.12	(-0.11/0.02)	Unsupported

SCU, Stress caused by uncertainty; CS, Crab syndrome; AC, Affective commitment; CC, Continuance commitment; NC, Normative commitment; CI, Confidence interval; Hyp., hypothesis.

Coefficients are standardised (β).

*, $p < 0.05$; ***, $p < 0.001$.

Hypotheses testing

This study employed a structural model analysis with 5,000 bootstraps and calculated a 95% confidence interval to determine the upper and lower boundaries, which aids in comprehending the significance level. Structural equation modelling results demonstrated a good fit of the proposed research model to the data (Chi-square [χ^2]/degree of freedom [df] = 2.45; GFI = 0.84; AGFI = 0.80; CFI = 0.92; IFI = 0.92; RMSEA = 0.07). The results of the hypothesis test are displayed in Table 4. Stress caused by uncertainty explains 15% of the variance (R^2) in crab syndrome, while the relationship between crab syndrome and stress caused by uncertainty accounts for 17% of the variance (R^2) in organisational commitment.

When examining Table 4, it is evident that stress caused by uncertainty has a significant positive effect on the crab syndrome ($\beta = 0.39$; $p < 0.001$). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 is supported. While crab syndrome has a positive and significant impact on affective commitment and continuance commitment ($\beta = 0.33$, $p < 0.001$; $\beta = 0.24$, $p < 0.001$, respectively), it exhibits a non-significant negative effect on normative commitment ($\beta = -0.09$; $p > 0.05$). Accordingly, H2a and H2b are accepted, while H2c is rejected.

The indirect effect of stress caused by uncertainty on affective commitment and continuance commitment through crab syndrome is significant ($\beta = 0.13$, $p < 0.05$; $\beta = 0.09$, $p < 0.05$, respectively), but the indirect effect on normative commitment is not significant ($\beta = -0.04$; $p > 0.05$), as observed in Table 4. This finding supports Hypotheses 3a and 3b while not supporting H3c.

Discussion

Although the antecedents and outcomes of crab syndrome have been investigated (Ermiş & Akyol, 2023; Miller, 2019; Özkan et al., 2022; Üzüm & Özkan, 2023b; Üzüm et al., 2022), the understanding of the concept remains quite limited. In this research, the relationship of crab syndrome with stress caused by uncertainty and organisational commitment has been integrated under a single model, and the proposed assumptions have been tested.

Stress induces physiological, psychological or behavioural changes in individuals (Brefczynski-Lewis, 2020), causing negative emotions such as anxiety, worry, restlessness and uneasiness from a psychological perspective (Zhang et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2023). Vaillant (2011) argued that individuals needed to develop psychological defence mechanisms to avoid anxiety and stress. Particularly in organisational life, crab syndrome can be considered a natural defence mechanism employees develop to cope with stressful situations. The conclusion that stress caused by uncertainty triggers crab syndrome is also consistent with the literature (Beshai et al., 2022).

The second finding of the study is that crab syndrome leads to an increase in employees' affective commitment and continuance commitment. Haris et al. (2016) suggested that the envy underlying crab syndrome would decrease employees' organisational commitment, ultimately leading to a decline in organisational performance. Different studies have also observed the negative association between employees' envy and emotional engagement (Abeyratna & Arachchige, 2021; Shu & Lazatkhan, 2017). On the other hand, a study concluded that academics experiencing crab syndrome had decreased levels of organisational commitment (Ermiş & Akyol, 2023). In contrast to these research findings, crab syndrome positively influenced affective commitment and continuance commitment. This finding is supported by Demir's (2011) idea that emotions play a significant role in organisational communication, and when these emotions are managed correctly, organisational commitment tends to increase.

Normative commitment is considered a mandatory choice rather than a preference because of the absence of alternatives (Yalcin et al., 2021). The choice between a fast or slow life strategy involves making decisions based on environmental conditions. Therefore, normative commitment is believed to have a negative and insignificant relationship with crab syndrome.

In conclusion, this study revealed that crab syndrome has a mediating effect on the relationship between stress caused by uncertainty and affective commitment and continuance commitment. While the literature emphasises the negative relationship between stress and organisational commitment (Abdelmoteleb, 2019; Li et al., 2021), information about the role of crab syndrome in this

relationship is limited. Employees are social beings influenced by their emotions (Pérez-Rodríguez et al., 2019). Perceived negative emotions can have a more substantial impact on employees' behavioural responses compared to positive ones (Loi et al., 2009).

The stress induced by uncertainty directs individuals to focus on personal interests. Thus, it can evoke crab syndrome, which encompasses negative emotions such as envy, ambition and competition in employees, and at the same time, these emotions can increase the employee's affective commitment towards the organisation (Gilbert & Basran, 2019). Mokline and Ben Abdallah (2021) emphasised that employees' performance during crises could contribute to developing skills such as commitment and creativity. In this context, especially ambitious employees' defence mechanisms developed in response to negative events (stress caused by uncertainty), such as crab syndrome, may increase affective commitment and continuance commitment.

The established model contributes to a better understanding of the impact of stress caused by uncertainty on organisational commitment through the mediation of crab syndrome. It enriches the crab syndrome literature and provides practical implications for the hospitality sector, shedding light on future studies.

Theoretical implications

The research primarily contributes to the understanding of crab syndrome. It has provided empirical evidence concerning the unknowns related to the antecedents of crab syndrome, particularly about stress caused by uncertainty (Üzüm & Özdemir, 2020). On the other hand, affective commitment and continuance commitment have been identified as consequences of crab syndrome. Additionally, it has demonstrated the mediating role of crab syndrome in these relationships. In this study, it was determined that the choice of a coping strategy in life is influenced by environmental conditions (stress caused by uncertainty) (Werre, 2008), and in this context, personal characteristics (crab syndrome) are affected (Jemal, 2022), leading to a commitment to assertively claim one's share in resource sharing (Barelds & Dijkstra, 2007; Vecchio, 2000). By evaluating these relationships through the lens of the hospitality sector, this research has supported the crab syndrome literature.

Life history theory argues that in an environment with limited resources, living organisms develop behavioural strategies to find a place for themselves and survive (Stearns, 1992). Limited resources, by creating uncertainty, lead to stress (Chen et al., 2021), which can shape personal characteristics (Birkás et al., 2020; Jemal, 2022). In the light of life history theory, it has been identified that uncertainty triggers crab syndrome behaviours by inducing stress.

The dominant competitive feeling in crab syndrome, accompanied by negative emotions such as jealousy or envy (Miller, 2019), is generally oriented towards preserving the

employee's status and organisational resources (commitment) in the workplace (Vecchio, 2000). This emotion, which is competition focused, is a composite of natural feelings that manifest in the workplace to ensure employees' organisational survival (Tai et al., 2012). It has been observed that these emotions provide a basis for demonstrating commitment for accessing scarce resources (Yousef, 2017).

While the prevailing view in the literature suggests that positive situations can only arise as a result of positive behaviours (Li et al., 2020), contrary to this general perspective, the study concludes that increasing affective commitment and continuance commitment is possible not only through positive behaviours but also through the influence of a negative situation such as crab syndrome. Despite the need for moderation, emotions like jealousy, envy and competition can benefit the organisation (Vecchio, 2000). In this context, this study provides a new perspective on the literature.

Practical implications

The hospitality sector is influenced by various factors, such as constantly changing customer demands, employee leave schedules, transportation costs and weather conditions (Özkan et al., 2023a). Therefore, it is a sector characterised by high uncertainty. Although stress caused by uncertainty leads to crab syndrome, the positive relationship between crab syndrome and organisational commitment supports the understanding that, organisationally, crab syndrome can be utilised as a tool to establish a strong position in competition with other rival businesses in the hospitality sector.

To manage stress caused by uncertainty effectively, it is essential to keep communication channels open (Blomberg, 1996). Training employees to focus on the positive aspects of stress, promoting trust and encouraging relationship-based interactions are crucial (Shu & Lazatkhan, 2017). In order to create a perception of equality among employees, adopting standardised rules and procedures and avoiding preferential treatment are recommended (Aryee et al., 2004). Additionally, in the hiring process, conducting a detailed personality analysis for candidate selection can provide insights into the individual's personality (Kim et al., 2013).

In the hospitality sector, especially during peak seasons and busy working hours, ensuring an optimal staff level is crucial to protect employees from the stress associated with excessive workloads. Emphasising the positive aspects of emotions, such as ambition and envy, can lead to further development and higher performance (Khan & Noor, 2020). Therefore, organisations should establish a fair, transparent and controlled culture of competition. Implementing a fair reward system that makes employees aware of each other's performance is essential (Bizzi, 2023). In this context, various tools, such as notice boards, WhatsApp groups and corporate information systems should be effectively utilised within the organisation to foster controlled competition.

Limitations and future research

The relationships investigated in this research were evaluated through the lens of the hospitality sector in Turkey. Therefore, examining these relationships in different sectors outside the hospitality sector would contribute to the generalisability of the results obtained from the research. The study addresses the impact of environmental conditions on individuals through stress caused by uncertainty, crab syndrome and organisational commitment. Data were collected from a single source focusing on employees' perceptions (Özkan et al., 2023b), and future research could benefit from a multi-source approach. Additionally, this research is cross-sectional; therefore, future studies could be longitudinally designed to minimise common method variance tendencies (Özkan et al., 2023b). The research evaluated the mediating role of crab syndrome between stress caused by uncertainty and organisational commitment. It provides a snapshot from a Turkish sample, and hence, future research could explore the moderator role of cultural characteristics (collectivist-individualist). Studies focusing on crab syndrome at the group level could be designed.

Furthermore, various organisational variables that might influence an individual's experience of crab syndrome, such as organisational support perception, professional ethics understanding, communication skills or leadership styles, could be added to the research model.

Conclusion

This research identified that environmental conditions causing uncertainty create stress on individuals, impacting personality (crab syndrome) and examined the outcomes of these effects (organisational commitment). In environmental conditions where uncertainty is intensely felt, the selection of a fast-paced life strategy to compete and retain scarce resources was shown to generate commitment. These findings were derived from lodging establishments in Turkey, contributing to the expansion of the crab syndrome literature, providing insights into the hospitality sector and guiding future research.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

B.Ü. conceptualised, reviewed and edited the article. B.Ü. and S.S. wrote the original draft and gathered the required resources. O.S.Ö. constructed the methodology, conducted the data curation and assisted in writing the original draft and formal analysis.

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

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